

BRADFORD WRITES!
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“Shared Traumas Expressed Through Literature”

By Max Salters

Writing has been historically used as a coping mechanism to process stressors. This is heavily apparent from 1830 to 1945 when literary movements emerged from the conflicts and changes America experienced. Realism was a direct reaction to the Romantic Era, creating stories that employ verisimilitude to critique society. WWI and the Gilded Age resulted in Modernism, where writers rebelled against formulaic plot progressions. Transcendentalist literature started as an opposition to intellectualism and industrialism. Instead of valuing rational evidence, it highlights intuition and the nature of humanity. The alterations to American lifestyles were the impotence of the new styles of writing created in their respective eras. American writers used literature as catharsis for the traumas societally experienced.

American Dream vs. American Immigrant Reality

The Jungle by Upton Sinclair introduces a Lithuanian family who has recently moved to Chicago. The novel, published in 1905, follows Jurgis Rudkus, the optimistic and hardworking patriarch of his impoverished family. His positivity, however, is short-lived, as Jurgis begins to navigate the workforce, finding employment at a meat packing factory. Throughout the story, he experiences loss, addiction, imprisonment, and, eventually, growth. The story highlights Jurgis's transition from an uneducated immigrant to a socialist advocate.

The conditions that the working class of that era was exposed to shape the way they see themselves fit into society. Sinclair highlights this lack of power through the narrative while simultaneously critiquing capitalism as the device of division between citizens. Instead of

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experiencing humane working conditions, the workers spend most of their time in dimly lit factories that resemble rat races, with hygienics and safety being far from a concern. Sinclair writes:

Here was Durham's, for instance, owned by a man who was trying to make as much money out of it as he could, and did not care in the least how he did it; and underneath him, ranged in ranks and grades like an army, were managers and superintendents and foremen, each one driving the man next below him and trying to squeeze out of him as much work as possible. And all the men of the same rank were pitted against each other; the accounts of each were kept separately, and every man lived in terror of losing his job if another made a better record than he. (Chapter 5)

Here, the amount of agency the workers hold is shown in the context of their jobs. They are under the whim of their higher-ups, with very few options to escape. This metaphorical "rat race" is described in typical realist fashion, exemplifying the somber narrative style of the era. The drab setting of *The Jungle* also illustrates the depressive mindsets that overtook the workers in major cities. Being forced to abandon their personhood to provide for themselves, and in Jurgis's case, a large and growing family, left them without an identity of their own. To break out of the boundaries capitalism has set for them, Sinclair suggests that workers, especially immigrants, educate themselves on the climate of their world.

A major theme within *The Jungle* is that education is the key to navigating through hardship. To combat the inhumane conditions that he was exposed to, Jurgis joined the socialist party of America, which advocated for the protection of workers' rights and denounced the evils of capitalism. Jurgis joins the campaign after losing his wife, battling alcohol abuse and being jailed for the second time in the story. This serves as his redemption arch, implying to the reader

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that the only way to create sustainable change, both in your personal life and on a societal level, is through educating yourself and becoming the change you want to see. Sinclair writes,

After the revolution, all the intellectual, artistic, and spiritual activities of men would be cared for by such "free associations"... If anyone wanted to work or paint or pray, and could find no one to maintain him, he could support himself by working part of the time. That was the case at present, the only difference being that the competitive wage system compelled a man to work all the time to live, while, after the abolition of privilege and exploitation, anyone would be able to support himself by an hour's work a day (Sinclair, Chapter 30).

Although Jurgis begins the story unaware of the complexities of capitalism and the existence of socialism, his newfound identity reflects the actions of some during the Gilded Age. This era is known for labor unions created and laws passed to protect workers. While Jurgis's story highlights the theme of immigrant pain, his character also mirrors the activists of the era.

The reality for immigrants in America has been one filled with suffering and stress. Sinclair acknowledges his privilege as a White American in this era. He reminds the reader that the suffering of a "poet," or a writer generally, is incomparable to the suffering of an immigrant:

But it is not likely that he had reference to the kind of anguish that comes with destitution, that is so endlessly bitter and cruel, and yet so sordid and petty, so ugly, so humiliating—unredeemed by the slightest touch of dignity or even of pathos. It is a kind of anguish that poets have not commonly dealt with; its very words are not admitted into the vocabulary of poets—the details of it cannot be told in polite society at all. (Sinclair, Chapter 7)

Immigrants are commonly regarded as the backbone of American society, and for good reason. Not only have they sacrificed their lives on more familiar lands to find opportunities on American soil, but they have sacrificed their livelihoods to expand the economy. They had to

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invent new lives under the restrictions of xenophobia and capitalism. This means that many worked strenuous hours to earn barely enough to feed their physical bodies, and they were left emotionally and intellectually starved without any time, money or energy to create art like *The Jungle*. Sinclair highlights these invisible efforts through his story and creates a narrative that many immigrants did not have the privilege to put on paper.

