



Technological Encroachment and Social Changes in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Writing

DOI:10.54664/BLOV2517

Ksenija Kondali and Adna Oković

University of Sarajevo

This article explores instances of American literary production that illustrate the massive changes caused by unbridled industrial development and its social ramifications in the late nineteenth century. Expounding first on the differences between modernity and Modernism, it focuses on several narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, that present the circumstances of transition from Victorianism to a new era characterized by industrial innovations, heightened mechanization, social implications, and cultural reflections. The article discusses texts by late nineteenth-century American writers and tries to demonstrate how they revise earlier concepts of nature and sense of purpose and belonging under the impact of forceful modernization and industrialization. While the industrial revolution and the emergent capitalist system inflicted irreparable damage on nature, they also affected social and moral norms and practices. Most strikingly, the explosive urbanization and changed economic order in the United States led to alarming social differences and transformed visions of nature and the self, calling for new ways of representation in literature at the end of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Gilded Age America, modernity, Modernism, technology, nature, social transformation.

In the stark contemporary present of rampant instabilities riven by conflicts over political, economic, and other difficulties, a critical insight into the history of transformations that fed these circumstances may strike us as both called for and futile. Such re-evaluation may be useful since the shifts generated by the interface of nature and economy have undoubtedly affected also the American cultural milieu in remarkable ways that continue to resonate in popular and critical reception. We propose to begin our exploration with what is evidently the determinative period in the continuing interaction of nature and technology reflected in literary and cultural production on both sides of the Atlantic: the transition from Victorianism to Modernism, with the latter challenging, in the words of Peter Childs, “the hegemony of realism” (3). Research largely shares the recognition of Modernism as a reaction (or, rather, a series of reactions) released by the consequences of the industrial revolution and its related transformations in diverse spheres of life, including thought and art. The origins of the changes ushered in by Modernism are broadly recognized in critical writings of this period and often evoke its sense of break or intense shift from, but also call upon its consideration relative to, the idea of modernity. The transformative power of technology and progress was a highly contentious issue for many writers of the *fin-de-siècle* era and beyond, with some of them placing irrational faith in it, while others, skeptical of such a conviction, pointed out its dangers “and the need to develop other systems of knowledge and determination, often aesthetic” (Tew and Murray 12). This argumentation leads to the contention that “Modernism can then be seen as a response to modernity and the idea of the modern” with modernity typically defined as an epistemology initiated in the Renaissance with rational engagement to control surroundings and

CORRESPONDENCE: Prof. Ksenija Kondali, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo, Franje Račkog 1, Sarajevo 71000, Bosnia and Herzegovina. @ ksenija.kondali@ff.unsa.ba

continuing through the Enlightenment “to a point in the twentieth century”, perceived as a new approach “in areas such as scientific progress, rationalist social and economic practices and a secular public sphere” (Tew and Murray 13; 210). One of the most comprehensive studies on this topic, Matei Călinescu’s 1987 *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, offers a critical assessment of the terms “modern”, “modernity”, and “modernism”, while recognizing an enormous increase in their use during the previous century. For Călinescu, “modernism” as a term designates “a conscious commitment to modernity, whose normative character is thus openly recognized” (86) while “the idea of modernity implies both a radical criticism of the past and a definite commitment to change and the values of the future” (95). In the case of England and the United States, an independent conception of “modernism” was rather slow in development, which Călinescu attributes in part to the evolution of “modern” as both an adjective and a noun:

When “modern” ceased to be a synonym for “contemporary,” it became capable of performing the basic semantic functions of “modernism,” unimpeded by the potentially pejorative or vulgar associations from which the latter term had freed itself only very recently. Thus, a large number of aesthetic theories, insights, and choices, which today we would not hesitate to describe as “modernist,” went on being formulated within the broader framework of the idea of “the modern.” (85)

Tracing the development of aesthetic modernity and what led to Modernism, Călinescu acknowledges the long and complex history of modernity both as term and concept. Although his analytical overview takes the mid-nineteenth century as the point of departure for the concept of modernity, he alerts to the need to consider its earlier evolutionary stages for a more informed examination of certain issues brought up by modernity (9). His study continues to delineate modernity’s irrevocable division that occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century; one modernity was a phase in the history of Western civilization, constructed due to scientific and technological progress initiated by the industrial revolution and the wide-ranging economic and social changes generated by capitalism. The other modernity represents “an aesthetic concept. Since then, the relations between the two modernities have been irreducibly hostile, but not without allowing and even stimulating a variety of mutual influences in their rage for each other’s destruction” (Călinescu 41). Identifying the first as the bourgeois idea of modernity, Călinescu stresses its associative elements, including the code of progress, faith in the benefits of science and technology, the commodification of time, as the mainstay of middle class value systems. The other modernity, according to him, was meant to create the avant-gardes, and from its romantic inception had extreme antibourgeois leanings, repulsed with the middle-class set of norms and values (Călinescu 41; 42).¹

