
The American Urban Sublime: Literary Manifestations

Dr. Swati Mukerjee

The path of metropolitan development in the United States in the twentieth century, traced the rise of the modern capitalist city and its evolution into the complex urban landscape of post-modern times. At that time the city was re-inventing itself as a universal site where writers were trying to discover as to what aspects constituted the urban sublime. Over the ages, a diverse range of urban theories have helped planners, sociologists, writers and policy-makers to understand the urban complex.

Urbanism found its “most pronounced expression in ... metropolitan cities” according to sociologist Louis Wirth, who postulated in “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938) that the “historically conditioned cultural influences which, though they may significantly affect the specific character of the community, are not the essential determinants of its character as a city...” According to Wirth, the members of a cosmopolitan unit have “diverse origins and backgrounds” and such variations gave rise to the “spatial segregation of individuals according to colour, ethnic heritage, economic and social status, tastes and preferences”. That kind of diversity often caused “segmentalization of human relationships” leading to the “schizoid” aspect of the urban personality (Wirth *Urban Sociology Reader* 34-35).

Focusing on the essential characteristics of the city-living experience, Simon Parker in *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City* (2004) postulated that “conflict” should form a part of urban theory because it related not just to

visible, physical violence “such as riots or civil disorder”, but also to “less visible struggles over resources between social classes” (Parker 4-5). At the beginning of the twentieth century, sociologist Georg Simmel in his essay “The Metropolis and the Mental Life” (1903), showed how the city was a determinant of social and cultural life, promoting personal subjectivity. Enumerating the individual reactions to the changing conditions of a modern metropolis, Simmel paralleled living in an urban environment to primitive man's fight against nature. In the jungle- like situation of the twentieth century cosmopolitan existence, man protected himself with a state of indifference, as most urban dwellers were immersed in impersonality; in order to counter the sharp discontinuities in the metropolis. Simmel felt that the man in the modern city “reacts with his head instead of his heart” (636). He felt that the “blasé” attitude which characterized the reserved metropolitan man, caused an ever-increasing social distance among people, which was the outcome of urban density and specialization.

The exploitative relationship between labour and capital among the different social classes in a globalized city formed the subject of study, not only of the urban sociologists like Wirth and Parker, but also the realist writers of the nineteenth century like Stephen Crane, who highlighted the sharp contrasts among the different status groups in his fiction. Apart from Crane, Frank Norris and Henry James among others, resorted to the 'urban novel' or 'city writing', which became the dominant literary mode of expression in the twentieth century, highlighting the issue of social fragmentation characterizing the American metropolis. America was leaping into a new modern age, and these realistic writers set their stories in specific regions, drawing upon the grim realities of everyday life, while trying to communicate the complexities of the urban experience.

Realism was a literary technique, denoting a kind of subject-matter

relating especially to middle-class life, while attempting a faithful representation of reality or verisimilitude. It has been chiefly concerned with the commonplaces of everyday life, where character was considered a product of social factors and environment was the integral element in the drama of human life, as lived out in the city. A high point in the history of realism occurred in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, with the appearance of novels like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1889).

Naturalism was an extension of realism in a way and writers, who began their careers in the 1890s, were referred to as the naturalists as they saw human experience as subject to biological or environmental determinism. Naturalist/realist writers like Crane, Norris and Henry James tried to provide a viable way of reading the urban experience in America and for this they used the language and vocabulary spawned by the contemporary urban environment. Recording their city-experiences required a vocabulary which was very different from the romantic and sentimental language of the 17th or 18th centuries. These novelists dealt with "...a mechanized world of man-made structures" and it was the "city itself" which provided a vocabulary for the urban novel" (Gelfant *American City Novel* 18).

The urban novel at the turn of the century tried to reassess the overall meaning of the urban experience in cultural, intellectual, social and political terms, envisioning a new consciousness of the city. The writers attempted to trace the emergence of a new social form resulting from the tensions between the rural vision and the urban industrial ideal. The following sections of this article discuss the contributions of naturalist/ realist writers like Charles Brockden Brown, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris among others, as they tried to give literary form to the urban glimpses they saw around

them, while maintaining a love-hate relationship with the American metropolis at the turn of the century.

