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English 012: Literary Cities

Professor Dimock

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The City Comes Alive: Urban Centers as Protagonists in *McTeague* and *The Age of Innocence*

Intro: Acknowledge how different the novels are, but draw similarities when it comes to the importance of geographical space when it comes to the meaning of the narrative (e.g. “a story of San Francisco”).

Thesis: Newland Archer and McTeague both function as unenlightened narrators, as products of a larger, pervading system they are both unaware of. New York and San Francisco serve as the true protagonists of these works in that the novels explore the flaws and traits of the cities as a whole through the microcosm of a narrower story.

* How are the main characters unaware of how the system affects them?
  + Archer: fancies himself as different from/above the city he inhabits, but is in fact so embedded into it that he doesn’t notice how it affects his choices/schemes against him.
    - P. 28 “And, in spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind.”
    - P.54, “Have you forgotten…that in our country we don’t allow our marriages to be arranged for us?”
    - P.61, “…alive to the flatness of the words, but imprisoned in the conventional by his consuming drive to be simple and striking.”
    - Family conspiring about his affair near the end of the novel
  + McTeague: isn’t intelligent enough to realize how the Gold Rush and what it represents (greed, the dehumanizing effect of money) impacts his life.
    - P.304, “It was the same work he had so often performed in his Parlors, only magnified, made monstrous, distorted, and grotesqued, the caricature of dentistry.”
* How is the city a protagonist?
  + Secondary characters serve as archetypes that illustrate certain aspects of the city’s personality
    - May
      * P. 23 “Nothing about his betrothed pleased him more than her resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the “unpleasant” in which they had both been brought up.”
      * P.65, “Far down the inverted telescope he saw the faint white figure of May Welland—in New York.”
    - Artists (e.g. Winsett/M. Riviere)
      * P. 85, “They were odd, they were uncertain, they had things one didn’t know about in the background of their lives and minds.”
    - Grannis/Baker
      * P. 260, “Far from the world and together they entered upon the long-retarded romance of their commonplace and uneventful lives.”
    - Zerkow/Maria (ethnic minorities most grotesquely connected to San Francisco’s obsession with greed?)
      * P. 34, “It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed—inordinate, insatiable greed—was the dominant passion of the man. He was The Man with the Rake, groping hourly in the muck heap of the city for gold, for gold, for gold.”
  + Repeated phrases reflect the conventions of the city more clearly than they do the characters saying them🡪characters subconsciously linked to the city
    - “You can’t make small of me!”
      * Zerkow: “Don’t you dare try an’ cheat me!”
    - “It’s not the thing…”
  + Quotes that reflect the city as a system/machine
    - P.38, “In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs.”
    - P.41 “The New York of Newland Archer’s day was a small and slippery pyramid…”
    - P.70, “…a haunting horror of doing the same thing every day at the same time besieged his brain.”
    - Ch. 20, “In some places east of the Mississippi nature is cozy…In Placer County, California, she is a vast, unconquered brute of the Pliocene epoch, savage, sullen, and magnificently indifferent to man. But there were men in these mountains, like lice on mammoths’ hides…sucking their blood, extracting gold.”
    - P. 347, “ McTeague remained stupidly looking around him, now at the distant horizon, now at the ground, now at the half-dead canary chittering feebly in its little gilt prison.”
    - P.71, “Neither of them had asked that this thing should be, that their destinies, their very souls, should be the sport of chance.”
    - Ch. 7—“Your lottery ticket won five thousand dollars!” “God damn the luck!” (Marcus Schouler)
  + Streets that take on personalities
    - Polk Street—belongs to the working class (a world of commutes and “soldier” schoolchildren)
    - Fifth Avenue—belongs to the elite (a world of parties and a complex social code)

Conclusion: Extend city-as-protagonist narrative structure to modern-day examples in film, literature, music (e.g. Lost in Translation, New York/Chicago/California in modern cinema, Casablanca) and how it allows creators to extend the perspective of the story/make it larger than the individual.