In *fin-de-siècle* literature, writers of different genres increasingly attempted to represent human experience in ways that either departed from or completely defied earlier realist conventions and traditional methods. These new approaches manifested themselves across a range of authors and texts that introduced innovative literary expressions for a more adequate coverage of concerns and themes that included the nature of the industrial world and the related alienation. Extensive industrial and technological changes had deep and overarching effects on the society and culture on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, but on account of this paper’s focus and limited scope, we limit our explorations of critical concepts to texts written in late nineteenth century America.

The United States gives a blatant demonstration of how technology inexorably challenges previous paradigms of work and life in the vastness of American geography. These dramatic changes were accelerated due to the rise of industrial capitalism in the Gilded Age, characterized by new inventions, massive manufacturing enterprises, unprecedented productivity, economic monopoly, unimaginable individual wealth, and unchecked political power. While explosive urban development created economic and cultural vitality, it also burdened the infrastructure and services in the cities. The spectacular growth of factories and cities in the United States was spawned by the industrial transformation in this period, so that, by 1900, almost half of its population lived in cities.

¹ For more details about the evolution of the concept of Modernism, see Călinescu, especially sections “Literary and Other Modernisms” (68 – 85) and “Comparing the Moderns to the Contemporaries” (86 – 94).

In his early works, American author Stephen Crane depicted, first in his days as a journalist in New York City, and then in his fiction, the extreme urban environment of the Gilded Age. Crane was one of the “muckrakers” who explored the paradox of progress and poverty in the period from the 1870s to the 1920s, when the United States rose to the status of the world’s leading industrial nation, mostly thanks to its technological innovation. Crane’s critical observations and social consciousness in his urban non-fiction captures the transformations and the making of an industrial working class in an explosive, unstable urban-industrial economy. Alarming, and, in his vision often grotesque examples of urban squalor and class differences are found in both his sketches and longer literary forms. For example, in the 1890s, in a piece titled “On the Jersey Coast”, Stephen Crane gave a scathing condemnation of the social divides created by these urban-industrial conditions contrasting the “resort of wealth and leisure” in his cherished childhood haunt of Asbury Park and the tired toiling men who went on a commemorating parade there (*New York Tribune*, July 24, 1892: 19, qtd. in Solomon 45).

The centrality of New York City in the bewildering process of late nineteenth-century economic and social transformation is widely acknowledged and no wonder it features in many of Crane’s works, especially its less appealing and underrepresented “underworld” he knew well.² As Andrew Lawson writes in his article “Class Mimicry in Stephen Crane’s City”, by the late nineteenth century, a well-established topography of New York as a city polarized between the “opulent rich” and the “degraded poor”, teemed with citizens occupying self-contained, noncommunicating worlds (596). Writing about city life in sketches such as “An Experiment in Misery” (1894) about living in a flophouse, and other details of the life in the lower-class Bowery tenements, Crane simultaneously reported on the insatiable American demand for new workers that spurred massive immigration, with cities swelling by population number, but lacking in sanitation and safety systems. Despite (or perhaps exactly because of) US technological advances, the brutality of the new urban-industrial order was evident. Crane portrays characters whose dwellings are found in the dilapidated caverns of Bowery tenements, just made visible to the middle-class readership and to Crane through Jacob Riis’s slum studies *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and *Children of the Poor* (1892), complete with flash photos.

Based on city records, Senate Committee hearings, and his own research, Riis, a reporter, social reformer, and photographer, points out the ruthlessness of speculation that turned housing units into advance rent collection schemes: “The greed of capital that wrought the evil must itself undo it, as far as it can now be undone. Homes must be built for the working masses by those who employ their labor” (3). The development of tenements illustrates the transformation of whole neighborhoods into slums as “comfortable dwellings in the once fashionable streets along the East River front fell into the hands of real-estate agents and boarding-house keepers” (Riis 5).³ Identifying the “genesis of the tenement”, in his sociological research and writing, Riis denounced the mounting economic disenfranchisement of the working poor and campaigned to eradicate poverty in a supportive family environment and better-quality urban dwellings by giving public lectures. Riis gave such an illustrated lecture also in 1892 in a vacation resort on the New Jersey shore where Stephen Crane wrote dispatches for *The New York Tribune*. The following passage indicates Crane’s scathing reflection on the paradox of charity and hypocrisy in a highly divisive society:

Listening to the lecture, Crane immediately noticed the contrast between middle-class vacationers enjoying gentle sea breezes and the urban poor suffering stifling conditions in crowded tenements. Though vacationers contributed a modest amount of money to help give children a

² In support of this argument, among the numerous references in scholarship on Crane illustrating this relationship, the possibly ultimate one originates from Crane’s earliest biographer, Robert W. Stallman, co-authoring with E. R. Hagemann in the “Preface” to *The New York City Sketches of Stephen Crane and Related Pieces*: “No nineteenth-century American fiction writer knew New York City’s demi-world more intimately than Stephen Crane” (ix).

³ Riis’s research provided the genesis of what Keith Gandal, in his study *The Virtues of the Vicious*, labels “the new ethnography of the slum”, underscoring that during the last decade of the nineteenth century, the slum emerged as a spectacle in the popular arts of representation” (8). Gandal notes a range of reformers, authors, and photographers who used the slum dwellers as subjects, but points out that Jacob Riis and Stephen Crane exemplify what he identifies as an overtly masculine status and “slum spectacle” or the aesthetics of representing the urban poor.

temporary respite in the country, Crane's sarcastic statement that they were "not entirely forgetful of the unfortunates" implied that their flight from the city was also an escape from any sense of moral obligation. (Sorrentino 97)

Nonetheless, Crane was deeply influenced by Riis's lecture and subject, prompting his view on the brutality of "a dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter" (11) in his first novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, published in 1893. In sharp reaction to dominant forms of popular "slum" fiction, Crane endows his personal hard experience with honesty in reporting and understanding of the urban misery in this novel which "involves a complete reversal of the sentimental themes of the nineteenth-century best sellers that dealt with the life of a young girl" (Solomon 19). Gritty sites of tenements, sweatshops and cheap beer halls constitute the setting of much of Crane's writings, including *Maggie*, but while Riis in his study *How the Other Half Lives* offers a curious blend of charity picture book and travel guide through the slum attractions, Crane revises traditional slum writing exemplifying his uncompromising ethics of individuality, respect, courage, and dignity, in defiance of the technological progress and its dehumanizing ramifications. The novel's characters embody the change from an old, Victorian morality to a different ethics and new type of perceptions and affections, which are, as Keith Gandal argues, based on spectacle and personality in a Victorian culture characterized by sentimentality and feminization (2). Dedicated to "codes and violations" rather than on "absolute good and evil" (Gandal 52), Crane explores in his works the change from traditional Protestant values to new ethical mores and form of subjectivity, where pride is no longer deemed a sin but a trait of self-respect. In his words, "the new styles of urban representation were themselves evidence of the ethical transformation they were helping to popularize" while also demonstrating that such aesthetics was enabled thanks to "a shift in morals" (Gandal 17).

Gilded Age America was a period when a rising number of journalists and authors investigate and describe the contemporary society that was a mercilessly competitive sphere in which numerous Americans got caught up in a social upheaval due to the effects of emergent industrial capitalism. Stephen Crane portrays his characters grappling with circumstances that affect their sense of purpose and belonging, exemplified in numerous other texts of his *oeuvre*, making use of his idiosyncratic stylistic feature—"irony fused with pity" (Stallmann and Hagemann xii), also evident in his novel *Maggie*. The novel tells the story of Maggie, raised in a dysfunctional family by a maudlin and petty-crime mother in the abject poverty of a Bowery tenement. The girl gets seduced by Pete, her brother's friend, only to be abandoned by both her family and her lover. Trapped in the inexorable agony of her situation, she is forced to become "a girl of the streets", "a girl of the painted cohorts of the city" (70). Her transformation from a girl that "blossomed in a mud puddle" (24), to a downtrodden sweatshop worker for a "collar and cuff factory" (28) and then a streetwalking prostitute is Crane's sardonic opposition to the rags-to-riches myth of U.S. society. At the same time, these examples suggest the alteration of social relations in the rapidly changing Gilded Age America, with its capitalist economy and culture fostered by technological incursion into work and everyday life.