The distinctive character of American city-fiction started with the work of Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), who like Crane and Dreiser much later, also started his career as a journalist. At the end of the eighteenth century he produced a remarkable group of novels like *Wieland* (1798), *Ormond* (1799), *Edgar Huntly* (1799) and *Arthur Mervyn* (1800), where he portrayed a landscape of collapsing faith and the ruins of an unnatural outward world.

In his works, Brown problematized the concept of the city, because for the first time, the so-called promising 'garden' of the New World was seen as a potentially malign wilderness, which was an evidence of nature's degradation. In his fiction, the city was portrayed not simply as a place of civilization but also of pestilence and deceptions, almost as abhorrent as the wilderness faced by the pioneers. While mentioning the yellow-fever epidemics that ravaged Philadelphia and other cities in the 18th century, in his works *Ormond* and *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown's description of a person afflicted with the fever, was among the early examples of realism in American city fiction: "It was obvious to conclude that his disease was pestilential....His throbbing temples and burning skin indicated a fever, and his form already emaciated, seemed to prove that it had not been of short duration" (Brown *Arthur Mervyn* 5).

Even though Brown applied the vision of the loss of the perfect 'Eden' to the American cityscape, his fiction was an evidence of how an innocent Adamic paradise was no longer viable because such a landscape dissolved into darkness, mystery and the troubled psyches of city people. Consequently the benign world of Nature gave way to the deceptions of the urban American environment where the power of darkness and sense of mystery was introduced into literature,

resulting in moral ambiguity which was new to the American cityscape. For him the epidemics were symbolic of the diseases of the mind, which were gradually becoming an inseparable part of the urban experience.

Yet Brown's portrayal of the darkness of the landscape fusing with the disturbed psyches of the city people was contradictory to the attitude of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804- 1864) towards nature, as he tried to balance the pastoral and the urban. Hawthorne was attracted to the ideal of the balance between the urban and the pastoral and in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), he explored the different facets of urban pastoralism by testing it against the pulse of reality.

Similar to Hawthorne's wish of a pastoral-urban bonding, Professor Leo Marx in *Machine in the Garden* (1969) made an assessment in retrospect, of the regenerative powers of the pastoral myth and how Nature was actually a source of “virtue” and “good fortune of Americans”:

In its simplest, archetypal form, the myth affirms that Europeans experience a regeneration in the New World. They become new, better, happier men—they are reborn. In most versions, the regenerative power is located in the natural terrain: access to undefiled, bountiful, sublime nature is what accounts for the virtue and special good fortune of Americans. It enables them to design a community in the image of a garden, an ideal fusion of nature with art. The landscape thus becomes the symbolic repository of value of all kinds—economic, political, aesthetic and religious (Marx 228).

The “city” that Hawthorne focused in his novel was Boston, yet he did not explore the cosmopolitan character of Boston, the way Henry James did in *The Bostonians* (1886), detailing an age of alteration, increased political activity and the evolving modern cityscape.

Henry James (1843-1916) was principally a realist of the late nineteenth century, seeking in his fiction to give a faithful representation of contemporary American life. In *The Bostonians* (1886), he dealt with explicit political themes like feminism, the general role of women in society, friendship between two women, journalism that invaded privacy and the women's movement that prevailed in America at that time.

The question arises, that while trying to explore these themes in the context of the city, why would he choose Boston as his setting? One possible answer could be that after the Civil War, as the whole nation was heading towards commercialization, the culture of consumption was replacing the high culture embodied by Boston. Originally Boston (being the site of the Massachusetts Bay Colony), was the place where the New England mind with its Puritan heritage and Transcendentalist philosophy was supposed to be still intact. As a result, at one point of time, Boston came to represent the national citadel of culture and moral purpose, far removed from the frenzied uproar over money, which was plaguing other cosmopolitan centres.

