The shift from realism to modernism

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During the modernist era, artists gradually moved away from realism towards themes of illusion, consciousness, and imagination. In the visual arts, realism evolved into cubism and expressionism. This movement is paralleled in literature, as illusions and a feeling of flux replaced the realist themes of moral truth and intimacy. What, we must ask, was the impetus for this change? Although the paintings offer little insight, an analysis of the literature provides some information. An examination of the evolution from “ The Country of the Pointed Firs” to “ The Great Gatsby” reveals that Jewett and Fitzgerald attribute this change to the social force of urbanization. Jewett, a realist writer, offers readers a time and place where these forces are minimal, and the characters are able to achieve intimacy in their relationships, find moral truths in life, and perceive reality. She contrasts these scenes with a few examples of the destructive infiltration of city life into the countryside. Fitzgerald’s modernist novel sets up the same argument, but centers on city life. He focuses on characters living in the New York metropolis area that are plagued by an obsession with the superficialities of materialism, which leads to pretentiousness, illusions, and frustrated dreams. At the end of the novel, Fitzgerald contrasts these social ills with a vision of New York prior to industrialization and urbanization, a place where harmony and dreams can be achieved.

Popular visual art during the mid to late 19th century – Jewett’s era – is classified as realism. In realism, subjects are portrayed in a straightforward manner: in scenes of everyday life, without any idealizations. These paintings therefore achieve almost the same effect as a photograph. In

general, the artwork of this time is rooted in reality, and there is a sense of intimacy between the material objects and people.

As the illustrator of Harper's Weekly, the best-known magazine of the late 19th century, Winslow Homer became the spokesperson for the American realist movement. His Harper's Weekly illustrations were painted in the realist style. Critic Lloyd Goodrich writes that " his war drawings were outstanding for their realism. There was nothing heroic about them; mostly they showed everyday life in camp…their bare honesty, their sense of character and humor, and their bold graphic quality set them apart" (13). The phrase " bare honesty" in this critique highlights the straightforward approach to reality taken by realist painters. Also, the critique focuses on Homer's efforts to intimately portray his subject's character.

The sketch of late 19th century country life in Maine illustrated in " The Country of the Pointed Firs" parallels the themes found in the paintings discussed above. The primary goal of realist writers – like realist painters – is to present life from an objective point of view (Donovan 129). Realist writers also echo the painters' efforts to give clear depictions of character's personalities. However, a theme of realist writing that is not found in Homer's work is the corruption of urbanization. Literary critic Josephine Donovan explains the technique the writers commonly use:

Romanticism had been the first literary reaction against industrial capitalism, and Realism carried forward its critique. Both movements decried the effects of mechanization: its reduction of products to qualitative sameness and of people to the level of the products. Romantic literature tended to vaunt the

value of the personal, subjective, emotional reaction and the virtues of places and times remote from the 19th century industrial city. Writers in the tradition of Realism…chose to focus on the details of contemporary life to evoke a similar critique in the reader's mind (129).

Jewett uses Donovan's technique to show her distaste for city life. In her novel, the characters find moral truth in friendship and family; they have a secure grip on reality, and there are several moments of emotionally satisfying intimacy – all in the absence of industrialism. Jewett then contrasts these images with negative views on the advent of urbanization in the rural town.

In " The Country of the Pointed Firs", feelings of deep personal connection are exemplified by Mrs. Todd's harmony with the other characters. The narrator's relationship with Mrs. Todd begins as a business relationship, but Mrs. Todd's truthful and empathetic personality eventually shines through, and a strong bond is formed. Jewett writes: " Mrs. Todd and I were not separated or estranged by the change in our business relations; on the contrary, a deeper intimacy seemed to begin" (Jewett 7). The word " intimacy" in this passage sums up the mood for many parts of the novel, and recalls a major theme of the entire realist movement. Mrs. Todd's herbs are a symbol of her vibrant and personable demeanor. The narrator not only notes that the herbs serve as a treatment for common illnesses, but also states, " It seemed sometimes as if love and hate and jealousy…might also find their proper remedies among the curious wild-looking plants in Mrs. Todd's garden" (Jewett 4). Like the herbs, she too exhibits an aptitude for dealing with things such as love and loss.