This degradation is foreshadowed in Maggie's induction into the world of worker's leisure of cheap bars, burlesque shows, and stock melodramas. It is in the theatre that Maggie finds ultimate temporary reprieve and amazement because of "an atmosphere of pleasure and prosperity," which "seemed to hang over the throng, born, perhaps, of good clothes and two hours in a place of forgetfulness" (70). Crane's portrayal of the dehumanizing inescapability of social forces, "the processes of degeneration on the psychological as well as the social level" additionally illustrates that "Maggie is a product and a victim, not only of the social environment, but of the false morality and the perverted moral values imposed on that environment and on her family" (Perosa 192). These changes of the socio-economic order due to technological encroachment are connoted in the narrative that is infused with imagery of machinery, such as the descriptions of the sweatshop where Maggie toils away:

The air in the collar and cuff establishment strangled her. She knew she was gradually and surely shriveling in the hot stuffy room. The begrimed windows rattled incessantly from the passing of elevated trains. The air was filled with a whirl of noises and odors.

She wondered as she regarded some of the grizzled women in the room, mere mechanical contrivances sewing seams and grinding out, with heads bended over their work, tales of imagined or real girlhood happiness, past drunks, the baby at home, and unpaid wages. (34)

The imagery of machinery also signifies the technological encroachment further exemplified with Maggie's brother Jimmie, a teamster in "charge of a painstaking pair of horses and a large rattling truck" (21), who manifests his aggressive character and fascination for fire engines "enshrined in his heart as an appalling thing that he loved with a distant dog-like devotion. They had been known to overturn street-cars. Those leaping horses, striking sparks from the cobbles in their forward lunge, were creatures to be ineffably admired. The clang of the gong pierced his breast like a noise of remembered war" (23). Supported by alliteration and strong sensory effects, the contentious nature of city life is embodied with the work horses driven to dangerous speed and menacing character.

More examples of Crane's world representative of "the rule of contention and competition as the dominant mode of behavior" (Shanahan 403) are found in his 1895 novel *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War* that describes the experiences of a young farm boy Henry, a private in the Union forces who volunteers in expectation of heroic passages of battle bravery. In a turning-point in the novel Henry flees from the battlefield amid the frenzy of killing and havoc, in which he had fired and reloaded his gun in a steady, automatic pace. But the disjunction of the soldiers chanting a "wild, barbaric song" in the "red rage" of battle under the sun on the treetops and the bright blue sky, the youth understands that nature has no regard for the mayhem of the battlefield. He disassociates from his fellow-combatants: "Methodical idiots! Machine-like fools" (121), refusing to consider himself a single cog in a machine, and seeks solace in the quiet of nature, in a nearby forest, and believes that Nature can justify his running away. To illustrate this argument, a longer quotation from the novel follows:

He went from the fields into a thick woods, as if resolved to bury himself. He wished to get out of hearing of the crackling shots which were to him like voices. The ground was cluttered with vines and bushes, and the trees grew close and spread out like bouquets. He was obliged to force his way with much noise. The creepers, catching against his legs, cried out harshly as their sprays were torn from the barks of trees. The swishing saplings tried to make known his presence to the world. He could not conciliate the forest. As he made his way, it was always calling out protestations. When he separated embraces of trees and vines the disturbed foliages waved their arms and turned their face leaves toward him. He dreaded lest these noisy motions and cries should bring men to look at him. So he went far, seeking dark and intricate places.

After a time the sound of musketry grew faint and the cannon boomed in the distance. The sun, suddenly apparent, blazed among the trees. The insects were making rhythmical noises. They seemed to be grinding their teeth in unison. A woodpecker stuck his impudent head around the side of a tree. A bird flew on lighthearted wing.

Off was the rumble of death. It seemed now that Nature had no ears.

This landscape gave him assurance. A fair field holding life. It was the religion of peace. It would die if its timid eyes were compelled to see blood. He conceived Nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy. . . .

The youth wended, feeling that Nature was of his mind. She re-enforced his argument with proofs that lived where the sun shone. (125 – 126)

But his hopes for a respite are shattered in the chapel-like gloom of the trees when he stumbles upon the corpse of a Union soldier: "the dead man and the living exchanged a long look" (126). According to the widely accepted understanding of Naturalism, human events are seen as insignificant in the face of an uncaring, often destructive, natural world, the protagonist's encounter with the dead man in the "tree chapel" could be read as exemplifying Crane's departure from a Romantic vision of nature.

