**Lecture8 : Rigional Realism 1865-1910**

Hemingway declared : "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn.”

I says to myself, I reckon a body that ups and tells the truth when he is in a tight place, is taking considerable many resks, though I ain’t had no experience, and can’t say for certain; but it looks so to me, anyway; and yet here’s a case where I’m blest if it don’t look to me like the truth is better, and actuly *safer*, than a lie. I must lay it by in my mind, and think it over some time or other, it’s so kind of strange and unregular. (chapter 28 almost at the end)

The Statement mad by Twain reflects on the necessity of American literature to tell the *truth.* Truth not in the sense if ethics, but in the sense of realistic representation of the lives of smaller communities and minorities in the the American society –in this case the black southern minorities. This new technique was unconventional to the usual emotional exaggeration in Romantic period.

The realists authors favored the real over the romantic, Mark Twain in specific opened thus new ways to narratives.

The country now is a continent wide, and it’s connected through railroad. The always present question “what does it mean to be an American?” needed to be re-answered again. Daily newspapers, too, flourished nationwide and American readers got access to regional, national and even international news. The depiction of events in the news of course were realistic to a certain extent. Everyday life and details were the material for these journalistic writings. However, as publishing and printing became a huge business, writers and editors tended to please their readers: writings about scandals which followed a subjective and sensational point of view rather than objective and rational one flourished and became known as yellow journalism referring to the yellow kid. This kind of journalism made American people enraged concerning the Spanish war in Cuba and force the American government to intervene military. This is considered as the first media war in history.

Similarly, realism invoked new questions and controversies: mainly the color line and the complexity of race relation in the American society. There are other tenant writers who discussed the dominance of European culture over the native American one (e.g. Zitkala-Sa, a Sioux woman who found herself caught between European American customs and traditional Indian culture).

The casualties and atrocities of the civil war changed the romantic and heroic image people had about soldiers and wars. People were astonished by the number of deaths and injured, by the devastated south and the economic losses.

Reconstruction was seen differently by different spectrums of American people. From white northerners it meant bringing democracy to the south; for black southerners, it meant enforcing the values the civil war was fought for: emancipation; for white southerners, it meant giving power to people who are not worthy of it (black ex-slaves or white carpetbaggers). Regional realism tried to show diversity of opinions according to the one answering the question.

After the civil war two crucial realization changed the world of literature:

1. With the rise of democracy, new writers emerged from regions far away from centers of literary establishment, such as Boston, Philadelphia and New York; writers from the south and Midwest started to emerge as cannons of American literature.
2. The second thing was the need to embrace reality as it is in narration, using satire and severely criticizing the pillars of American society: a genre known later on as regional realism

**Themes:**

Writers aimed to explore and expose regional life in great plains, Indian reservations, southern plantations, gold mining sites and so on in the most detailed and realistic manner.

Not only expressing national issues through their casual characters’ perspectives, but also using their dialect, which usually represents southern dialect. In Twain’s case, Tom Swayer and Huck Finn, two poor boys from Missouri.

In this way, readers not only read about the south, but come to experience the southern culture and paradox with the characters they read about. (this is a main feature of realism, a detailed description of geographic setting, customs, dialects and other social and natural details.

Main authors:

**Mark Twain**, born as Samuel Clemens, worked on the Mississippi river, encountering different kind of American people, wrote a novel from the point view of uneducated boy, and a runaway slave. Completely new characters to the American reader. He was able to take his readers in journey through the perspectives of these characters who usually live at the sideways of society.

Since its publication, Huck Finn caused controversy and disagreement: (1) some see it as a vulgar novel and it was banned; others see that it merely depicts life as it is, including vulgarity. (2) being a satire, some readers took it comically, others see that it’s a serious, rough novel, though satire.

Twain is still popular due to the probing questions he raised about American identity and values.

Twain challenged the accepted image of the south promoted by the plantation myth: that plantations are beautiful places, full of happiness and peace, with loving families, educated, civilized… and surrounded by loyal servants who happily take care of the family’s properties.

He started writing Huck Finn in the centennial anniversary of independence; raising question about the achievements of this nation after 100 years concerning ethnicity, culture, ethical system and so on.

Charles Chesnutt

He also challenged the depiction of African American in the south. In his novels, he wrote about slave characters who served on the plantations. Though these slaves were stereotyped negatively, Chesnutt shows wisdom and intelligence in their characrs, sometimes even outsmart white folks. A son of slaves himself, Chesnutt worked his to education and eventually became a lawyer and magazine industry helped him becoming a widely read black author. His characters are even more complex than Twain’s; he wrote about people who managed to survive the reconstruction era in the south.