

Regionalism and Realism in 19th Century American Literature

In century America the Civil War and westward expansion created numerous changes in society and politics. American artists turned to realism and regionalism to comment on the new concerns of the time period such as the ongoing struggle of the working class as well as the societal elevation of the middle class. Artists documented these national transformations by creating removed, impartial depictions of everyday life. In order to bring their characters and setting to life to allow their readers to become fully engulfed in their stories, Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* employed regionalism while Henry James depicted real life in real time using realism in his story *Daisy Miller: A Study*.

Mark Twain and Kate Chopin were experts at creating regionalist works. Regionalism refers to texts that concentrate heavily on specific, unique features of a certain region including dialect, customs, tradition, topography, history, and characters. It focuses on the formal and the informal, analyzing the attitudes characters have towards one another and their community as a whole. The narrator is particularly important in regionalist fiction for he or she serves as a translator, making the region understandable for the reader. In his masterpiece *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain's use of regionalism brings the reader right into the heart of the 19th century wild American West. Twain brings to the local to life. From the very beginning of the novel Twain tells his reader, "In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect, the extremist form of the backwoods South-Western dialects; the ordinary "Pike-Country" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last" (Twain, pg. 108). Twain guides his reader, using the vernacular, directly into the scene so you feel as if you are right next to Huck Finn, floating down the Mississippi River, as he dictates the story to you. Lack of grammar, incorrect sentence structure and words that you would never find in the English dictionary compose Huck's language and allow the reader to get a feel for his character as well as the customs of the specific region he comes from. The local color stories he describes throughout the novel give the reader a representation of the region in which he dwells and travels.

The Mississippi River plays a huge part in the story. It does not just function as the natural landscape and setting for this region. Instead, because of the way in which the river affects Huck and Jim's journey and is their means for escape, freedom and a new life, the river becomes a major character in the novel. The river also points to other aspects of regionalism. Regionalist works tend to be more focused on the actual region than painstakingly tending to the systematic development of the plot. Multiple times throughout the novel Twain takes up numerous paragraphs with Huck's detailed description of the nature and river around him. "The river looked miles and miles across. The moon was so bright I could a counted the drift logs that went a slipping along, black and still, hundreds of yards out from shore" (Twain, pg. 129). These descriptions have absolutely nothing to do with the plot. Instead they are a digression from it. However, the river's rendering enhancing the portrayal of the region, which further enhances the experience of reading the novel. As the reader, though you cannot physically see the river, you can sense and feel its size, power and majesty through Huck's words. Digression from the plot is a regionalist technique of better representing the culture. Along with deviating from the plot to describe the river, Twain has Huck also spend a lot

of time describing Jim's superstition. Although it plays a role in the story, it is not necessarily the most important part of the plot. However, the detailed description of Jim's superstition such as "Miss Watson's nigger, Jim, had a hair-ball as big as your fist, which had been took out of the fourth stomach of an ox, and he used to do magic with it," gives the reader a better understanding of the region (Twain, pg. 118).

Huck the narrator also functions as the reader's translator. Narrator translation is another key characteristic of regionalism. Huck takes his experiences and articulates them so the reader can understand where he is and what it is like there. Along with depicting the river, Huck works as a translator when he explains the widow and her actions. He tells the reader, "The widow cried over me, and called me a poor lost lamb, and she called me a lot of other names, too, but she never meant no harm by it" (Twain, pg. 109). For the reader who is not part of the region, Huck is able to explain why certain things occur in this area because of the region's unique customs. Regionalist works also call for the sympathy for the local and what is lost when it is incorporated into the national. Although Huck translates the widow's actions for the reader, Twain also criticizes the widow for trying to take the river out of Huck by conforming him to national values. In doing so she is viewed as an enemy because she is attempting to erase the local and uniqueness of the region that Huck embodies.