A staple narrative strategy of using machine imagery in Crane's opus is also present in this novel, which is, as a critic points out, used "more than fifteen times to describe the battle, suggesting both the deterministic inevitability of this struggle and its destructive power" (Cox 248 – 49). The persistent

evocation of technology buttresses the intrusion of technology in mechanical warfare, indicative also of the struggle with the loss of stable processes of the natural world transforming humanity and life, bringing fighting and death, for instance: "The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him. Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses" (129). Another example is offered in the description when the protagonist sees the wounded filing away from the battlefield: "The torn bodies expressed the awful machinery in which the men had been entangled" (131). Using the army motif that Daniel Shanahan interprets as a response to industrial capitalism in this novel, Crane joins the writers whose literary response to the social turmoil and confusion aims to expose the contemporary social convulsions generated by capitalistic struggle and technological development.⁴

Crane's contemporary, Sarah Orne Jewett, was a prominent figure in American literary regionalism, who spent a significant amount of her writing career in Boston, Massachusetts and gained recognition for her portrayals of everyday life in small maritime communities of Maine. Jewett was particularly successful in her representations of the dualist nature of New England, the region which, in the late nineteenth century, embodied both the tranquility and harmony of rural, coastal Maine and hustle and bustle of urban, industrial centers. As the first U. S. region inhabited by the European colonists in the seventeenth century, New England had always been the cultural center of the United States and similarly to New York City, Boston was growing and developing as America entered the era of incorporation. The statistical data shows that in 1880 Boston had over 365,000 inhabitants (Riis 231). Jewett was equally successful in depicting both sides of New England, the urban, industrial centers, with factories and tenement houses and the untouched, natural beauties of rural landscapes. Jewett's protagonists are often troubled and perplexed by the rapid industrialization of the region and her stories portray their psychological and economic struggles.

The short story "A White Heron," published in 1886, is one of many Jewett's stories with vivid descriptions of landscape and characters who share spiritual bonds with nature (Jobes 520). The protagonist, Sylvia, as befits her name, lives in a "lonely house" near the dense forest in the rural Maine area. Sylvia is a regular "woods-girl" (Jewett 670) who knows every inch of the woods and fields around her house and, according to her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley, "wild creatur's counts her one o' themselves" (Jewett 673). The narrator informs the readers that Sylvia has lived with her grandmother in the isolated rural area for a year, since the old woman brought her from the city to help around the farm. Sylvia is therefore one of many Jewett's characters who chooses "freedom over enclosure" (Roman 24) and leaves the city to find her place, her happiness and fulfilment in a rural area.⁵ Sylvia's isolation and flight from civilization can be read as a female (re)interpretation of Henry David Thoreau's transcendentalist experiment in life in wilderness on the Walden Pond.

The girl and her grandmother lead a reclusive and relatively uneventful life until, on a June evening, the protagonist meets a young ornithologist who is hunting for a rare white heron. The central theme of the story is Sylvia's conflict between the desire to help the young hunter by revealing the bird's location and her devotion to the white heron and nature – essentially, reflecting the broader context of the conflict between industrialization and nature. Despite its shortness and a slow-paced plot, the story incorporates several passages of beautiful and vivid descriptions of the forest and its inhabitants. Additionally, these descriptions have an important role in character development, since Sylvia is always represented in

⁴ More recently, Andrew Lawson has argued that the novel needs to be read in the context of the economic upheaval of the late nineteenth century ("The Red Badge of Class: Stephen Crane and the Industrial Army" [2005]). While Lawson's reading is suggestive and points toward the kind of creative work that can still be done in considering the context of the novel's creation, a great deal of critical attention continues to be paid to the accuracy of Crane's portrayal of war and to questions of the transformative influence of violence on identity construction, especially in the context of the dominant economic order and social hegemonies.

⁵ Margaret Roman identifies a pattern in Jewett's stories, where her heroines often make a choice to leave behind the life in Boston or another urban centre and start their lives on farms. In these stories, the cities not only represent the urban centres of fast life and often an existence in terrible living conditions, similarly to what Crane depicted in his writings about New York, but they are also the embodiment of societal norms and pressures placed upon women. Farms, woods and other rural areas are thus depicted as female spaces or, rather, spaces where women can exercise their freedom from the expected "doll-like existence" (Roman 27).

connection with the nature, and her character traits are shaped and determined by her relationship with the nature, the sense of awe, respect and belonging, as illustrated by the following example:

