

Does the eighteenth century witness the emergence of 'realism' in the English novel?

George Levine (1981: 240) defines realism in the English novels "as a self-conscious effort, usually in the name of some moral enterprise of truth telling and extending the limits of human sympathy, to make literature appear to be describing directly [...] reality itself". In Roland Barthes (1986: 260) view "realism is only fragmentary, erratic, confined to 'details'" and one has to bear in mind that even "the most realistic narrative imaginable develops along unrealistic lines". Ian Watt defines realism in different ways. One definition is that realism portrays "all the varieties of human experience" (Watt 2000: 11) and identifies "a belief in the individual apprehension of reality through the senses" (Watt 2000: 14).

Hence, each approach focuses on a specific characteristic of the genre and identifies its link with realism. The text's characters within their environment, the used language, a realistic plot and the author's claim of truth, all attempt to reflect a "correspondence between life and literature" (Watt 2000: 12). In analysing *Moll Flanders* and *Lemuel Gulliver* within their "play between illusion and reality" (Davis 1983: 11) the emergence of realism in the 18th century is, on the one hand, examined and, on the other hand, questioned in this essay.

Swift frames *Lemuel Gulliver* as a simple and honest seaman, who is "neither a fool nor a genius; resourceful, energetic and brave, though not on the grand heroic scale;" (Ward 1973: 121-122). Yet, according to Ward (1973:125) *Gulliver* cannot be identified as a fully developed human personality because he is "representing some aspects of humanity, or ourselves, never the whole". Despite of some biographical records the reader does not obtain "any sort of expression of *Gulliverian* personality in anything *Gulliver* says" (Rawson 2005: 23). Swift uses *Gulliver* as the observing and framing tool through which the satire develops. He equips *Gulliver* with curiosity and an obsession for travelling but he does not unfold *Gulliver's* personal story and feelings or present an understandable mental development within his character (Rawson 2005: 22-23). As long as the reader is willing to identify with some aspects of *Gulliver* he has fulfilled his purpose.

Like *Gulliver* also *Moll Flanders* lacks attitudes, which are essential for the "reader's belief in the literal reality of the characters" (Watt 2000: 21). Watt argues that an improvement of her character and a presentation of her whole personality in

connection with crucial moral choices do not take place (Watt 2000: 108-109). She is solely a “characteristic product of modern individualism” (Watt 2000: 94), who wants to achieve social and economic independence. Moll uses wrong names and identities, gives carelessly up her ideas of moral after her first theft and easily justifies stealing from children to acquire her aim of financial security. Even after her supposed redemption at Newgate she “remains true to her essential character” (Novak 1964: 201). For that reason Moll’s encounter with Humphry in the ending has its main cause in her mother’s promise of an inheritance instead of motherly love for her son. Thus it can be argued that Moll has neither true relationships nor long lasting emotional experiences. Her money and booties are presented of higher importance than her husbands and children, who are mentioned only to be forgotten after a few pages. Yet, emotions and true relationships are an essential part of human personalities. Neither Moll nor Gulliver seems capable of them and therefore they cannot be classified as fully developed characters.

Nevertheless, a realistic aspect of the characters is the use of an appropriate language. Moll’s narration is full of “repetitions and parentheses” as well as “unpremeditated and sometimes stumbling rhythm” (Watt 2000: 101). As a consequence, the language resembles the uneducated thief Moll. Also Gulliver’s language can be seen as realistic. He uses nautical terminology as well as comprehensible metaphors and similes to present the different worlds. Gulliver describes the skins of the maids of honour in Brobdingnag as having “a mole here and there as broad as a Trencher“ and “hairs hanging from it thicker than Pack-thread” (Swift 2005: 108). As a consequence, the reader is able to adjust his perspective according to Gulliver’s situation. Hence, in both texts the language corresponds with the characters social position and the situation they describe.

Having considered the aspect of realism in the characters and their used language it is important to examine the realistic attitudes of the setting and the plot. As Regan (1999: 99) points out, novels depend highly on the presentation of an accurate and complete social structure in a specific historical period. Defoe benefits from his knowledge of economics and his personal experiences in Newgate to outline a believable background for Moll’s criminal adventures (Davis 1951: 205). Moll’s detailed description of the towns and her lodgings as well as few appropriate details of each situation made her adventures more believable because they are framed by plausible circumstances.