The Currency of Ignorance

The Great Gatsby takes place in an era known as the Roaring 20s, infamous for its decadence. After WWI, America experienced an economic abundance. Many factors aided this growth, such as the influx of immigrants that supplied cheap labor, the excess of natural resources and the growth of industrialism. However, this abundance led to one of the main conflicts of the era: classism. The characters F. Scott Fitzgerald creates in this story highlights how ignorance is nurtured through excessive wealth.

The story follows Nick Carraway, an upper-class and otherwise indifferent protagonist, as he moves to an opulent area in Long Island called West Egg. He later meets his almost mystical neighbor Jay Gatsby, who is later revealed to have made his wealth by taking advantage of the newly enacted National Prohibition Act and bootlegging alcohol. Additionally, the reader learns that Gatsby hosts his infamous parties to impress Daisy, Nick's cousin, who lives across the lake from them. She begins an affair with Gatsby, while her husband simultaneously has an affair with a woman out of town. As the drama unfolds, Nick becomes guilt-ridden from being a silent bystander. He finally leaves West Egg with his innocence crushed after Gatsby is murdered for taking the blame for a murder Daisy committed previously.

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While the plot revolves around incredibly wealthy people, their actions highlight the emerging class conflict. Daisy and Tom's relationship is one example of how privilege can manifest as selfishness. Their wealth acted as a cushion from the consequences of their actions:

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and . . . then retreated back into their money . . . and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

(Fitzgerald, Chapter 9)

Despite hurting and manipulating other characters consistently and causing two deaths by the end of the story, they feel no remorse and continue to run away from their problems (a luxury not granted to those without the money to afford it). Fitzgerald uses these characters as a metaphor for the inherent selfishness of capitalism. Monopolies and large business owners capitalize on the lower class without making any effort to protect their rights or ensure their safety. In both scenarios, the minorities are taken advantage of by those with more money. He argues that the upper class loses touch with reality, which is clearly displayed through Daisy and Tom's actions.

Additionally, Fitzgerald incorporates several details that serve as symbolism for his stance on class and wealth. An advertisement for Doctor T.J. Eckleburg's optometry practice is described when Nick is on his way to meet Tom's mistress:

But [Doctor Eckleburg's] eyes, dimmed a little by many pointless days under the sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground. (Fitzgerald, Chapter 2)

These eyes can be interpreted as a representation of clarity (or a lack thereof), illustrating how excessive wealth can dim one's perception of reality. This is seen through Gatsby's actions, as he loses touch with every other aspect of his life in pursuit of Daisy (and as a result, his wealth and life). As modernist texts typically do, *The Great Gatsby* criticizes both the economic climate of that era and the people that upheld it.

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The economic tensions of this era are mostly divided into two experiences. Some lived opulent lifestyles, but there were also the workers who supported those lifestyles. As Fitzgerald put it:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . (Fitzgerald, Chapter 9)

This quote shows hope for the American Dream and paints the “have-nots” in an optimistic light. However, this optimism does not reflect the feelings inhabited by Americans in the upcoming years. Fitzgerald chose to take his stance using privileged characters, criticizing them and their status.

The Have-Nots

While F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote about an era of economic prosperity, the era that immediately followed was anything but. The Great Depression lasted from 1929 to 1941 when a failing economy led to mass unemployment. Poverty is an aspect that John Steinbeck highlighted in *Of Mice and Men*. The story follows two protagonists, George and Lennie, as they search for work in California. Their relationship is best described as a caretaker and dependent, due to an unnamed intellectual disability Lennie has. Although George often complains about the role he takes on, he is equally reliant on Lennie as Lennie is on him. They begin to work at a ranch, where they meet Curley, the boss's son, and Curley's wife. Lennie begins a flirtatious relationship with the unnamed woman, despite being warned against it by George. This leads to an altercation between the wife and Lennie, which results in him breaking her neck. To protect

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him from the oncoming lynch party, George shoots Lennie, thus crushing his dream of owning a farm together.