Yet, when James chose Boston as the setting for his novel, he tried to trace its transition from a city of New England heritage to a city of capitalism. At that time, Boston embodied the conflicting values of the New England mind and the culture of consumption, gradually leading to its decline as the intellectual centre of the nation. What the decline of Boston as a 'city of culture' meant, was crucial to the discussion of what American society achieved and sacrificed in its transition into a commercialized urban milieu.

The title *The Bostonians* is significant in the sense that it referred to the major characters namely, Miss Olive Chancellor, a staunch feminist belonging to the Boston elite, Verena Tarrant, a young talented speaker who is a protégée of Olive, and Basil Ransom, a

political conservative, originally from Mississippi. These three central characters are surrounded by a vivid supporting cast of would-be reformers, cynical journalists, as James showed remarkable ability to create a broad cross-section of American society. It should however be kept in mind that the quiet but significant struggle between Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom for Verena's affection and allegiance, seems more pertinent and engrossing today than it might have appeared to nineteenth century readers. Basil eventually proposed to Verena and persuaded her to elope with him, much to the discomfiture of Olive and her fellow feminists.

At that time, Boston was fast moving away from its Puritan heritage, towards the new industrial order of the twentieth century. The spires of the declining churches were being fast outnumbered by the chimneys of the multiplying factories and industries. Beacon Hill, a prestigious enclave and cultural hotspot, was sharply contrasted with the landscape of Charlestown and Cambridge areas of the city, where factories and churches muddled together in the same wintry view. The depressing sight of factories encroaching within the city limits was presented to the reader through Verena's vision as she noticed:

...the desolate suburban horizons...the general hard, cold void of the prospect of a few chimneys and steeples, straight, sordid, tubes of factories and engine-shops....There was something inexorable in the poverty of the scene, shameful in the meanness of its details...with sheds and rotting piles, mounds of refuse, yards bestrewn with iron pipes...and bare wooden backs of places (James *Bostonians* 185).

The sordid poverty and ugliness of the scene as viewed through Verena's eyes was juxtaposed with the impression of the city in the eyes of Basil Ransom and Olive's sister, Mrs. Luna. While talking to

her, Basil was surprised to hear that “nobody tells fibs in Boston. I don't know what to make of them all”, while summing it up as “this unprevaricating city” (Ibid 35).

Basil on his part, referred to it as “the city of reform” (Ibid 38), because in the late 1870s, when the events of the novel were set, reform movements such as abolition before the Civil War and the women's suffrage movement after it, were still active in Boston. For Basil Ransom, to hear the celebrated speaker Mrs. Farrinder speak for the emancipation of women was “something very Bostonian” (49), betraying his belief that reform movements existed only in Boston, which was perhaps why it was constantly referred to as “a city of culture” (46). Yet the status-quo could not be maintained indefinitely, because the transition of the city to a capitalistic economy was becoming evident in the “...spires of the declining church, the masts of isolated self whose triumphant self-reliance has been transformed to isolation and loneliness; and the chimneys of the new industrial order” (45).

Yet James did not only highlight the grime and the poverty engendered by the onset of industrialization. He also accentuated some modern aspects of Boston, including the offices of newspapers which were the “national nerve-centres” (123) and the “high glass plates” (123) of the vestibules of hotels, introduced for efficiency at the sacrifice of privacy. The modern hotels were transparent, exposing the people in the lobbies, which had become the sites for publicity, just like the emerging department stores. The city also had “places providing pleasure”, as Basil realized that Boston was “big and full of nocturnal life”, with little or no remaining traces of Puritan heritage (413). The pleasure-seekers of the city were transported by the highly popular streetcars, whose speed and convenience demanded the sacrifice of the passengers' distinctiveness that New England virtue had greatly valued. Riding in a streetcar meant

sharing the same space with strangers, threatening everyone's individualism, as they moved through the expanding city, pursuing their materialistic goals. Through all these images, James depicted the shortcomings as well as the advantages of urban life, enabling the activities of commerce and consumption in a city which had been known previously only for its Puritan leanings.

