



The Presentation of Modernity by Trains in Twentieth-Century American Literature

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Abstract. The train, a new mechanized means of mobility in the 19th century, contributed greatly to the development of modernity. In addition, train imagery permeates American literature from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. They show a range of features of modernization in the physical sense, but also expose the contradictions that modern American society possesses — the hope of freedom and progress, and the reality of competition and oppression. By analyzing the train’s connotations in literature, modernization shall be reflected as a double-edged sword.

Keywords: American literature · railway · modernity

1 Introduction

On August 28, 1847, the U.S. Northern Railroad was opened to traffic. Daniel Webster, then U.S. Secretary of State, spoke at the ribbon cutting ceremony in Lebanon, Massachusetts proclaiming of the railroad, “It is altogether new. The world has seen nothing like it before” [1]. As a transportation technology, the railway was given a sacred mission in 19th century America to remove barriers and isolation between regions and to promote progress and equality. In his book, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues that the railroad was the most dramatic symbol of modernity in the 19th century [2]. This paper aims to examine the American novel from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Three innovative features of railway are analyzed: the function of communicating and integrating geography, the regulated and standardized mechanization, and the enclosed space of the carriage as a miniature society. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the American political, social relations and American Dream implied by trains in literature, thus providing practical evidence for theories on the significance of which in American modern society.

One of the major characteristics of the train is that it is, from a sociological point of view, never a mere means of movement, but a complex system. The train, whose subtle characteristics were described by the French theorist Michel Foucault, “refers both to the carriage we are in and to the way we move from one place to another, and to the objects that speed past before our eyes” [3]. The train actually allows large groups of

people to move at high speeds on mechanized tools. It is therefore a modern producer of human mobility processes and a new type of enclosed space on the move, as well as an excellent representation of the speed of modernity.

2 Trains Carry Restless Modern Americans

The train frees the modern subject from one kind of temporal and spatial bondage, but places the subject in another kind of enclosed space. This enclosed space symbolizes the place of contemporary human industrial civilization; although it is only a transitional space during travel, it is also premise of the train station, one area of public facilities where modern people stay the longest. These spaces are called “non-place,” in contrast to “place,” which traditionally creates a sense of belonging [4]. In “non-place” individuals have no sense of belonging to the place itself, no social connections are made between people, and there is no concern for each individual’s past or identity. These places — which are dominated by various modes of mass transportation — include trains and their stations, airplanes and their stations, subways, hotels, supermarkets, etc., and include most of the places where people go in contemporary urban life. On the train, people have the same identity as passengers, instead of the various labels of social identity, including “student,” “businessman” and “mother,” that easily fade into background. Everyone is fascinated by the scenery of the train, nervous about its maintenance and sudden stops, and fascinated by the rapid changes of scenery on the train.

The train reminds us that it is easy to stay and leave, and gives us a chance to temporarily escape from the present and imagine the future. At the train station, we are simultaneously in the superposition of “nowhere to go” and “anywhere to go.” In Vladimir Nabokov’s *Mary*, for example, the intention of the train is closely linked to the restlessness of the crowd, and especially to the protagonist’s confusion about his life choices. The story begins with the description that the apartment where the main character Ganin lives is located “next to the subway line on the outskirts of the city,” so the rumbling of the train gives the apartment “the feeling that the whole building is moving slowly”. In fact, the imagery of trains appears thirty times in the novel. The train tracks outside the window make “the possibility of departure never cease to seduce Ganin” [5]. The apartment is inhabited by a group of exiles, homeless and wanderers; their restlessness is accelerated by the high-speed trains that move day and night. In this novel, memories of Mary, Ganin’s first love, and nostalgia for his homeland are intertwined, adding to the bleak, melancholic beauty of Ganin’s exile in a foreign land. At the end of the novel, Ganin finally awakens from his fantasy. He realizes that his homeland is out of reach, that his former lover has become another man’s wife, and that memories, though beautiful, are never the substitute for reality. When he finally steps on the train to France, the train here symbolizes the decision he finally makes. He leaves the past behind, no longer striving to escape reality, and bravely embraces the unknown future.

