

Social Realism and Poetic Narration

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The early “problem novel”—covering such topics as divorce, abuse, addiction, sexuality, and the struggle for identity in the face of overwhelming social pressures—faced critics’ charges of being more didacticism than narrative, more ideology than poetry. While one can easily argue that ideologies, of whatever stripe, underpin all literature, *how* an author creates stories, how she weaves together words to describe often difficult issues facing young readers, can make the author’s ideological viewpoint that influences a story’s ideology—the author’s perspective of the “problem”—seem more or less heavy-handed. It was charges of that heavy-handedness that the problem novel has faced from critics. In some ways, the term “problem novel” is a reflexive one, unwittingly acknowledging perceived problems with the genre itself.

Current novels deal with many of those same issues, but now the genre is more often termed “social realism.” I prefer that term, particularly for its connotations. There is a sense of community and world view evoked in its acknowledgement of a “social” context in a story, an acknowledgement that these novels explore the interrelatedness of the individual and larger social constructs and how larger institutions or cultural patterns may nurture or harm children. The “problem novel” has been more than simply titularly redefined as “social realism”; the current generation of authors of these books is redesigning the function of narrative, particularly the function of aesthetics in social realism. Indeed, in a number of these current “social realism” novels, aesthetics is the ideology and the means for the individual to explore, confront, and not merely survive the problems that assault them, but also recreate themselves.

In Nikki Grimes’s *The Bronx Masquerade* (2002), for example, eighteen students of an inner-city school who are dealing with issues such as alienation, neglect, racism, sexism, violence, and family loss, each find ways to translate their pain into poetry when their teacher inaugurates “Open Mike Fridays” and students read aloud poems they have written. Each entry is organized as part of a repeated tripartite pattern: an interior monologue of the character, followed by his or her poem, then a commentary by central character Tyrone (some of the students return for additional poems, others are only heard from once). The novel is a masterpiece of interlocking images, as students borrow and re-envision one another’s poetic images—and redefine their images of themselves. Poetry becomes a way for the students to articulate their own pain, to communicate with one another, and

in that creative process to gain a stronger understanding of themselves. Building upon W. E. B. DuBois's philosophy that art is political, Grimes shows a clear relationship between the power of art and the potential transformation of the individual and, by extension, society. As one student describes it in her poem, "For a moment, / the puzzle is done. / We are one now— / Eighteen syllables. / A single poem" (qtd. in Grimes 138).

In Jacqueline Woodson's *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (1994), as the two main characters build a friendship, art becomes a way for them to survive the loss of their respective mothers and, in the case of one of the girls, to combat sexual abuse. Lena, the young girl who is abused by her father, finds not only psychological escape but also a reification of positive identity as she sketches. Then, as the girls share a reading of Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, they find there a mother figure who affirms their potential and power. Reading and art are thus a way of re-establishing one's identity by creating a positive space in the midst of an otherwise assaultive world. Such novels as these are metafictional, arguing the recuperative power of art as young readers are in the very process of reading, and hence immersing themselves in art.

These books are also keenly poetic: *Bronx Masquerade* includes actual poems and Woodson's imagery and narrative style in *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* is as aesthetically deft as one sees in descriptions of a "middle place" where the girls meet or in images of "Lena's hands slipp[ing] away from the chain links, and [. . .] sail[ing] away." Poetic style marks An Na's *A Step from Heaven* as well. The story of a Korean family that moves to the US, *A Step from Heaven* focuses on the struggles of an immigrant family and particularly on a young daughter struggling in her relationship with her father. Told through a series of short vignettes, *A Step from Heaven* is a remarkable example of how stories about the struggles of children and families can be conveyed through poignant images that evoke the sometimes deeply ineffable nature of intense pain. Poetic imagery can draw a reader more firmly into the text, and interpret images such as "*I am a sea bubble floating, floating in a dream. Bhop*" require a reader's dedicated interaction.

Such books as these, both in their own use of poetics and in the sophistication of their storylines, argue that art is a radical, recuperative, efficacious response to social and personal conflicts. It is a way to re-establish the individual and his or her sense of creation, identity, hope, and faith in possibilities. These books represent social realism as art.

Works Cited

- Na, An. *A Step from Heaven*. Asheville, NC: Front Street, 2001.
- Grimes, Nikki. *Bronx Masquerade*. 2002. NY: Penguin Speak, 2003.
- Woodson, Jacqueline. *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. 1994. NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1995.