Half a mile from home, at the farther edge of the woods, where the land was highest, a great pine-tree stood, the last of its generation. Whether it was left for a boundary mark, or for what reason, no one could say; the woodchoppers who had felled its mates were dead and gone long ago, and a whole forest of sturdy trees, pines and oaks and maples, had grown again. But the stately head of this old pine towered above them all and made a landmark for sea and shore miles and miles away. Sylvia knew it well. She had always believed that whoever climbed to the top of it could see the ocean; and the little girl had often laid her hand on the great rough trunk and looked up wistfully at those dark boughs that the wind always stirred, no matter how hot and still the air might be below. Now she thought of the tree with a new excitement, for why, if one climbed it at break of day, could not one see all the world, and easily discover from whence the white heron flew, and mark the place, and find the hidden nest. (Jewett 675)

Assuming that Sylvia and her grandmother symbolically represent Maine's rural culture in its minute details, the ornithologist, sometimes referred to as the hunter, in turn, represents a disinterested intruder into the region's customs. The contrasts between the feminine and masculine or, consequently, between nature and industrialization forms the basis for further interpretation. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the ornithologist is the antagonist of the story. His actions are not particularly villainous, and he appears to be a reasonably likeable character, with an interest in nature, which he displays in a different manner, hoping to add a new trophy to his bird collection. The protagonist's behavior is in sharp contrast with the hunter's violent acts. He claims to be immensely fond of birds which he later stuffs and exhibits and this attitude is puzzling to Sylvia who cannot "understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much" (Jewett 674). The ornithologist represents the urban, scientific and essentially materialist culture and consequently the profit which can be gained from natural resources, without objecting to resort to violence and brutality, as illustrated by the scene where Sylvia witnesses "the sharp report of [the] gun and the piteous sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood" (Jewett 679). This brief, but quite violent and brutal scene is a symbolic representation of the effects of rapid urbanization and industrialization on nature and the complex relationship between the two in Gilded Age American culture and literature. To that end, Sylvia's choice to keep the titular white heron's location a secret, thereby remaining faithful to the animals and forests she loves represents a conscious struggle to oppose industrialization and destruction of nature.

The novella "The Gray Mills of Farley", published in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* in 1898, shows the readers a different side of New England, as it focuses on an industrialized, manufacturing village, enclosed in a compound of mills ominously dubbed "the Corporation".⁶ The region's connection with textile mills was firmly established in the early nineteenth century, even before the massive industrialization brought about by the Gilded Age, given that "modern industrialism in America appeared first in New England" (Tindal & Shi 332), as early as 1813, with the establishment of the Boston Manufacturing Company and consequently, the "Lowell system" of water-powered textile industry. While the story witnesses to Jewett's careful observation of her industrial neighbors, since the Corporation was based on an

⁶ While the term "the Corporation" originally only referred to the employee housing connected with the workspace in factories and mills (Sherman 193), from the perspective of a twenty-first century reader, the name "the Corporation" evokes a variety of anti-capitalist, and even dystopian cultural, literary, and nonfictional texts, from the works of muckrakers who aimed to uncover the corporate greed and malpractice in Gilded Age America, to the postmodernist works of Thomas Pynchon or Hollywood blockbusters. Nowadays, they are mostly exaggerated examples of corporate wrongdoings, where the main antagonist is a representative of an evil, capitalist corporation, notorious for the exploitation of the workforce, or destruction of natural resources, or plans for world-domination. Sometimes, as in the early 2000s cartoon *Phineas & Ferb*, the evil corporation consists of only one man who is trying to gain control over the tristate area.

existing textile mill located near Jewett's home (Sherman 192), it also provides an insight into the lives of the Irish workers inhabiting the village.

The initial description of "the Corporation" establishes the village as an odd mixture of natural and man-made factors:

[t]he mills of Farley were close together by the river, and the gray houses that belonged to them stood, tall and bare, alongside. They had no room for gardens or even for little green side-yards where one might spend a summer evening . . . this compact village was . . . small but solid; you fancied yourself in the heart of a large town when you stood mid-way of one of its short streets, but from the street's end you faced a wide green farming country. (Jewett 889)

This curious blend of descriptions of natural landscape and bleak buildings, the homes of mill workers, paints an interesting image of a rural location, altered by industrialization. The green farms are just beyond reach of those trapped within "tall and bare" buildings; they can look at them but cannot go outside. The narrator continues the description:

There were always fluffs of cotton in the air like great white bees drifting down out of the picker chimney. They lodged in the cramped and dingy elms and horse-chestnuts... Somehow the Corporation homes looked like make-believe houses or huge stage-properties, they had so little individuality or likeness to the old-fashioned buildings that made homes for people out on the farms. There was more homelikeness in the sparrows' nests, or even the toylike railroad station at the end of the main street. (Jewett 889)