The character of Mrs. Blacket serves as a focal point for family unity, with her talent for seeing things with the clarity of a realist painting. The motif of family gathering in this novel is used by Jewett to show the intimacy of a closely-knit rural community and a sound moral conviction in the characters. Pondering a visit to her mother's home on Green Island, Mrs. Todd looks to the island in the sea. Just then, " The sunburst upon that outermost island made it seem like a sudden revelation of the world beyond this which some believe to be so near. ' That's where mother lives,' said Mrs. Todd" (Jewett 30). The beam of sunlight in this passage is a symbol of the family unity Mrs. Blacket threads. By using light – traditionally symbolic of purity – and describing the family bond with divine thoughts, Jewett gives the impression that the community of family bonds is a righteous thing. Also, in a happy scene at the family reunion later in the novel, the other family members all know who she is and gather behind her as she walks across a field. As a hostess at Green Island, Mrs. Blacket shows her ability to clearly assess her surroundings. The narrator says, " Her hospitality was something exquisite; she had the gift which so many women lack, of being able to make themselves and their houses belong entirely to a guest's pleasure…Tact is after all a kind of mindreading, and my hostess held the golden gift" (Jewett 46). Mrs. Blacket has a secure grip on reality, an overriding theme found in both realist painting and literature.

While the themes of intimacy and truth dominate the novel, Jewett occasionally hints at the idea that urbanization is a destructive force. The characters' disdain for the loss of the seafaring tradition that once flourished in the town exposes this perspective. Captain Littlepage is one of the older

shippers in the town who finds the urbanized aspects of Dunnet Landing deplorable:

I see a change for the worse even in our own town here…I view it that a community narrows down and grows dreadful ignorant when it is shut up to its own affairs, and gets no knowledge of the outside world except from a cheap, unprincipled newspaper (Jewett 20).

To him, the sea opens avenues for the adventure of the soul, which he contrasts with a reliance on the fabricated and stifling outlets of the city – namely newspapers. His view may seem unreliable because he is a mentally distraught individual, but Mrs. Todd also holds this opinion. While reflecting on the times when seafaring flourished she says, " There was more energy then…In these days the young folks is all copy-cats, ' fraid to death they won't be all just alike; as for the old folks, they pray for the advantage o' being a little different" (Jewett 64). Here, Mrs. Todd argues that the advent of city life in Dunnet Landing breeds oppressive conformity. The theme of urban dehumanization via mass media and social conformity sharply contrasts with the divine praise of family bonds in the countryside, a contrast that forms the basis of Jewett's argument of rural life over urban.

As in Dunnet Landing, turn-of-the-century industrialized nations were experiencing a wave of urbanization accompanied by heightened commercialism. In fact, the 1920 U. S. Census shows that for the first time a majority of Americans lived in urban centers (www. census. gov). It was in this context that the modernist movement was born. This era was dominated by two revolutionary styles in painting: cubism and expressionism. While the

trademark of cubism is showing multiple vantage points for one object or scene, the philosophy is: “ Cubism is not a manner but an aesthetic: it is a state of mind” (Cooper 12). Thus, the distortion of space through the assimilation of several viewpoints on one thing is the result of a symbolic re-recreation of reality. Cubism was followed by the similar style of expressionism. In expressionism the artist’s intention is not to reproduce a subject with accuracy, but rather to stylize it so as to reveal his mood. The unifying theme of modernist visual art is a departure from objective reality, initiated by the artist’s existential feelings.

The William S. Paley Collection in the Museum of Modern Art contains many renowned cubist and expressionist paintings. An example of a cubist still-life is Pablo Picasso’s “ The Architect’s Table” (1912). The viewpoints of this still-life are so cluttered together that if it were not for the painting’s title, it would be hard to discern what is being depicted. Critic William Rubin writes, “ These paintings are difficult to read, for while they are articulated by planes, lines, shading, space, and other vestiges of the traditional language of illusionistic representation, those constituents have been largely detached from their descriptive functions” (106). Rubin’s description of the style as ‘ illusionistic’ is certainly fitting. The portrait “ Woman with a Veil” (1927) by Henri Matisse is a hybrid of cubism and expressionism: the space in which the woman sits seems distorted, and the scene is highly stylized. Despite the obvious departures in form and composition from realist portraiture, the biggest difference is the limited scope that modernist painters give to the personalities of the subjects. Armstrong explains that “ set behind the scrim of a veil – a psychologically distancing and self-protective device – her

hypnotic gaze allows no entry” (91). This stands in striking contrast to the earnest, open personalities of the characters portrayed by Homer and Jewett.

Modernist authors distort reality and obscure characters’ personalities much like modernist painters. T. S. Eliot, a modernist poet, sums up the mood of the movement with his famous quote: “ Humankind cannot stand very much reality” (Karl 27). As shown by this quote, a primary concern of modernists was the question of existence. This concern is partially a result of Sigmund Freud’s revolutionary turn-of-the-century work on conscious reality. Freud devised a theory explaining that consciousness is really a thin veil guarding man’s true intentions – the unconscious. The idea of the conscious serving as a veil is echoed in the painting discussed above – it is the imagery used in Matisse’s portrait to show psychological distance, and it is the source of Picasso’s re-creation of reality, bridging themes of modernist painters and writers.

