

"Low Life in American Art: From Mark Twain to Steven Hartman"

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The depiction of the underside of American society has given rise to a genre which is rooted in a decidedly American tradition. One example is the work of Mark Twain, whose humorous portrayals of the runaway rag-a-muffin boy and the superstitious slave, in works like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), offer comic relief from the tragic lives such marginalized people lead. Perhaps Twain is one of our most celebrated authors because of his ability to create texts which showcase a low life view of the "American" experience. It should be mentioned, however, that while Twain's literary prowess has been celebrated for a number of reasons, his authorship has also come under attack because some readers and critics find his texts to be lacking in political correctness. Peter Shaw, in his survey of adverse critical responses to *Huck Finn*, claims that contemporary critics of the novel, "no less than their predecessors, have violated a work's literary integrity by demanding that it conform to a particular inorality" (Shaw 434). It would seem that an aversion to "Huck's wavering attitude toward race and slavery" has caused a number of critics to condemn the novel (see Arac for further discussion). Such a reading, by default, can potentially hinder these practitioners from discovering the structures in the text which enable a sense of pathos to be experienced by the reader.

The question posed by Tom Quirk in "Is *Huckleberry Finn* Politically Correct?," when he asks "Is the canonical status of this novel evidence of cultural hegemony and racist myopia?" (193) in effect turns this positioning on its head. Instead of lamenting the loss which occurs when

literary politics are made operative in the oppression of a text, Quirk questions whether canonization is illustrative, in a Foucauldian sense, of a mainstream world view imposing itself upon those cultural sub-groups, who perceive their integrity slighted by the manner in which texts exhibit value systems that present ethnicity in a pejorative light. Naturally, such imposition is operative. Nevertheless, the point which I attempt to make in this essay is that the underlying forces which govern canonization do act, in both specific cases as well as in broad terms, to restrict reader access to important texts. In this essay the short story "The Desert Never Ends" (1995), by the American author Steven Hartman, is taken as a case in point. My aim here is to show how pathos in low life literature, within an American cultural context, operates in Hartman's short story. It is argued that some of the current trends in canonization, (which could be interpreted as advocating a disapproval of texts that frame a decidedly low life/male discourse) impact negatively on the access which readers have to low life texts, and also alter the inanner in which some readers experience such discourse. Readers, I argue, have much to gain from taking a harder look at low life texts which, while seemingly offensive on the surface, are capable of invoking feelings of empathy for the abused and inarginalized.

As to the manner in which the underside of American society is depicted in fiction, much has happened in the last 117 years. The low life presented, for instance, in Bukowski's short fictions, is decidedly more raw and "decadent" in the sense that the prevailing sense of "decency" as it is perceived in mainstream society is challenged (see, for example, *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* [1969] and *South of No North* [1973]). Bukowski's work, much of which showcases the downside of the domestic alcoholic, exemplifies an author's ability to present "windows" through which readers can view and thus "experience" the essence of the low life. Seemingly seditious cultural phenomena, exemplified by much of the short fiction of Bulowski, are amazingly effective in conveying in the reader's mind a sense of pathos, of identification with the fate of the central characters, and like Twain's work, they offer a good portion of comic relief.

When low life material is presented in mediums which exploit violence, murder, rule of the gun, and the life of the outcast, there has been a tendency to condemn such artifacts on the grounds that exploitation and

sensationalist functions are too overt, too dominating, and as such crowd out other, more "noble" aspects of the "text." These notions, naturally, have been turned on their head by the critical and public success of, for example, movies such as Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), Francis Ford Copola's *Rumble Fish* (1983), or Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Such cultural phenomena, which investigate and reveal the social realities of the American low life, play a perilous balancing act. They, nevertheless, are examples of "art" as it is defined by the established power brokers in the critical establishment.