The entire description adds to the surreal, almost dreamlike image consisting simultaneously of extremely gloomy and playful pictures and symbols. The village is therefore at the same time a gloomy representative of the capitalist system, devoid of any individuality, warmth, or homeliness, but at the same time, the description evokes images of theatre and toys, with fluffy cotton streams, as though the entire village is a large dollhouse or a huge theatre prop. Additionally, Sarah Way Sherman notes that "these houses seem disconnected from their natural setting, like theater props" (193) and the very appearance of the little Corporation clearly shows the dichotomy between natural and man-made, between old and rural and new and industrial. In this story, the mill workers "are victims not only of American industrial activity, which has resulted in an environment that shows 'all its poverty and lack of beauty, at one glance', but specifically of its abstract sponsor, a capitalist system that owns the village and effectively transforms it into its own impersonal image as the 'Corporation'" (Morgan & Renza xxvii). To that end, these detailed descriptions illustrate not only the precarious position of millworkers who have truly little time to do anything else other than toil inside the mills, but also the changing attitudes to nascent capitalism and industrialization, the changes that are at the same time feared and welcomed, because the people directly dependent on the system are the ones the system abuses the most.

The narrator provides the readers with more context and explains how the workers came to New England and where they came from:

The Corporation had followed the usual fortunes of New England manufacturing villages. Its operatives were at first eager young men and women from the farms near by, these being joined quickly by pale English weavers and spinners, with their hearty-looking wives and rosy children; then came the flock of Irish families, poorer and simpler than the others but learning the work sooner, and gayer-hearted; now the Canadian-French contingent furnished all the new help, and stood in long rows before the noisy looms and chattered in their odd, excited fashion. They were quicker-fingered, and were willing to work cheaper than any other workpeople yet. (Jewett 889 – 90)

Jewett's fictionalized representation of the labor force in the late nineteenth century finds its basis in historical facts. Throughout the nineteenth century, immigrants from different places in the world sought their American Dream and flocked towards the large cities on the American East Coast. The first to arrive were the Irish, in the 1840s and later, by the 1880s, they were joined by other immigrants, from Asia, Southern and Eastern Europe. The newly-arrived immigrants provided the industrial, incorporated

America, with “a huge supply of human beings to do the back-breaking, unhealthful, and dangerous work” (Zinn 254). Indeed, the workers in “The Mills of Farley”, as described by the agent of the corporation, “made no resistance when we had to cut down wages two years ago; on the contrary, they were surprisingly reasonable” (Jewett 895). A similar situation is repeated when the mills are closed during the winter, with the laborers seemingly accepting their fate without struggle, in silence, with few rare dissenting voices, because they had no choice.

But adult mill workers were not the only workforce exploited in these circumstances. The narrator introduces an orphan girl, Maggie, who has no home of her own, but lives with one family of laborers or the other, shows an individual’s dependence on the mills – something that she shares with all the inhabitants of the corporation. Maggie is first introduced in a scene where mill workers leave their workplace for the day and she is just one of many children employed in the mills. The fastest group of boys is soon followed by

a cheerful delayed little group of new doffers, the children who minded bobbins in the weave-room and who were young enough to be tired and even timid. One of these doffers, a pale, pleasant-looking child, was all fluffy with cotton that had clung to her little dark plaid dress. When Mrs. Kilpatrick spoke to her she answered in a hoarse voice that appealed to one’s sympathy. You felt that the hot room and dry cotton were to blame for such hoarseness; it had nothing to do with the weather. (Jewett 892)

Along with different small chores, the most common jobs for children in cotton mills included sweeping and doffing (taking care of the bobbins) (Schmidt 19) and child laborers were ubiquitous in this industry. The very machinery of the cotton mill required very small and delicate fingers and children would often get hurt: their arms would be broken, their tiny fingers mangled in the mill (Schmidt 72 – 73). The narrator of this story only alludes to the health hazards for Maggie and other children because her hoarse voice “had nothing to do with the weather” but was caused by the conditions in the mill. Compared to other works from the same period, Sherman writes that “[i]n this story, Jewett’s tone is much quieter, using suggestion as in her local color work to convey undertones of meaning. The threat to Maggie’s health is only implied, though readers would have recognized it” (196).