Based on these existential ideas, modernists felt that the past must be rejected and the present exalted, because the present was what mattered. However, “ Even as the present is lauded, it is perceived as diminished, since the present has been created materialistically and technologically” (Karl 13). This notion led to literary critiques of the increasingly industrialized world: a possible source for the psychological distance from objective reality exhibited by modernist painters.

This rising industrialization – and resultant consumerism – created a diminished reality, a main topic in Fitzgerald’s “ The Great Gatsby”. The novel takes place on the East Coast in the 1920’s, where fame, fashion, and

moral corruption ran rampant. When the characters invest in the pretentious values of this materialistic society, they too become pretentious and suffer from illusions – much unlike Mrs. Blacket and Mrs. Todd. Fitzgerald sets this mood in the opening pages of the novel: Nick Carraway, through whose eyes the story is told, finds that the, “ Intimate revelations of young men or at least the terms in which they express them are usually plagiaristic” (Fitzgerald 6). The sources of these plagiaristic revelations are the magazines and books that the characters read. They give the characters information about the outside world that has little to no relevance to their own lives, taking away from their individuality – a parallel to Captain Littlepage’s denunciation of newspapers. Tom Buchanan represents the gullibility of urbanites with his deep interest in the obviously far-fetched book “ The Rise of the Coloured Empires”. Throughout the novel, “ Small scandal magazines of Broadway,” (Fitzgerald 33) appear, such as “ Town Tattle” and “ Simon Caller Peter”. These magazines illustrate the characters’ unhealthy infatuation with the far-removed lives of celebrities: a product of pop culture and consumerism.

The relationship between Gatsby and his guests emphasizes the moral corruption inherent in the worship of pop stars. People from all over New York flock to his parties so they can be in the company of celebrities and wealth; a simulation of the glamorized scenes they read about in magazines. Yet no one seems to know Gatsby is, and when he dies only Carraway and Gatsby’s own father attend his funeral. In contrast to the family reunion in Jewett’s novel, where everyone knows Mrs. Blacket, the destructive forces of urbanite values are apparent in Fitzgerald’s novel.

The demise of Wilson also shows the delusions of consumerism. Outraged by his wife's infidelity, he exclaims, "' You may fool me but you can't fool God!' Standing behind him Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg," (Fitzgerald 167): the eyes of a giant billboard advertisement. In this scene, Fitzgerald critiques American society, implying that people foolishly praise the objects they see in advertisements and pop culture as though they are Gods.

The main conflict in this novel is Gatsby's struggle to realize his love for Daisy. However, his dream is inseparable from his vice of materialism, and the story ends in tragedy. Both Daisy and Gatsby are plagued by a preoccupation with wealth. Gatsby even notices this in Daisy, remarking that part of her charm lies in the fact that " her voice is full of money," (Fitzgerald 127). However, he fails to see the dire implications of this characteristic. Rather, literary critic Stephen Matterson argues that " Gatsby continues to believe that his wealth is the key to regaining Daisy and their lost time" (33). In the novel's chaotic resolution, Fitzgerald implies that faith in these values leads to misfortune.

At the end of the novel, Fitzgerald offers a vision of a dream, but it is far removed from New York in the 1920's. He presents a vision of a Dutch explorer who lands in the New World. The fresh land, " Panders in whispers to the last and greatest of human dreams…[he was] face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (189). This passage makes a strong connection with Jewett's novel: the explorer parallels the shippers of Dunnet Landing, and the unscathed freedom of the New World echoes the purity of rural life enjoyed by Mrs.

Todd and Mrs. Blacket. Thus Fitzgerald, like Jewett, shows his inclination towards rural life.

The picture of the industrializing, urbanizing, and commercializing 20th century America depicted by Jewett and Fitzgerald is certainly not a pleasant one. As explained above, painting and literature show similar themes. While the pop art movement – an offshoot of modernism – also commented on the changing face of American society, it had a much brighter tone. Andy Warhol, the most popular American pop artist, exclaimed, “ I love Los Angeles. I love Hollywood. They’re beautiful. Everybody’s plastic, but I love plastic. I want to be plastic” (Karl 313). Pop artists adore consumerist culture and mass media, and want to be a part of it. Most importantly, however, pop artists supported the idea that the “ American Way” could be honored as fine art.