In Raymond Carver’s short story “The Compartment”, the author also ties the train to the fickle future of life. But Carver does not stress only when the main character steps on the train and bravely faces the future, but further expands on his confusion and anxiety about the future while staying on the train. Myers was so anxious about meeting

his son that he did not even know what language and gestures to use to welcome him. But at the same time, Myers is also waiting for a stopover in the journey with a complex feeling of both catering and rejecting. At the moment the train was about to stop in Strasbourg, Myers decided not to meet his son and continued his journey: “it came to him that he didn’t want to see the boy, after all” [6]. It was during this stopping time, in a few minutes that the train stayed at the platform, that Myers saw the intricacies of train tracks. Myers’ carriage has been unloaded; when he returned to his original compartment, the train has started again. His environment, and even life course, was thus wrenched onto a different track, a radical change. “He was going somewhere, he knew that. And if it was the wrong direction, sooner or later he’d find it out.” In “The Compartment”, Myers gives the purpose and direction of his life to the railroad, allowing it to carry him to an unknown future. He is lost in the uncertainty of his life’s journey, whose floating and lonely state of existence overshadows the future.

3 Trains Transform Time and Space

In addition to manifesting more uncertainty and potentials in modern human character, the railroad also presents the standards and rigor of the modern system in a physical sense. It lies mainly in the adoption of standardized railroad time, i.e. the rationalization of time. One of the characteristics of the pre-industrial period was that towns had their own local time. A typical example of this is the proverb “work with the sunrise and rest with the sunset.” Most rural people used the signs provided by nature to determine the time, which was convenient but not accurate. However, the railroad, while providing the possibility for large numbers of people to travel, also makes it necessary to establish standard times across regions. Trains extend the radius scale of people’s travel. The standard time brought by the train schedule influences people’s daily life and travel schedule. It requires punctuality, and thus makes social life calculable. In the United States, standardized time was introduced in 1883. It, along with strict train schedules, reshaped the American sense of time in the 19th century. Watches became a necessity for people of this time period, and missing trains became a new and common anxiety. Sarah Jewett’s *Going to Shrewsbury* shows the standardization and ruthlessness of train schedules in a few words: “train reluctantly stopped at a small station, only to see one elderly passenger hurriedly get on and before he could stand, the train suddenly started and moved forward” [7]. This is a small station without a name, and because of the low passenger traffic, the train is required to stay at this station for a very short time. It is obvious that the train, which strictly adhered to the timetable, is impatient and in haste to leave. The train schedule stipulates that the stopping time at a station is proportional to the economic status of the place. Both station and passenger are manipulated by an omnipresent force: the invisible hand of capitalist modernity. Hamlin Garland’s “The Return of the Private” is a more direct reflection of the callousness and insensitivity of train schedules. The story depicts a train carrying Northern soldiers returning to Wisconsin from New Orleans after the Civil War. Although they are exhausted from the war and are eager to return home, “the train moves slowly and deliberately, as if it would not reach La Crosse until midnight” [8]. No matter how much the soldiers begged or cursed, it was to no avail, and the train continued to move at the same speed, prescriptive

in advance. The rationalization of time here is apparently represented by the train's time schedule, toward which the individual human being is powerless to resist. This also maps out the ultimate difficulty of controlling modernization in the face of mechanized, fixed systems that drives it.

Along with the rationalization of time is the rationalization of the market. The railroad removed geographical barriers and made it possible for capital to pursue interests across the country. Cities could constrain the countryside, and all geographic areas were brought together in close proximity. This is graphically described in Stephen Crane's 1898 classic novel, *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*. The theme is primarily a reflection of the conflict between tradition and modernity, and one of the key manifestations of the conflict is the difference in awareness of time. Jack Potter is a representative of the modern city man. He needs to take the train to Yellow Sky. After telling his bride that "we are due in Yellow Sky at 3:42," she pulls out a silver watch and "with a frown of attention" says, "It's seventeen minutes past twelve" [9]. Its detailed description of time is intended to highlight the fact that the train schedule has trained the newlyweds' precise time consciousness, and their consciousness about time also represents modern people's efforts to fit into modern time management systems. In stark contrast to the modern time consciousness is the traditional time of the Yellow Sky. As the scene shifts, "save for the busy drummer and his companions in the saloon, Yellow Sky was dozing." People still live a leisurely country life, following the natural time of an agricultural society, drunken and cozy. But what they have not yet realized was that the Southern Railway's California Express that Jack was on would arrive at Yellow Sky in 21 min. The train, a symbol of modernity, already strides toward the future, leading the railroad system that gradually spanned the entire country. The railroad, it can be said, connected the town of Yellow Sky to modern metropolises. The railroad not only calibrated national time, but created a national network that played a remarkable role in mitigating the inequality and isolation between rural and urban, local and national. In short, the railroad ushered in a new era of modern mobility. Compared to the horse-drawn carriages of the pre-industrial period, trains mechanized movement, rationalized time, and reduced distances. American literature has paid attention to and documented the profound changes that trains have brought to human's innovative perception of time and space.

