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Naturalism Marred by Idealism:

The Literary Failures of Hamlin Garland

Abstract:

Hamlin Garland occupies a difficult place in the American literary canon. At the onset of his career in the 1880s, he was a firebrand, storming the literary scene, railing against its romanticism and genteel traditions. As a literary critic, he was the most outspoken, uncompromising proponent of realism. A self-proclaimed radical, he enthusiastically advocated for land reform and populism. More importantly, in fiction he devoted himself to chronicling the grueling conditions of Midwestern farmers. Despite this pronounced dedication to realism, reform, and the farmer, by 1898 Garland had largely abandoned everything he advocated, producing conventional romances, autobiographies, and paranormal investigations until his death in 1940. As such, what remains of his literary reputation rests largely on his collection *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891). However, Garland's text is, at best, a mixture of strong and weak stories. Where his stronger stories succeed, they illustrate the determinism that characterizes farmers' lives, truthfully rendering the impact of economics and the effect of nature's indifference on laboring Midwestern people. His weaker stories, instead of faithfully chronicling the hardships of farmers, allowing the stories to flow along logical lines, and conclude justifiably, are often marred with improbably happy resolutions that defy truth and undermine

Garland's intentions. As such, I contend that naturalism was the literary mode that best suited Garland's intended aims of accurately portraying impoverished farm life, but he could not divorce himself from romantic notions of individualism and human possibility, recognizing the two distinct moods within these stories that Donald Pizer categorizes as stories of "reminiscence" and stories of "present anger" (59). In short, I demonstrate that Garland's early work is naturalism spoiled by incongruent idealism, signaling his career's downward spiral into trite romances and positioning him not as a realist but as a transitional figure in the emergence of naturalism.

Work Cited

Pizer, Donald. “‘John Boyle’s Conclusion’: An Unpublished Middle Border Story by Hamlin Garland.” *American Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1, Mar. 1959, pp. 59-75. *JSTOR [JSTOR]*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2922652>.