However, some aspects of the setting and the plot question the realism of the text. A woman, who travels twice to America and back, who is only once imprisoned within a live of crime and is never seriously ill despite of numerous sexual encounters can not be seen as a realistic representative of 18th century society. Skinner (2001: 151) suggests, that marrying five husbands, having twelve children and still being more vivid than two of her husbands who die from lethargy, would be hard enough to believe.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift uses facts and details to let the most unreal setting appear authentic. The whole narration relies on the truth of Gulliver's character, the typical English man who just happened to find himself in strange situations. Furthermore, Swift counts on the reader's ability to recognise in the illustrated societies the political, religious and social understandings of 18th century England. Swift's satire disguises 18th century ideas and values and in doing so attempts to present its moral failure. Ward (1973: 132) points out that "in terms of moral and political geography it [*Gulliver's travels*] is a very elaborate metaphor of eighteenth century London". Especially in the first two books similarities, such as the beggars of Brobdingnag resembling London's homeless, can be found.

Nevertheless, in the third and the fourth book it becomes more difficult to identify realistic aspects. In the country of the Houyhnhnms, Swift is setting "a real man and his society against an ideal man of their imaginations" (Ward, 1973: 170). A scheme of antithesis acts between the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos. Both races represent only aspects of humanity and in this sense picture a fragmented understanding of human mankind. The Houyhnhnms are governed by rationality and nature and do not have feelings whereas the Yahoos live in irrationality and are directed by their instincts only. Gulliver, who acts as the representative of the common English man, is not willing to accept that humanity is a combination of all these attitudes. He rather detests his yahoo-like appearance and does not assume any mistake in the Houyhnhnms. Consequently, Gulliver cannot be seen as a reliable narrator anymore and the narrative loses its main link to realism.

However, an additional problem with the emergence of realism is the authors insisting that only "plain Matter of Fact" (Swift 2005: 272) are told and nothing has been changed but the style "a little alter'd" (Defoe 1998: Preface 1). From the 17th century onwards the authors began to acknowledge "the wickedness of lying" and "the utility of verified narrative" (Tieje 1913: 215). In *Gulliver's Travels* the attempt to

present the truth is overshadowed by the sense that the first three books are not written by the same misanthrope Gulliver has become in the end. Davis (1951: 206) argues that Swift's claim of truth has to be regarded mainly as a "wonderful parody of the methods of authentication of Defoe". In *Moll Flanders's* preface Defoe presents himself as the editor of Moll's biography and as such distances himself from its content. He presents Moll's biography as a deterrent example of sin, evil and degeneration but also of repentance and salvation (Davis 1983: 124-126). Nevertheless, for Watt (2000: 115) Moll undergoes a too "narrow kind of ethical lesson" and can therefore not be seen as an imitable example. It could be argued, that Defoe's preface is to be taken ironically and Defoe just wanted to give a voice to a character of Moll's class and gender, instead of telling a true tale (Skinner 2001: 150).

In conclusion, both texts attempt to present a "complex and comprehensive image of society" (Regan 1999: 99). The characters Moll and Gulliver have realistic but also unrealistic attitudes. Both characters speak a plausible language, are self-aware and represent a specific social status. Nevertheless, unrealistic features, such as a lack of emotions and true relationships, can be identified and result in an incomplete presentation of the characters. Another issue to consider is the setting and the plot of the texts. Although Defoe and Swift use detailed descriptions to make the setting plausible, some aspects of the narrative question the realism of the texts. Moll is never seriously ill, lives in uncountable lodgings and abandons 12 children. Gulliver, the common sailor and link to realism, loses his sense of perspective in Houyhnhnms and with it his reliability as a narrator.

Thus, the 18th century does witness the emergence of realism in their texts, but it is a limited and not fully developed realism. Although Defoe and Swift show the "ability to represent or recreate a society" and "to produce a sustained and powerful criticism of that society" (Regan 1999: 100), their realistic attitudes are confined to snatched "fragments out of the atomised chaos which is the outside world" (Lukács 1988: 114). This results in an ambiguity of the texts towards fact and fiction, which positions *Moll Flanders* and *Gulliver's Travels* in between imagination and reality.

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