



## **THE DISCREET RITUALS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract:**

*In the history of the United States, the years following the Civil War symbolized a time of healing and rebuilding. However, for those engaged in serious literary circles that period was full of upheaval. In fact, it can be said that a "literary civil war" raged on between the camps of the romantics and the realists and later, the naturalists ("History 426"). What was caught in between was the literature called the genteel tradition. The dictionary meanings as well as the synonyms for the word genteel include "respectable, mannered, dainty, polite, elegant, stylish, and refined." In fact, it was the American philosopher George Santayana who had characterized the literature that had provided a moral medium in fiction and poetry in the post- Civil War period as the genteel tradition. The eminent literary figures of this tradition had emphasized the ethical imperative in their novels, stories and periodical literature. However, the genteel tradition in the nineteenth century America was later vilified as it had represented the old mentality inherited from Europe - the code of Ladies and Gentlemen. The following paragraphs delineate the historical milieu from which the genteel tradition literature sprang, spread and ultimately failed to survive the emerging modern themes of realism and naturalism.*

**Key Words:** Romanticism, Genteel Tradition, Literary Civil War & Gilded Age

In the post-Civil War period, ordinary Americans had little time and energy left for "the finer things" in life - literature, music, art and other embellishments of life (Irwin Unger 540). Even the traditional wealthy and rich had been super ceded by new generation - the Rockefellers, Carnegies, Swifts and Guggenheims - who began to dominate the nation's economy. It appeared that there was no possibility of high cultural achievement in "the age of the Dynamo". In 1874, the editor of the National Amented that the country had suffered from a "chromo civilization" like the popular colour prints of the day (chromolithographs) whose colours were gaudy and false (540). The famous novelist, Henry James, who had fled the US to England had questioned how a society so immersed in wealth-getting could make room for arts; how could it be expected to think creatively; how could the Americans find the leisure to amuse themselves (540). It was generally believed that there was an irreconcilable conflict between materialism and culture (Gilded Age). Yet, the half a century following the Civil War had experienced a cultural flowering and the US produced a plethora of authors, painters and thinkers who made the country one of the cultural centres of the West.

In the US, the years that preceded the Civil War had experienced an extraordinary literary growth that had astonished the world. American literature before the Civil War was usually characterized by a romanticism that included the novels of James Fennimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville and the transcendental essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. But many of the outstanding figures of the prewar days did not survive the Civil War. Hawthorne, Cooper, Irving, Thoreau and Poe were all dead by 1865. Yet, the aura of their reputation persisted for some time and the New England had continued to be the literary capital of the US. The Atlantic Monthly and the North American Review, America's chief journals of culture were published from here. The leading contributors include Henry

Wadsworth Longfellow, Charles Eliot Norton and James Russell Lowell, who were attached to the most prestigious university, Harvard.

These writers symbolized the genteel tradition in literature. They believed that art, especially fiction and poetry, must represent the spiritual, the pure and the noble, for literature was a moral medium, not merely an aesthetic one. Literature should not report life as it actually was because that would include much that was sordid and mean. Rather, it must try to transform life into something higher and refined. The believers of this tradition had insisted that art and literature should transcend the real and uphold the ideal. For example, the poet James Russell Lowell spoke for other genteel writers when he said that no man should describe any activity that would make his wife or daughter blush. He declared that no man should write what he was unwilling for his young daughter to read. It can be said that in the genteel tradition "sex was so buried under flowery romanticism that a traveller from another solar system who read a genteel novel might not have known that men and women were biologically different" (Irwin Unger 541).

In 1911, the philosopher George Santayana had analyzed the American society in his essay entitled "The Genteel Tradition". He had criticized the 'curious doubleness' in the American sensibility according to which the American civic life had become separated into two quite distinct realms. On the one hand was the world of practical affairs - the world of business, technology and politics and on the other, the higher world of culture, art, education, religion. What Santayana was talking about was an egregious split between thought and experience. Santayana had identified two important sources of the genteel tradition, namely puritan piety and Transcendentalism. According to him there was a strong tendency 'to run ahead of the conditions of existence, to reify spiritual and intellectual values and isolate them in a kind of Platonic heaven' (George Santayana). He considered that the writers and thinkers in the genteel tradition were 'fastidious and aloof, indeed intellectually starved'. He concluded that intellectuals in general 'had not felt at home with the world of commerce, or with popular culture, politics, citizenship or even democracy itself' (Gilded Age).

Almost most of the writings of the genteel tradition are now forgotten except a few like the *Story of a Bad Boy* authored by Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1870). Yet, it cannot be denied that they sought to impose a set of values on American literary taste during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. For example, in 1882, one of the poets of this tradition, George Boker had expressed his disapproval of the Gilded Age America and insisted that poets must defend traditional values:

We poets hang upon the wheel  
Of Time's advancement; do our most  
To hide its inroads, and reveal  
The Splendors which the world has lost.  
Science and Avarice, arm and arm,  
Stride proudly through our abject time;  
And in their footsteps, wrangling, swarm  
Their own begotten broods of crime. (Irwin Unger 541)

Though the Gilded Age saw some continuation of both romanticism and the genteel tradition, the more significant pattern was the gradual rise of realism, that is, a realistic--and sometimes quite critical--portrayal of life, replacing the romantic idealism characteristic of the pre-Civil War period. Some writers, for example, Mark Twain, found the genteel tradition overtly fastidious and stale. Many episodes in his novels point out

that societies insisting on genteel behavior were often hypocritical - Tom Sawyer continually mocks genteel respectability, particularly for boys. Twain described Tom as 'not the Model Boy of the village' and instead 'loathed' him (American Impressionism).

In fact, the genteel tradition had been stressed in the periodical literature of the nineteenth century. After the Civil War, the magazine field was dominated by a small number of sedate magazines - like *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and *Scribner's* - written for 'gentle' reader of highly intellectual tastes (Gilded Age). The poetry, serious fiction, and wood engravings that filled these monthly's pages rigidly conformed to upper class Victorian standards of taste. These magazines embodied the genteel tradition, the idea that art and literature should reinforce morality not portray reality.

However, the last ten years of the nineteenth century were critical of the emergence of modern American mass culture. The modern instruments of mass communication- -the mass-circulation metropolitan newspaper, the mass-market magazine, national advertising campaigns, radio, and the movies had emerged in these years. American culture also made a critical shift to commercialized forms of entertainment. Also, during the 1890s the world of magazine publishing was revolutionized by the rise of the country's first mass circulation national magazines.

The founders of the nation's first mass-circulation magazines considered the older "quality" magazines stale and elitist (Gilder Lehrman). In contrast, their magazines featured practical advice, popularized science, gossip, human-interest stories, celebrity profiles, interviews, 'muckraking' investigations, pictures and articles. Instead of cultivating a select audience, the new magazines had a very different set of priorities. By running popular articles, editors sought to maximize circulation, which, in turn, attracted advertising that kept the magazine's price low. By 1900, the nation's largest magazine, the *Ladies' Home Journal* reached 8,50,000 subscribers - more than eight times the readership of *Scribner's* or *Harper's*. The end of the nineteenth century also marked a critical turning point in the history of book publishing, as marketing wizards like Frank Doubleday organized the first national book promotional campaigns, created the modern best seller, and transformed popular writers like Jack London into celebrities. Hence, the genre of genteel tradition, the defender of 'morality' against 'reality' came to an inevitable end.

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