Women like Olive Chancellor possibly did not get married because they felt they had a better connection to women than to men. She preferred to live with Verena, finding the arrangement of living in a same-sex household both practical and preferable to a heterosexual marriage. Their relationship gave James the opportunity to focus on one of the unique features of the city, namely the 'Boston-Marriage', which connoted an ambiguous co-habiting long-term relationship between two women. The term was said to have been in use in New England in the decades spanning late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, describing two women living together, independent of financial support from a man. There was an assumption that in the era when the term was in use, it denoted a lesbian relationship, even though there was no documentary proof that any particular Boston –Marriage, included sexual relations.

The living arrangements of a Boston Marriage helped the partners to pursue careers, because American culture of the nineteenth century made it difficult for women to have careers while being married to men. With society according inferior status to women, some of them sought independent lives, deciding to set up households together. In comparison to heterosexual marriages, the 'Boston-Marriage' arrangement had many advantages, with greater equality in responsibilities and decision-making. Apart from being emotionally attached to each other, the partners actively used their careers as a reason to avoid marriage. The Olive-Verena relationship exemplified this arrangement in *The Bostonians*, showing how being feminists,

they were involved in social betterment and cultural causes with shared values, trying to form a strong foundation for their lives together.

Even though this novel dealt with explicit political themes, along with feminism and the general role of women in society, yet James was at best ambivalent about the feminist movement. However, he was completely focused on the city of Boston, which was the locale for the unfolding events in the lives of his characters. Similar to James, we find Stephen Crane depicting the life of his protagonist in another city of the New World, namely New York, which like Boston was also an expression of the urban culture of America at the turn of the century.

The novels which were the result of Stephen Crane's (1871-1900) life in the bohemian poverty and urban jungle of New York were *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets: A Story of New York* (1893) and its companion piece *George's Mother* (1896), both of which were set in the tenements of Rum Alley in the city.

New York City was chosen by Crane as the fundamental naturalist setting of the novel *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, where the events of her life gradually unfolded. The city exemplified the struggles, problems and conflicts of a decadent bohemia of evanescence and artifice. The main action of the novel has been confined within the tenements of Rum Alley, from where Maggie glimpsed larger horizons than those among whom she lived.

Rum Alley was a representative slum of New York City consisting of grimy tenement lodgings. During the last decade of the nineteenth century when the novel was set, large-scale immigration had disastrous effects on the urban American scene. Concentration of population, both native and immigrant, took place in metropolitan centres like New York, Boston, Philadelphia among others, mainly

due to the Industrial Revolution in America. The recipient cities and towns were ill-equipped to bear the burden of additional inhabitants and the result was that slums, shanty towns and tenement lodgings sprang up in an uncontrolled manner, changing the face of the urban scenario permanently.

The jungle reality of the slums brought about by rapid industrialization ensured that multiple families were squeezed into limited spaces within a city. The cramped living conditions were a critique of the prevailing social environment of cities like New York. The numbers of the labouring classes had drastically increased with high rates of immigration, not only from other countries but from rural areas of the country as well. Crane, along with contemporaries like Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser attempted to explore the problems of economic inequality which were causing fissures in the social fabric of the American nation at the turn of the century.

With rapid and unchecked industrialization, some parts of the city became the prototypes of Hell instead of Heaven, making outcasts like Maggie, symbols of absolute alienation. The poverty of Maggie's family, which Crane depicted so realistically, was a fallout of the unequal distribution of wealth in a capitalist economy, during the last decade of the nineteenth century. This led to excessive overcrowding in cities like New York, giving rise to unhygienic living conditions for the impoverished classes.