While violent films have often been stigmatized and labeled by some as exploitative (in their attempt to showcase one aspect of the American experience, directors such as Jim Jarmusch and Wayne Wang are celebrated for their refreshing and if you will "lighter" portrayals of the backside of the affluent society. Such practitioners offer their public an alternative to the dominant genres which frame contemporary society. Their work is an integral part of a tradition which can also be traced, for example, in the lyrics of Tom Waits. Collectively, contemporary low life cultural artifacts create a stage for further exploration of the social landscape. There are, moreover, a number of practitioners whose work could, in some people's minds, be associated with the above mentioned artists. A writer like Bret Easton Ellis, attempting to juxtapose a sense of social immediacy with the indifference of a drug obsessed and affluent upper-middle class, may fail at showcasing the human qualities that are inherent in the work of more talented writers. Nevertheless, we witness a low life element in his work and see a direct association with the darker side of American society. The fiction of Ellis, however, like unnecessarily violent film, abuses the sensational impact of sex, drugs, violence, and the mindlessness of disillusioned youth. The human element gets lost in the shuffle. The marketability of the cultural artifact becomes the supreme concern in the consumer orientated cultural trade nexus. Such a sell-out is not apparent in the more genuine low life cultural artifact.

Song lyrics also often address the plight of the disenfranchised. Low life American song lyrics, which are part and parcel of the American experience, have their roots in the back alleys and basement dives of places like New Orleans, New York, and Chicago. Lyricists have been able to glorify a seedy side of life, to package it in a display of poetic expression, while at the same time allowing the listener an opportunity to interact, to experience

aesthetic appreciation, and to be intimate with the wisdom and integrity of figures who otherwise have little prestige in postmodern society. The barfly becomes the bard and the deliverer of the desperation and vision of the down-and-out. American cultural artifacts often embrace and celebrate such inspired underdogs, people living on the fringe. Beyond their tatty exterior, such heroes are often "noble" in the sense that they cling to codes of honor in their struggle against injustice. Like Sisyphus, these anti-heroes are inevitably imprisoned in the cycles of their own fate. The reader, on the other hand, is given the opportunity to experience through the "text" the catharsis which is the driving force behind the discourse.

Low life literary texts owe much of their success to the pathos conjured up by the dramatic exhibition of the disenfranchised. Yet experience or membership in the underside of American life is not a prerequisite for aesthetic appreciation. Readers are given the opportunity to transcend barriers which hinder individuals in knowing the "other" through discourse that moves beyond the esoteric concerns of specific groups. Often dealing with the frustration of having to endure human tragedy in all of its manifestations, the low life character is universal. Murder, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and an obsession with weapons become icons or metaphors for our own fascination with various mechanisms of power, authority, and control. A reader is given opportunities to relate to her or his own experiences of degradation, injustice, and personal disappointment. Individuals from all walks of life share a common fascination with low life visions of America, and for many the impact of the literary experience is given impetus through a focus on the underside of the American dream. This becomes a space where a reader can engage the human condition.

The low life genre for the most part addresses a male world-view (and it is primarily men who partake in the creation of such art). Some factions of the cultural/academic canon-making machine openly dismiss the male-oriented low life texts on the basis of a "political agenda." One could say that the requirements of the various factions which collectively constitute what we have come to know as the politically correct movement, not only in the use of language but also in the values and sensibilities that are celebrated in a narrative, construct barriers which estrange many writers. On one hand we have the focus on gender, the issues of sexual preference, and the experience of the gender discriminated, while

on the other we have the heterosexual and male-oriented so-called mainstream world of the macho value system which is the very foundation of the low life realm. A fascination with violence, arguably, in the Freudian sense a sexual issue, as well as a preference for translating experience into masculine codes, is very much the mode of operation for low life literature. No excuse is made for the seeming insensitivity on issues such as gay liberation, the women's movement, and the plight of the socially disenfranchised.

Texts celebrating the low life figure are potentially at odds with many people, the activist feminists calling for a new canon, the disenfranchised individuals in society who are fighting for more room in the canon for texts which address their struggle and are devoid of language and structures that discriminate. The literary interface that texts are forced to undergo in order to become recognized in the academy poses serious challenges to low life literature. But it does have something to offer, not only to mainstream men, who for various reasons relate to this macho world of male codes, but to people from all walks of life, and this is because the texts encapsulate a mood, a landscape, which allows the universality of human conflict to be given a voice. It could be argued that the male dominated experience in low life literature is itself a proclamation of dismay over the marginalization of the misunderstood and economically disadvantaged boy/man who invariably confronts the life-denying penal system and the unbearable pressures of life in a world where the expectations placed on men in general lead to anxiety and alienation.