Trains not only change the nature, but also change the relationship between people and the natural environment. The speeding train carries passengers through the landscape, creating a new kind of panoramic landscape framed in the train windows. Take "Up the Coulee," another short story from Hamlin Garland as an example. It tells the story of Howard, a highly educated brother who travels from the West to an eastern city to pursue his career and returns home several years later. The story opens with Howard sitting in a reclining train seat, looking out over the American Midwest. "To lean back in a reclining chair and whirl away in a breezy July day, past lakes, groves of oak, past fields of barley being reaped, past hayfields, where the heavy grass is toppling before the swift sickle, is a panorama of delight, a road full of delicious surprises, where down a sudden vista lakes open, or a distant wooded hill looms darkly blue, or swift streams, foaming deep down the solid rock, send whiffs of cool breezes in at the window" [10]. It is obvious that the landscape is so peaceful and rustic that it nearly composes a pristine painting. It is worth noting that the terms "panorama" and "vista" used in this landscape

depiction are the very popular painting terms in European and American art circles in the middle of the 19th century. Nineteenth-century panoramas of European landscape subjects were dominated by travel and vistas, and analogies between the visual experience of train travel and panoramas were common practice in the nineteenth century. In fact, this analogy is not accidental, but closely related to the way trains changed the way people viewed the landscape. The train greatly transformed the tourists' visual experience because they are confined by the train in their carriages and their sight is confined in the tiny windows. The railroad takes passengers all around and determines the route of their journey; and the windows take passengers' eyes through the landscape all around and determine the scenery in their view. People can only gaze at the distant scenery through the windows, and are carried by the fast speeding train to leave the scenery behind quickly. Passengers need to accept the separation from the detailed scenery as they speed past one place after another, losing the opportunity to stop, stare at and savor on a particular scene. Wolfgang Schivelbusch explains it in more detail: the speed of the train determines that the passenger cannot see the nearest objects, but has to look far away, because the distant objects move relatively slowly, while the near objects flash by too late to see, thus creating a panoramic perception.

The speed of the train changes the visual experience, creating panoramic and visionary perceptions, and also making the landscape go from concrete to generalized and utopian. Land is a functional physical resource that can be cultivated, harvested, bought and sold; there is no distance between people and land. Landscape, on the other hand, is a space that erases the real hard work in the fields for the purpose of entertainment and leisure, a product of man's distance from the soil. Although the fields Howard sees through the car window in the short story "Up the Coulee," are so full of poetry, the real lives of peasants he sees after getting off the train then shatters his beautiful fantasy of the countryside. As he sees the land again without distance, he also sees the countryside in its unadorned true form. At his brother's house, he saw the sweat of farmers working up close, and heard the villagers' complaints. Eventually Howard realizes that the country life he sees through the car window is a utopian illusion. It is the speed of the train that makes the scenery outside the window unreachable and loses its reality in the distant view.

The train not only beautifies the landscape through its distant view, but also unifies it. *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky* opens with an evocative description: the great Pullman was whirling onward with such dignity of motion that a glance from the window seemed simply to prove that the plains of Texas were pouring eastward. Vast flats of green grass, dull-hued spaces of mesquite and cactus, little groups of frame houses, woods of light and tender trees, all were sweeping into the east, sweeping over the horizon, a precipice. "Whirling" points out the high speed of the train, which is a witness of mechanization and modernization; "dignity" emphasizes the majestic momentum of the trains' motion. However, it is notable after the narrative perspective shifts to the passengers inside the car, who look out of the windows and see the Texas plains pouring eastward. As the vast expanse of the West "pouring eastward," in addition to the scenery becoming a fluid object that passes in an instant, it also suggests, to some extent, that the West is converging with the East in the process of modernization. Trains have brought the regions closer together and increased the mobility of goods, resources, population,

and information. The disparities and inequalities between regions due to geographical differences are also being gradually eroded by modernity, just as the sceneries outside the train windows gradually blend together as one.