In the first three pages of the novel, Crane superimposed the sounds of the primitive animals on the ferocious jungle of the New York slums. The Darwinian struggle for existence was reinforced in some of the significant words and phrases of the characters, including terms like “howling”, “writhing”, “livid with the fury of battle”, “furious assault”, “convulsed”, “insane demon”, “barbaric”, “triumphant savagery”, along with verbs like “kicked, scratched and

tore” (Crane *Maggie* 1-3). Maggie's parents were often depicted in insanelly drunken battles during which they broke up whole roomfuls of furniture and crockery. Maggie's brother felt that the house resembled a battlefield after one such skirmish between the parents:

A glow from the fire threw red hues over the bare floor, the cracked and soiled plastering and the overturned and broken furniture. In the middle of the floor lay his mother....In one corner of the room his father's limp body hung across the seat of a chair (Ibid 24).

Being on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, for individuals like Maggie, the city brought about alienation, rather than any kind of fulfillment, with misery rather than happiness being shared among the tenement lodgers. Maggie's plight was a critique of the social environment, where the novelist fused elements of poverty, ignorance and intolerance in a context of violence and cruelty to create a nightmarish world. The urban environment was extremely dehumanizing for the lower classes, often leading to unnatural deaths like Maggie's suicide.

Apart from this novel, Crane located *George's Mother* (1896) also in New York City, where there were constant traffic snarls and children fought animalistically for victory in tenement yards. Yet it was also the place of dream, wealth, indulgence and the social theatre, where ever fresh roles were being offered. George longed to “comprehend it completely, that he might walk understandingly in its great marvels, its mightiest march of life, its sin” (Crane *George's Mother* 35). When his mother died in front of him, an “endless roar, the eternal tramp of the marching city, came mingled with strange cries” (Ibid 53). George was in a better position to survive in the urban jungle of New York, unlike Maggie, who succumbed to pressure by committing suicide, as she was inconsistent with her environment and the urban ways of life.

The new naturalist generation that did not idealize or humanize, but defined an American life of human ironies, underclasses, social conflict and Darwinian struggle. Apart from Crane and Henry James, another contemporary writer focusing on the myriad aspects of the city in his fiction was Frank Norris, who was also a part of the naturalist tradition prevalent at the turn of the century.

If New York was the naturalist setting for some of Crane's novels, the city of San Francisco was the locale of Frank Norris's (1870-1902) *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* (1899), as the title explicitly stated. The author contemplated this as a naturalistic novel, where the preponderance of sordid milieu over the individual was thoroughly emphasized and the assemblage of characters created a sense of sociological extremes. The novel presented the people or creatures in a new dimension of Darwinian thought in an urban jungle, outside the established frames of social conformity and orientation.

Norris chose San Francisco for this tale of moral ruin because of the violent and depraved reputation of the city after the California Gold Rush (1848-1855), due to which the physical and social landscape underwent permanent changes. The effects of the Gold Rush were substantial because the city grew from a small settlement of about 200 residents in 1846 to a boomtown of about 36000 by 1852, with merchants and immigrants arriving by hundreds everyday. The sudden massive influx into this remote area of California overwhelmed the infrastructure, which in many places did not even exist. With the news of gold discovery, local residents were among the first to head for the goldfields, and whenever the yellow metal was discovered, hundreds of miners would collaborate to put up a camp and stake their claims. The social climate of the city became so vitiated that vice thrived in its most sordid forms and a stranglehold of graft and political corruption gripped the city from the mid-1880s, with unmistakable origins in the criminal underworld.

In *McTeague*, Norris presented the theme of degeneration lurking beneath the civilized facade of an urban milieu, with money and gold forming the basis of the economy. It was the story of Sweeney Agonistes (later called McTeague), an atavistic dentist from the California mining camps, who went to San Francisco to set up his practice there. The aggression lurking in his nature was apparent from his movements and appearance and Norris took pains to create his personality by the use of suggestive words and phrases at the very beginning of the novel:

For McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs...slowly, ponderously. His hands were as hard as wooden mallets, strong as vices.... Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and forefinger (Norris *McTeague*).