A case in point is the short fiction of Steven Hartman, an American short story writer whose works, some twenty odd vignettes and short stories now in print, embodies not only humor and wit in a decidedly American manner, but also belongs to the emerging low life genre in the tradition of short fiction writers like Charles Bukowski. In a sense, we find in Hartman's works the wit and tempo of the Beat Generation with the power and sensitivity of more established writers like Henry Miller and Ernest Hemingway. I would argue that far more critical attention should be given to work of this sort, but fear that the current focus on post-colonialism, gender, and ethnic writing, at the expense of other equally legitimate kinds of marginalized discourse, has effectively blocked critical celebration of writers whose works does not conform to the politically correct frames currently under construction in the academy. The very

strength of Bukowski's short fiction has saved his reputation from extinction. But other writers working in similar fields are finding it difficult to make their voice heard. It would seem that sensationalism and the exploitation of violence are possible alternatives, but for writers like Hartman this is not a viable choice. It is in the lives of the underdogs, the down and out, the marginalized male, that he finds the stuff of human existence, and there allows the reader not only to reflect on their own experiences, but also to discover the underlying righteousness of his characters. Hartman forces the reader to recognize the conventions that leave us incapable of transcending the ideological baggage which restrict our ability to identify, and finally to embrace characters who, for various reasons, are repulsive on the surface. The redemption is the reader's triumph, the reader's transcendence into identification with the very roots of the American cultural mindset. In Hartman's cosmology the low life figure becomes emblematic of the human situation stripped bare of social class and social propriety. He presents individuals dealing with issues of classic profundity wrapped in the cloth of back street America.

In "The Desert Never Ends" we encounter George, whose use of four letter words, his macho demeanor, and his reflections on prison life (where he served four years for murdering his father), immediately challenge the reader. Who is this person? Will the unfolding of his fate lead one to a new understanding of the plight of such individuals, or is this portrayal of the naked low life figure simply an avenue into sensationalism, into the flippant exploitative world of the rough and tumble ex-con, who insists on telling his story in his own words? The interjection of humor, and there is plenty of it, may further confuse us. But as the reader gets further into the story it becomes apparent that the protagonist is victimized and is forced to fight for his humanity. As such, this is a story of a life gone wrong, of the twisted fate of the good individual, who, according to the Hemingway code, stays true to his sense of honor, truth, and duty. In this sense, one can read Hartman's work as a celebration of the American spirit and the underlying need for Americans to explain their legacy as one which embraces ideals that constitute our heritage.

Like Twain's knack for teasing out both tragic as well as humorous elements of life in the South during the antebellum period, Hartman gives us renditions of the rural-poor in a similar blend of iniquitous behavior followed by comic relief, weaving his tale of the victimized protagonist

in a decidedly American manner. George is a simple human being who suffers from the abuse of a violent alcoholic father. His efforts to protect his mother and younger brother culminate in murder and incarceration. The narrative moves constantly between the present and two visions of the past, one which recounts the childhood world which George endured, and the other his description of life after his release from prison. The recounting of the past operates as a forum for establishing some sense of *justification* for George's violent nature. As with his trashing of the pimp who insists on holding on to George's girlfriend and soon-to-be wife Cassy, we also find a sense of justification in the violence George dishes out to his boss, who taunts George about his former-prostitute wife in front of other workers.

The all too often absent father, who is greedy, often inebriated, and physically and psychologically abusive, can be seen to have an integral place in our understanding of characters like George, who invariably are forced to grow up to taking responsibility for loved family members all too soon in life, and as a result not only meet challenges which cause them a great deal of distress, but also miss out on the kind of tranquil childhood which is a part of the American Dream. According to the internal logic of the text, George's propensity for hard work, his belittlement of men unable to match his masculine prowess, and his decidedly "male" interpretation of the world can all be understood through the insights into his childhood as the son of an alcoholic.

It is imperative that the readers set aside their own personal agenda if and when such an agenda assumes that one rejects, almost through a knee-jerk reaction, discourse which appears to be entrenched in a macho and male interpretation of the world. Readers will benefit from a transcendence of such obstacles. "The Desert Never Ends" is not primarily about the celebration of the virile male hero. On the contrary, this tale is about the tragic nature of life. Our protagonist is a victim, an innocent bystander who has had the misfortune of having been born as the son of a man whose propensity for cruelty frames a behavior which has caused a great deal of trauma. But beyond being a victim, George is also a hero in that he takes it upon himself to defend his mother and brother against this tyrant. In standing up to the oppressor, George is forced to make a difficult decision. Clearly, he chooses to take matters into his own hands, and in taking a stand he accepts the consequences.