4 Trains Take a Snapshot of American Politics

The railroad actually brought two new types of important social places: the carriage and the train station. In them passengers are forced to be in closed spaces with a large number of strangers, who are detached from their daily living environment, thus raising new problems of social relations. This may also explain why people spend most of their time on trains sleeping, or drifting off in boredom. In literature, time on the train is also often an opportunity for the protagonist to use for reflection, an opportunity for authors to portray their protagonists. By remembering the past, looking to the future, debating about values, the images of the protagonist can become richer and livelier. On the train people are gradually distanced and isolated from natural space, thus creating a sense of loneliness. This is evident in “The Compartment,” by Raymond Carver, for example, where the inner world of the protagonist is linked to the outer environment. The entire story is driven by the changes and directions of the protagonist’s inner world, the uncertainty, suddenness, and irrationality of his thoughts. In the story, Myers’ sudden experiences and thoughts, which originate from within, not only shape the course of events, but also bring a strong sense of turbulence to the work. This echoes the external environment — the fast-moving, enclosed train compartment. Myers is initially alone in the small compartment by himself. Although another passenger enters after nightfall, there is no communication between the two. This silent, small space scene brings the reader to a strong sense of isolation and depression. The carriage separates people from each other, symbolizing the loneliness of the individual and the strangeness and indifference of the interpersonal relationships. If it were not for the loss of his watch, Myers would not have had any interaction with the passenger in his compartment. Moreover, his efforts to make himself understood fail due to the difficulty of communication between different languages. This is a clear demonstration of the state of near aphasia that results when individuals close themselves off in modern society. The communication difficulties prevent the individual from establishing connections with others, which triggers the loss of individual identity. Moreover, the contrast between the quietness of the soft-seat compartment and the bustle of the second-class compartment reveals the imbalance and insensibility of life of Myers, who is excluded from the richness of real life.

When the carriage is displayed alone, it creates space and opportunity for solitude for the isolated modern humans. But if one considers the carriages as a group and compares them horizontally, the social class differences in them can be identified, as a miniature society. In 19th- and early 20th-century America, the spatial order of train cars was divided into two classes and races: the first was the Pullman carriage, a luxury sleeping car named for railroad owner George Pullman; the second was the Jim Crow carriage, also known as the segregated carriage, divided into whites-only and blacks-only, named for the so-called “separate but equal” Jim Crow laws implemented in public in the American South in the late 19th century. In 1864, the Pullman Railroad manufactured luxury cars that introduced class differences into train travel, departing from previous

ideals that claimed trains were equal, open spaces. The Pullman train's sleeping, dining, and passenger carriages were an exact imitation of bourgeois interior spaces, and no effort was spared in constructing car interiors with luxury, from expensive fabrics to marble bathrooms, resulting in great commercial success. As a result, Pullman became synonymous with luxury trains, and is still used today. If the Pullman carriage was mainly about economic status, the Jim Crow carriage was about social status. 1890 saw the implementation of the Segregated Carriage Act in Louisiana, and the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, holds an important place in American history as it upheld the legality of racial segregation and made the Jim Crow carriage a more justified carriage. This decision upheld the legality of racial segregation and perpetuated Jim Crow laws for more than half a century, and the court case centered on the arrest of blacks for riding in white cars in violation of the Act. It can be seen that the Pullman carriage and the Jim Crow carriage are, in fact, the projection of the racial order and class stratification of everyday life into the interior space of the train.

Throughout this period, the works of white American writers were primarily concerned with the relationships of the classes within Pullman's compartment. In *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*, the contrast between the class of ordinary, small citizens and the luxury carriage alone creates an extremely powerful impact. The bride gazes at the luxurious bedding of the Pullman sleeping carriage and listens to her husband's introduction. "He pointed out to her the beauty of the car they were riding in. And in truth her eyes opened wider as she observed the rich sea-green cloth covering the seats, the shining silver and glass, the wood that shone darkly like the surface of a pool of oil." They marveled at the luxurious settings, with a touch of alarm and uneasiness in their admiration. On hearing that a meal would cost a dollar, the bride cried, "Charge a dollar? Why, that's too much — for us — ain't it, Jack?" The couple's troubled financial situation, their uneasiness that they tried hard to hide, is meticulously contrasted with the lavish, even wasteful, carriage facilities. The contrast is so stark, showing the incongruity between the class they really are in and the carriage they make, that the other elegant, modern travelers in the same carriage are secretly mocking them and making fun of them. The novel reflects the fact that train, which is a consumer good, becomes a new representation of differentiated social status; the Pullman carriage, driven by the interests of capital, will make the sense of hierarchy even more notable.