Kate Chopin also employs regionalism in her work *The Awakening*. However, Chopin's regionalism is slightly different than Mark Twain's regionalism. While Twain looks to glorify the region he writes about, Chopin uses her novel to criticize the region in which her story takes place. She still fully presents the reader with an understanding of the region by adhering to the same set of regionalist characteristics and guidelines used by Twain but she showcases her region in a dimmer light. *The Awakening* takes place in the Creole society and culture of Louisiana. She brings her reader, unlike Twain, into a world of high class. The reader experiences high society as they are transported between Creole society's two regions, urban New Orleans and rural Grand Isle vacation retreat. In both places, Creole society is expressed. Like Twain, Chopin uses the vernacular. Certain French phrases such as "quadroon" are common to the Southern region and are employed by Chopin throughout her novel as a means of bringing her reader into the region. Using regionalist techniques, Chopin presents the reader with the Southern region's particular class system and social norms. The novel's female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, is not from the region. Thus, by challenging and rebelling against the region's unique social structure, she is the perfect means by which Chopin is able to expose the region's specifics to the reader. As a Protestant from Kentucky in a Catholic, Creole culture, Edna was an "outsider." However, in her being outside looking in, the reader gets an amazing description of the Creole life and customs. Edna "was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles... They all knew each other, and felt like one large family" (Chopin, pg. 541). Edna's observations illuminate Creole traits; "A characteristic which distinguished them and which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery. Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (Chopin, pg. 541).

Chopin best employs regionalism when she presents (and simultaneously critiques) Creole society's norms and rules. The most significant is the assumed and structured role of the mother-woman. "The mother-women seemed to prevail that

summer at Grand Isle...They were women who idealized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin, pg. 540). The human manifestation of this description is Edna’s friend Adèle Ratignolle. Adèle is the epitome of the perfect Creole wife. She is everything Edna is not. As her adversary, Edna’s flaws expose and highlight Adele’s outstanding adherence to Creole society’s standards. She not only worships her husband and children and perfectly executes her domestic duties, but she is also free in her expression and discourse. All of these are characteristics of the ideal Creole woman. Chopin used numerous characters, their dialect and interaction with each other and community to compose her regionalist work and bring the specific region in which *The Awakening* took place to life

In his most famous novella, *Daisy Miller: A Study*, Henry James employs realism. Realism overlaps regionalism in many ways. It is the literary depiction of life how it is lived. Realist works digress from the plot by indulging into the depths of its characters in order to capture the essence of real life in real time. Realist writers attack social mores and traditions. Rejecting romanticism, realist writers do not wish to hide the unpleasant. Instead, they revel and flourish in what is real; proudly including all that is ugly, crude and perhaps socially unacceptable. True to the realistic technique, Henry James has a strong emphasis on the development of believable characters in *Daisy Miller: A Study*. Daisy is so real to readers because she is so flawed. However wrong Daisy may be according to societal norms, James never infringes on any of his character’s essential and indispensable nature. Even though her actions may be radical for the times, they are true to her own specific character and way of being. Daisy’s manner is consistent throughout the book. When Winterbourne firsts meets her in Switzerland she is “chatty,” “audacious” and “a flirt” (James, pg. 397). Daisy never loses these characteristics or betrays who she truly is. By doing this, James makes her real to the reader.

However, in being real, Daisy is not accepted by society. This is the beauty of realism. Unlike romanticism, where characters and events are dramatized, idealized, and exaggerated, Daisy’s disposition is imperfect. She is described by Winterbourne and his aunt as “crude,” “dreadful,” “ignorant” and “vulgar” (James, pg. 408, 409). Although her actions, such as walking with two men in public, are deemed scandalous by society, they are true to her flirtatious nature. If James had made Daisy abandon her unique demeanor in favor of the societal norm, she would no longer be real. Instead, James adheres to realism from beginning to end. Although Winterbourne pleads with Daisy to leave the Colosseum for fear she will catch malaria, true to her own, special form she barks at him in giddy protest, “I don’t care...whether I have Roman fever or not!” Her consequential death, a result of her outlandish behavior, does not provide a happy, fairytale ending. Instead, in having his heroic main character die, James makes his work that much more realistic.

In response to social and political changes in America and in direct opposition to romanticism, a style that had dominated literature for many years, 19th century American writers employed regionalism and realism. Some of the best representations of regionalism can be found in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* while one of the best representations of realism is found in Henry James’ *Daisy Miller: A Study* because these three authors brought to life their stories and characters for their readers.

