

American literature

Literature



The period following the civil war did not fulfill the expectations of romantics, so this literary genre began to alter into realism, aimed at depicting objective reality without any embellishment, just as it demonstrated itself as a phenomenon (Chase, 1957).

Realist prose often reveals the harshest sides of human daily existence and seeks to reflect each detail in the very context of the world being depicted. The present paper is intended to exemplify American realism by the short story “ To Build a Fire” by Jack London.

It tends to be noted that the industrial revolution of the 19th century partitioned the country into a number of dimensions, from wilderness to civilization, and realists like Jack London were eager to depict only those cultural and regional contexts which they experienced by themselves.

Given that London himself wandered a lot around the Northern territories, “ To Build a Fire” contains the relevant imagery: “ Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank [...]” (London, 2003). As one can see, the writer as regionalist feels responsible to indicate the precise locality, which can also be categorized as a feature of realism.

In realist writings, protagonist is much more important than plot (Chase, 1957). In the given short story, the major stress is placed upon the main character’s actions in the indifferent environment, which therefore reveal certain personality traits like self-importance, assertiveness and desire for independence.

Nevertheless, given that London partially adopted the conceptual framework of naturalism, the protagonist is nevertheless doomed given the dominance of instincts over civilization, inherent to such deserted area.

The protagonist of the story cannot be regarded as a smart or wise person, but he uses the products of the ‘sophisticated’ civilization to build a fire (matches, the knowledge about temperatures and geography) and fails to save his life. On the other hand, his wolf relies merely upon instincts and survives.

Given the author’s intention to demonstrate the victory of “animal knowledge” over human intelligence, he focuses closely on the minor details, positioned as a sequence of the main character’s mistakes. This feature of realism is especially notable in the passage the protagonist unties his wet and icy moccasins in order to protect his legs, but before he cuts the frozen laces, a small ‘avalanche’ falls from the nearby tree upon his fire.

Although setting fire in the open would have been more useful, the man selected forest as a place, as it is much easier to take wood from it (London, 2003). As one can see, there is a strict algorithm of errors, caused probably by the man’s conviction in the infallibility of the devices he uses and in the overall safety of human race in general.

The final characteristic of realist prose, plausibility of events, is also notable in the short story, given the severe winters of the specified region and the man’s initial carelessness.

To sum up, the major characteristics of American realism like regionalism, objectivism, consistence of the plot with the environment and the attention

to detail are included into the short story, whereas the convergence of London's writing with naturalism in the depiction of the way the nature gradually overcomes the independent and determined personality of the civilized man should also be identified.

Works cited

Chase, R. *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957.

London, J. "To Build a Fire". 24 May 2003, < <http://www.jacklondon.net/buildafire.html>>