

American Literature after the Civil War

Literature has a strong link with social, cultural, and political life: on the one hand, writers grasp the emerging public mood, important historical events and popular ideas and describe them in their works; on the other hand, a work of literature can influence the mass with fresh ideas and inspire people for actions. The period after the Civil War was marked by emergence of new trends in American literature. In the end of the nineteenth century, the world of literature witnessed considerable changes in cultural, social and political spheres thus imposing a controversial vision on the status of a post-War American writer. The rise of new literature movements and trends was triggered by the shift in technological progress of the United States. In particular, the after-Civil-War America witnessed the appearance of the newly established concept of realism as opposed to the sentimental mode of American fiction (Hook and Goldman 7). Relying on this, American literature chose a new course of thinking under the influence of recent historical events.

After the Civil War, American literature proclaimed itself the literature of social protest and social reform where realism becomes the main tool in shaping social views. Those considerable changes fostered reevaluation of the state of the American society, as realism penetrated the arena of literature. The new realistic tendency influenced the people's vision of the present and the future. According to Hook and Goldman (8), "In the structuralist and post-structuralist criticism of today, realism is conventionally seen as the expressive mode most closely linked to the ideology of industrial capitalism". The writers aspired to reflect the social and economic order that existed in the American society in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Being absorbed in naturalism and realism, the most influential writers of that period felt sympathy for the conservative movement. They believed that the national culture was based on the dominating conservative views spiced with the democratic trends. Writers and poets took a stand of “watchdogs” of the political and social situation in the country (Bercovitch and Patel 98). Their goal was to disguise the veritable intensions of “patricians” and return the balance between the political and moral codes. It seemed that masters of words were reluctant to take the public as an independent mind who does not require an excessive control. Their absolute vision of politicians as the enemies and major obstacles for members of society on the way to prosperity and welfare (ibid.).

Affiliation to realism tendencies was the manifestation of aesthetic withdrawal where the American writers tend to gain the appropriate reputation in society. Some writers, like Henry James, were extremely concerned with the place of works of literature in the market thus showing the importance of journals and magazines for the prosperity of the American literature. Considering this, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the American prose writing acquired the status of political and economic guide for people who stayed unconversant with politics. This period, hence, is marked by the rapid development of periodicals and professional magazines where writers were re-qualified into promoters of their new conservative and realistic concept (598). In general, the post-war era changed the view of the function of the American literature which was initially referred to the field of pure art. After the Civil War, the world witnessed the rise of commercial literature due to the efforts of writers who decided to take the responsibility for the future of the American society.

Development of naturalism and realism in the realm of literature was actually a way to adapt to the drastic changes that occurred in the post-War society. It was the manifestation of true democracy with American writers attached to the value and importance of the social questions. They were sure that the main purpose of both prose and poetry was “to meet in a rapidly changing society, its social and moral consequences, the political consequences it engendered” (Gray 282). The main slogan of that period was “the art must become democratic”, which means “available even to the lowest lawyers of society” (ibid.). The main peculiarity of this period in American literature is that it emphasizes the link between the personal and the political, the private and the social. The world of literature depicted the moral decline at all social layers (283). Considering the appropriateness of genres used by the writers and poets, “there is no finer piece of social comedy in the novel, in fact, and no clearer index of the shaky position of the newly rich in an older society in American literature than the description of a dinner party held at the house of one high-class family” (284). As it could be viewed, the post-civil-war representatives of realism in literature manifested their moral indignation thus calling the high classes to repent their “sins”. They advocated absolute moralism and social equality.

Based on the above, it should be marked that the Civil War brought considerable changes to people’s political, social and cultural outlook in the post-war America. U.S. writers managed to reveal the truth about the “patrician” society and make an ordinary reader hear them. This period presented the public with great literary works that helped them evaluate the historical conditions of that time. Nowadays a modern reader also has the opportunity to deepen his/her understanding of the post-war epoch social conditions reading the works that refer to this fascinating period.

Works Cited

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