“The Grey Mills of Farley” does not dwell on detailed descriptions of industrial violence or the workers’ dissatisfaction, but it offers an interesting insight in the struggles of the American people facing tremendous changes in living and working patterns in the late nineteenth century. Jewett’s story ends with the mills reopening and the laborers, adults and children alike, “all smil[ing] with such blissful satisfaction” (Jewett 911). The ending is, however, bittersweet, and it emphasizes yet again the complex relationship between the capitalist system and the people who toil under it for their meagre wages. “They are dependent upon a way of life that is perhaps no longer possible: the small town, the village, the rural knitting together of groups through shared responsibility and continuous contact” (Sherman 208). The clash between those traditional, perhaps obsolete notions and the ruthless, relentless power of machines, industry and capitalism is the central theme of Jewett’s story and her narrative not only warns against the exploitative form of capitalism, but also depicts the confusion of the Americans who are given no choice but to adapt to the new systems, ideas and profound changes in the society, culture, and technology. Simultaneously, these literary examples mirror the attempts of writers who may be recognized as advancing towards a modernist expression since they communicate, in Peter Childs’ definition of modernist concerns, “the new sensibilities of their time: in a compressed, condensed, complex literature of the city, of industry and technology, war, machinery and speed, mass markets and communication, of internationalism, the New Woman, the aesthete, the nihilist and the flaneur” (4).

The late nineteenth century was indeed a period of sweeping changes in the society and different fictional texts illustrate their authors’ determination to present industrial innovations, heightened mechanization, and their social implications. Cultural reflections in various texts testify to the technological pressure and transformative effects of social mobility in the United States as well as across the Atlantic, made widely popular even in the recently released film version of “Downtown Abbey”. Its polished production seems to impart a sense of comfort in our present profoundly shifting economy, unhinged

society, and terrifying politics, relentlessly transformed by technology. It also seems to offer a sense of hope that despite all social, economic, and technological changes, human beings, in fiction and real life alike, will persevere and adapt.

Works Cited

- Călinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Duke UP, 1987.
- Childs, Peter. *Modernism*. Routledge, 2000.
- Cox, Trammell James. "The Imagery of *The Red Badge of Courage*." *Critical Insights: The Red Badge of Courage*, edited by Eric Carl Link, Salem Press, 2011, pp. 240 – 54.
- Crane, Stephen. *Stephen Crane, Prose and Poetry*. Edited by J. C. Levenson, Library of America, 1984.
- Gandal, Keith. *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum*. Oxford UP, 1997.
- Jewett, Sarah Orne. *Novels and Stories: Deephaven / A Country Doctor / The Country of the Pointed Firs / Dunnet Landing Stories / Selected Stories & Sketches*. Edited by Michael Davitt Bell, The Library of America, 1994.
- Jobes, Katherine T. "From Stowe's Eagle Island to Jewett's 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 8, Dec. 1990, pp. 515 – 21.
- Lawson, Andrew. "Class Mimicry in Stephen Crane's City." *American Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 4, Winter 2004, pp. 596 – 618.
- . "The Red Badge of Class: Stephen Crane and the Industrial Army." *Literature and History*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2005, pp. 53 – 68.
- Morgan, Jack, and Louis A. Renza. "Introduction: Imagining the Irish in the Works of Sarah Orne Jewett." *The Irish Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, Southern Illinois UP, 1996, pp. xix – liii.
- Perosa, Sergio. *American Theories of the Novel: 1793 – 1903*. New York UP, 1985.
- Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. Dover Publications, 1971.
- Roman, Margaret. *Sarah Orne Jewett: Reconstructing Gender*. U of Alabama P, 1992.
- Schmidt, James D. *Industrial Violence and the Legal Origins of Child Labor*. Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Shanahan, Daniel. "The Army Motif in *The Red Badge of Courage* as a Response to Industrial Capitalism." *Papers on Language & Literature*, vol. 32, no. 4, Fall 1996, pp. 399 – 409.
- Sherman, Sarah Way. "Jewett and the Incorporation of New England: 'The Gray Mills of Farley.'" *American Literary Realism*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2002, pp. 191 – 216.
- Solomon, Eric. *Stephen Crane: From Parody to Realism*. Harvard UP, 1967.
- Sorrentino, Paul. *Stephen Crane: A Life of Fire*. Belknap, 2014.
- Stallman, R. W., and E. R. Hagemann. "Preface." *The New York City Sketches of Stephen Crane and Related Pieces*. New York UP, 1966, pp. ix – xvi.
- Tew, Philip, and Alex Murray, editors. *The Modernism Handbook*. Continuum, 2009.
- Tindall, George Brown and David Emory Shi. *America: A Narrative History*. Brief 8th ed., W.W. Norton, 2010.
- Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States: 1492 – Present*. Revised and updated ed., Harper Perennial, 1995.