Even while locating his novel in San Francisco, Norris implied that his protagonist was not the typical urban dweller of a metropolis. He was attracted to a patient Trina Sieppe, of Swiss peasant background whom he finally married, with disastrous results. She won five thousand dollars in a lottery, which brought misfortune to their lives, turning her peasant frugality to base avarice and McTeague's native brutality into drunkenness and violence. The psychological distress and the moral turpitude of the couple were mainly due to the competitive and ruthless environment prevailing in contemporary society. As cities like San Francisco boasted of complex lifestyles dominated by greedy consumers, Norris's plot was evidence of the fact that the old meaning of American Dream was threatened and no longer viable.

In the prevailing cosmopolitan environment of a capitalistic economy of late nineteenth–early twentieth century America,

material success without morality became the superficial meaning of the American Dream and the term came to denote a meaningless utopia. The obsession with money and gold by Norris's characters assumed grotesque forms after McTeague was forced to abandon his profession. When his wife Trina became insufferably stingy, he used to bite her fingers till the blood came, in order to force her to give him money. Surprisingly, even while their lives deteriorated beyond repair, Trina was obsessed with her hoard of gold, before being killed by her husband, who had returned to claim more money. He fled back to the Big Dipper Mine, where he had worked as a boy, a prototype of a person ruined by the violence and evil lurking in the urban wilderness of the twentieth century.

As a result of this, protagonists like McTeague, Trina, and Maggie were inevitably “ruined in the milieu which modern man had made” (Walcutt 123). While exploring the inter-relationships between the city dweller and his environment, the naturalist writers portrayed in their fiction, how “...increasing numbers of Americans made the city their home”, as a result of which “...the city's new organization of space was bringing private and public spaces together, changing the social landscape along with the physical” (Klimasmith 7). Simultaneously, these writers attempted a basic kind of evolutionary analysis, while delineating the war of the higher and lower parts of human nature, hinting at the presence of underlying feral instincts, which prompted them to kill at the slightest provocation.

The end of the novel is about McTeague's flight from the pursuers, or “bounty-hunters”, which he instinctively detected on his trail. Even as he tried to lose them while striking across Death Valley on a mule, he met Marcus Schouler, his friend-turned-enemy, who emptied his gun into McTeague's animal. Crazy by heat and thirst, both men started fighting, with Marcus finally falling dead and McTeague standing handcuffed to his body:

Looking down, he saw that Marcus in that last struggle had found strength to handcuff their wrists together. Marcus was dead now. Mcteaue was locked to the body. All about him, vast, interminable, stretched the measureless leagues of Death Valley (Norris *McTeague*).

American naturalism interpreted material change in a factual and pragmatic manner, while fictionally recording the processes that were altering the nation. The writers at the turn of the century were part of a transitional group, which broke free of the American Genteel Tradition of the previous era, showing how the web of circumstances sometimes brought about the destruction of the protagonists. They also focused on the cycle of degeneration initiated by a hostile environment, rendering the characters incapable of coping with the pressures created by the urban space they inhabited. Naturalists like Henry James, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris were among the first to articulate an age shaped by the harsh impact of modern industrial life on the emerging cities and they contemplated the proliferating social, psychic and feminist energies at work in the new urban milieu while investing the American scene with aesthetic significance.

Bibliography:

1. Brown, Charles Brockden. *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1800). Philadelphia: David McKay Publishers, 1889.
2. Crane, Stephen. *George's Mother* (1896). New York: Fawcett Publications, 1960.
3. Crane, Stephen. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005.
4. Gelfant, Blanche. *The American City Novel, 1900-1940*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954.
5. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). New York: Dover Publications Ltd, 2003.
6. James, Henry. *The Bostonians*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1886.
7. Klimasmith, Betsy. *At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850-1930*. Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005.
8. Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964). Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973.

-
9. Parker, Simon. *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
 10. Simmel, Georg. "The Metropolis and Mental Life". *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Adapted by D. Weinstein from Kurt Wolff's translation. New York: Free Press, 1950. 409-24.
 11. Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life". *The Urban Sociology Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2005.