Although there is a romanticized vision that much of the American experience is made up of team spirit and neighborly cooperation, there is also the notion that individual struggle, the plight of the pioneer who against all odds makes his or her way in the wilderness, is at the heart of what makes Americans feel distinct from others. George, like others who have worked to make an American legacy possible, is alone as he cuts his way through the thicket. The specter of alcoholism and domestic violence, things which often accompany each other, interferes and denies the mother and her children a decent life. Such cycles of abuse and violence are also all too familiar in the American experience. The comic relief is there to offer hope and to make the unbearable less distressing. At the same time the reader is invariably struck with a gnawing sense of personal tragedy. The price George pays is his suffering and pain. An ultimate sense of personal tragedy, when artistically enacted, allows a reader an opportunity to partake in the pathos which is not only the driving force behind "The Desert Never Ends," but also something which is intimately connected with the narrative impetus of American low life fiction. The seed of this genre, American low life, has been greatly influenced by Twain's fondness for showcasing comical aspects of everyday life.

A good deal of humor can also be found in *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). But Steinbeck interjected the political element into the equation, portraying the fates of a number of Oklahoma farmers whose journey into the dream known as California brought them not so much into a safe haven as toward greater understanding of themselves and the tragic nature of their predicament. Their doomed struggle provides readers with a great deal of opportunity to experience pathos. Steinbeck provides his reader with the convict returning home to his uneducated people, who can no longer survive on the parched land. The unfolding of their fate allows for contemplation of issues at the heart of American society. As this story exposes the injustice which many Americans endured during the period following the collapse of farming in the Dust Bowl region, readers are given an opportunity to share the experience. While with this political foundation the text of Steinbeck is less controversial at this point in time, there are readers who find various aspects of the narrative lacking in political correctness. Keep in mind as well that the book was initially condemned by right-wing advocates active in public life.

In the 1950's, when a wave of conservatism was dictating public taste, actors such as Marlon Brando (in *The Wild One*, 1954) and James Dean (in *Rebel Without A Cause*, 1955) offered the American public ample opportunity to experience pathos in a celebration of people who are depicted as existing on the margins of in mainstream society. Such stylized renditions of low life culture which flourished in the 1950's represent some of the finest examples of a distinctly American experience. At the same time, with jazz, blues, and rhythm and blues often being used as a vehicle for expressing lamentation over the plight of the misunderstood male, the down and out, we see how a low life vision of America becomes increasingly relevant in the evolution of American culture.

The radical changes which took place in American society during the 1960's and the 1970's apparently made it possible for the creators of cultural artifacts to depict more openly aspects of life which earlier were simply not brought to the fore. Here, the emergence of an interest in alcoholics took on new levels of realism. Bukowski not only gives us the alcoholic in his renditions of his alter ego, but also the socially degenerate "failure" whose primary drive is not only to drink but also to criticize society while attempting to have sex with any number of down-and-out women. This reminds us of the "romanticized low life view of society expressed by Henry Miller's persona when he is slumming it in his "lost generation" Paris in works such as *Tropic of Cancer* (1934). Such contextualizations of social attitudes and behavior can be seen as something new in American literature. Even here, however, the legacy of the South and of Twain's peculiar sense of humor, the plight of the lower echelons of society, and the sense of pathos which emanates from such narratives, is present.

Primary to a conceptualization of low life in American culture is a focus on the disenfranchised individuals who, because they go against the grain in so many respects, find themselves at odds with mainstream America. They invariably tend to suffer as the children of alcoholics, have an unhappy childhood in general, and find themselves in adult life unjustifiably challenged by bigoted people who have social and economic advantages and find satisfaction in suppressing others. In turn, our low life "anti-heroes" actually become heroes because they emulate values which are highly treasured in American culture. Hard work, a sense of duty, a stubborn refusal to do the wrong thing, and a keen ability

to stick by loved ones, inevitably lead the characters, and the reader as well, into the realm of pathos. With the greater openness in virtually all aspects of American life, contemporary exposés of American low life at times show characters behaving in a manner that can be judged by some to be politically incorrect and to exhibit attitudes which are offensive to marginalized segments of American society. One consequence is that literary texts which show American low life run the risk of making a poor showing in the canon wars, and as a consequence may not receive the attention they deserve. But works like Steven Hartman's "The Desert Never Ends" will hopefully, like the work of Bukowski, have presence in our culture because they capture a very important element of the American experience.

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