The Great Depression exemplifies a time of great loneliness. Their personhood became lost in their work lives, because of the amount of time spent working/ looking for work. For example, George and Lennie spend the first part of the story traveling alongside the road, searching for a new job opportunity:

Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. . . . With us it ain't like that. We got a future.

(Steinbeck, Chapter 1)

These men represent a larger part of society, who don't have the privilege to develop their identities and enjoy facilitated social interaction. Their lack of identity is a direct result of capitalism, which forces citizens to consistently identify as workers only, regardless of what other passions spark their interest. To survive in a competitive society, everyone was stripped of their humanhood and became labor machines.

There was one thing that kept Lennie and George's hope alive: their dream to own a farm of their own someday:

O.K. Someday—we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and—. (Steinbeck, Chapter 1)

This dream parallels how they want to escape their loneliness. The idea of one day leaving the sorrows behind and working on their own accord helps them cope with the stress of living through the Great Depression. However, Steinbeck reminds the reader that their dream is just that: a dream. Although many novels romanticize the idea of working your way up the metaphorical class ladder, Steinbeck takes a more sobriety approach in illustrating the reality for most Americans. Poverty is typically inescapable in just one lifetime, especially considering that

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the entire country was failing economically. Crooks, a stable hand at the farm Lennie and George work at, states an unequivocal truth:

I seen too many guys with land in their head. They never get none under their hand.

(Steinbeck, Chapter 4)

He reminds the two protagonists, despite the good intentions they have, that there is nothing that differentiates them from the rest of the working class. Under capitalism, the only thing that differentiates people is their status.

Of Mice and Men describes one of many harsh realities in American history. The layered stressors of the 1929 stock market crash, the Dust Bowl, and bank failures changed how Americans saw themselves fit into their own society. Citizens fell victim to the downfalls of capitalism and lost their autonomy over their lives. Steinbeck pulls from his experience working alongside migrant workers, highlighting the dangers a competitive economy creates. His lived experience of being dehumanized by capitalist society gives a valuable insight into the lives of Americans at this time.

The Jurisdiction of Humanity

American society revolves around the idea that “we the people” work within a democracy to function. Henry David Thoreau’s essay titled “Civil Disobedience” highlights the importance of intuition, one of the major themes of transcendentalism. When this essay was written, the Mexican-American War had ended a year prior, which creates the historical context for this work of nonfiction. In America’s pursuit of Manifest Destiny, President James K. Polk sent troops to Mexico, and imperialized the land that later became Texas, California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah. Through “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau condemns both authorities that make cruel

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decisions for the people, and the people that act out cruel actions under the suffocating influence of the authorities.

“Civil Disobedience” emphasizes the impact of war and what it symbolizes for humanity. Despite the common idea that fighting for one's country is admirable; Thoreau argues that participating in war goes against human nature:

A common and natural result of an undue respect of law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. (Thoreau)

In transcendental philosophy, humans are believed to be inherently intelligent beings. They are meant to take actions based on what they intuitively feel is right. In the context of a draft, many Americans disapproved of the war against Mexico and still crossed their borders on the command of their president. Since the citizens' free will was infringed upon by external forces, they were put in a position where they couldn't protest unfair civil action.

On the other hand, Thoreau advocates for citizens to live as themselves regardless of the consequences:

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men, generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. (Thoreau)

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Thoreau himself had been jailed because he failed to pay his taxes. However, he assures the reader that he “did not feel confined...” and instead learned a valuable lesson about conducting oneself in a way that aligns with their moral beliefs. Although it is an unconventional method of protest at the time, he highlights the importance of living in a natural state as opposed to helping the government in its endeavors.

The use of elaborate systems to govern entire populations is frowned upon. By adding complexities to the way humans live, they cannot live in their true nature. Thoreau argues that humans should operate naturally instead of being limited by the governing of another:

There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. (Thoreau)

Thoreau advocates for a society where citizens can rule themselves freely as an alternative to people ruling over each other. While he acknowledges that his society is far from achieving this, he creates a strong argument as to why it should be completed. Circumstances where the government acts in self-serving ways would be obsolete because everyone would govern themselves.

Conclusion

Writing is one of the most accessible forms of communication, framing a specific moment in history and delivering a neat package over centuries and countries. As 21st-century consumers, we use older texts to analyze the lifestyles of different generations. In certain cases, such as the eras of modernism, realism and transcendentalism, societies were greatly impacted by the traumas they faced. This collective pain is palpable through the great works that

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exemplify these literary movements, and despite the sorrowful stories they describe, they are powerful pieces of literature that give us insight into their suffering.

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