If white American writers looked at class relations among whites in Pullman carriages, then Jim Crow carriages constitute a distinctive feature of African-American literature of the period. Set in the fictional town of Wellington, Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* follows several intertwined episodes centered on the polarities of segregated society in the turn-of-the-century American South. The fifth chapter, "A Journey Southward," denounces the racial segregation by recreating the historically monumental *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. Two old medical friends, Dr. Burns and Dr. Miller, one white and one black, who have not seen each other for years, meet in a carriage and are in the middle of a conversation when they are interrupted by the conductor. Because Dr. Miller's curly hair and skin color indicates clear African ancestry, he is thrown out of the white carriage, and eventually forced to go to the Jim Crow carriage. Absurdly, Burns' request to follow Miller to a colored car was also denied by the conductor, who

insisted that white passengers were not allowed to ride in colored carriages. The conductor's attitude was very forceful, even aggressive, including warnings and threats. He claimed that he would enforce the law and praised the beauty of this legal system: it lies in its fairness, which applies equally to both races. That is, whites could not ride in colored cars and colored people could not ride in white cars. It can be seen that the majority of that era approved of racial segregation and strictly enforced it.

However, the Jim Crow carriage as a political space is far less clearcut than it appears, distinguished by race — the social relations it generates are actually intricate. The white conductor in *The Marrow of Tradition*, who is far below the black doctor in economic and social status, clearly enjoys a pleasurable thrill in enforcing the Jim Crow laws, which shows the power play between different races and classes. The working class, such as the African-American conductors and cooks working in the Pullman cars, had a self-contained hierarchical structure within themselves. Although the sleeper conductors had a humble and undignified status in front of the white passengers, they had a relatively high status among the black community. Against a background of high unemployment among blacks, conductors had stable jobs and most owned their own homes. And once they were hired by Pullman as conductors, their social status increased substantially. After all, few other blacks had the opportunity to travel, much less to come into contact with the upper class who rode in the sleepers. Racial tensions and class differences always put a pleasant, slightly condescending smile on the faces of the attendants. "He viewed them with the manner of a fatherly pilot, his countenance radiant with benevolence. The patronage, entwined with the ordinary deference, was not plain to them" [11]. The working class is caught between two classes with a huge gap, and has the ambivalent combination of inferiority and pride. It can be said that although the Jim Crow carriage is a relentless denial of their social status of the major African Americans, it is a lifesaving straw for some trying to climb up.

But the Pullman carriage, which shows racial segregation, also creates space for the possibility of building racial unity. As the Civil Rights movement intensified, African-American writers became more and more bold in articulating through their work the need to build racial solidarity across class lines within the race. Chapter 10 of *Home to Harlem* focuses on the class culture of black workers in the Pullman carriages. The carriage service staff consisted of train cooks, conductors, and dining room attendants. Jake, the main character of working-class origin, was a cook for the Pennsylvania Railroad and had a lower status than the conductors because the conductors enjoyed access to white passengers. While there is no opportunity for close communication between cooks and conductors other than playing cards, *Home to Harlem* depicts the intimate interactions between Jake Brown, the assistant cook, and Ray, a waiter on his dining car. He is a Haitian immigrant, educated, intelligent, emotional and critical of the social conditions of the African-American community. He teaches Jake a lot about politics, history and literature [12]. Their friendship transcends education and class, and continues long after the train arrives.

5 Conclusion

At the time of its emergence as a new transportation technology, the train was confidently perceived as a tool for advancing democracy. After all, trains made the freedom of travel

less exclusive to the privileged classes. However, railroad companies, governments, legislatures, and other organizations have joined forces to brutally compartmentalize the interior space of trains. Instead of democratizing the train, it replicates and reinforces the conflicts brought about by the original racial and class divisions. American literature not only records the friction and confrontation between different races and classes within the train, but also conceives the dialogue and integration between them, actively participating in the construction of democracy and equality and promoting its progress.

The train, as a major representation of modernity, becomes a recurring image in American literature from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Writers concretely and figuratively depict the effect of the train's speed on individual time consciousness and visual perception, as well as the role of the spatial order of the carriage on the relations between different races and classes. These authors depict capital as the root and driving force of modernity's mobility, dialectically thinking about the complex relationship between mobility technology and economy, politics, society and culture. On the one hand, trains have led a series of transformations resulting from modernity, such as the standardization of time, the ordering of space, and the globalization of territory. On the other hand, trains also reveal the paradoxes of modernity — trains are both a symbol of freedom and progress and a means of bondage and oppression, a platform where various classes and races compete, communicate, and collaborate with each other. American literature of this period portrays the multiple influences of modernity on society through the lens of the newly-developed trains. As the speeding train moves to its next stop, the United States continues to march toward a more equal and free future.

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