

Historic(al) New York as Fictional Object

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the portrayal of New York City in prominent American literary works, ranging from Washington Irving's (1809) *A History of New York* to contemporary post-9/11 novels through an analysis of how evolving depictions of the city have been transformed into potent and revealing fictional objects that enrich the literary works into which they have been integrated. By employing the classification of fictional objects into native, immigrant, and surrogate set forth by Terrence Parsons (1980) in his landmark work *Nonexistent Objects*, this applied study on New York posits that, within the larger literary framework of the novels under discussion, cities construed as fictional objects manage to stimulate an active reading of the text and prompt diverse interpretations of their broader cultural significance. Essentially, this paper illustrates how the historical identity of New York City has been continually reimagined in American literature and how these imaginative representations continue to influence our contemporary popular perception of the city.

Keywords: American literature, fictional object, historical fiction, literary representation, New York

Introduction

Ever since its establishment by the Dutch settlers in the 17th century, New York has been depicted in countless works of art. Its presence in the cultural sphere has multiplied exponentially with it growing into becoming the veritable *axis mundi* of the contemporary world. Literature, of course, has not been a foreign element to this ever-expanding paradigm, and it has encouraged, through the literary pieces housed under its umbrella, a dialogue between the sensibilities of the author and the numerous facets that this city has embraced throughout its history.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how the ever-changing images of the historic(al) New York City have been reflected in works of literature, ever since its depiction in Washington Irving's (1809) *A History of New York* to its postmodern incarnations in post 9/11 novels and to analyze how these images have been transformed into powerful and revealing fictional objects that enhance the texts that they are part of. Furthermore, this analysis will attempt to argue that these fictional objects promote an active reading of the text and invite multiple readings and interpretations of the text.

Readings of an Ever-changing City

Ever since New York became a permanent fixture on the global political, social, and cultural map at the end of the 19th century, many critical approaches to the multi-faceted nature of the city have been written both from the native perspective and the outsider. While predictably different in terms of focus, most analyses foreground the ever-shifting nature of the city, particularly when it comes to its architecture and cultural makeup. Upon returning from New York from one of his European travels at the dawn of the 20th century, Henry James (1994) remarked that he felt estranged within his own city, as he no longer recognized it behind the layer of apparently permanent renewal that the city was undergoing. This sense of estrangement has cohabitated with another intriguing approach: the artistic construal of an urban microcosm defined by its dynamic and ever-changing nature. It is perhaps this angle that has lingered the most in the cultural milieu of New York: "Across styles and mediums, New York artists addressed modern urban life. [...] They deemed New York the quintessential modern city, a microcosm of the contemporary world" (Scott & Rukoff, 1999, p. xvii).

It should come as no surprise that, in this context, the interest in representing New York in literature grew primarily as a means for showcasing renewal and "the whirlpool of modernity at the individual level" (Salmela & Ameen, 2022, p. 319). Through instilling an almost palpable dimension to modernity, the transformational nature of New York was made evident perhaps most significantly in Michel de Certeau's seminal *The Practice of Everyday Life*: "New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future" (Certeau, 1984, p. 91). Since then, the textual representation of New York has grown to exemplify a case-in-point as to the evolution of urban studies in both theoretical and literary writings; as far as the former is concerned, the definition of the city provided by Tambling (2022, p. vii) is entirely applicable to the analyses of New York as a socio-political and cultural topos:

“The city is the defining subject of modernity, occupying a first place in any discussion of it, or of globalization”; when it comes to the latter dimension, several seminal forays into the exploration of New York as a literary landmark have been put forward (Chapman Sharpe, 2008; Patell & Waterman, 2010; Lindner, 2015; Wilson, 2020; Fuchs-Abrams, 2020); all of these critical readings emphasize the richness of themes and stylistic modulations encountered in the fictional writings featuring New York as either foreground or background.

Framework

In his 1980 book *Nonexistent Objects*, contemporary philosopher Terence Parsons (1980, pp.49–60) classifies fictional objects by dividing them into three broad categories. Native objects are those “created” by the story, which cannot exist as such outside of the world of the story—represented by fictional cities, such as the Emerald City in L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* or Stephen King’s Castle Rock, Maine, which appears in a number of his novels. Immigrant objects are those “imported” from reality or other texts; here, Parsons (1980, p. 51) gives the example of London as it appears in Arthur Conan Doyle’s series featuring Sherlock Holmes, thus demonstrating how a city that exists in reality is used to provide the backdrop for fictional happenings. To further emphasize the distinction between this type of object and the aforementioned native ones, he lists Sherlock Holmes himself, as he is native to Conan Doyle, but he has made numerous appearances as an immigrant in works by many other authors. In this way, one can extend Parsons’ example to create a paradigm that may encompass all the cities stemming from reality that appear in fictional worlds, becoming a shared element that both the reader and the characters may have access to. The third type is that of surrogate objects, which may prove problematic, as Parsons (1980, pp. 57–58) himself argues that the distinction between immigrant and surrogate objects is rather difficult to establish. A surrogate object is understood to be that which stems from the real world but is enhanced by the creator of the fictional work with certain traits that make it unique and distinguish it from its real counterpart. Therefore, the object becomes accessible to the reader only by means of the text and cannot be experienced as such in concrete reality. London, as it appears in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, may be perceived as such an object, as it contains both elements from the real world and enhancements devised by the mind of the character. However, in the case of other novels, where these differences are not quite so clear cut, one must take into account the textual markers that suggest the faithfulness of the representation of the city or other object in question and the limits to which mimesis can be stretched (Parsons, 1980, pp. 57–58).

As this analysis will show, Parsons's classification might prove problematic if the boundary between fictional and non-fictional is blurred; nevertheless, it proves a useful tool for analyzing how a real city such as New York is depicted in the works taken into discussion. Specifically, the main advantage of employing Parsons' approach to fictional objects lies primarily in its adaptability to any close reading venture. Thus, in the case of this analysis, new insights about New York fiction can be derived through the lens of this theory, particularly when it comes to the semantic undertones connected to perceiving the city as synonymous with perpetuating modernity in the context of its ever-shifting nature.

Moreover, one must also note that Parsons' approach to fictional objects has been challenged over time; most notably, Motoarca (2014) significantly expands upon Parsons' surrogate objects by noting that one must not simply approach them as "self-evident truisms," but rather seeing the contextual employment of names in fiction as fictional surrogates to real objects as integral towards solving potential problems regarding the reference-continuity view. Voltolini (2020) takes the argument forward by establishing a distinction between continuism (the view that names in fiction refer directly to their real referents) and exceptionalism (which presumes a shift in semantic value, sometimes without ontological involvement, largely dependent upon the context at hand); he stresses that Parsons' approach functions as an argument for uniformity, which largely informs the present approach.

The Knickerbocker Case

In late 1809, readers could find in the New York-based *Evening Post* some missing person adverts that asked for information regarding the whereabouts of Diedrich Knickerbocker, a historian of Dutch origin who had gone missing from his hotel room. The adverts also listed an announcement from the hotel manager warning that if the historian failed to return and pay his room rate, he would publish a manuscript that the historian had left behind. The case stirred the attention of audiences and authorities were seriously considering offering a ransom for any information on the historian (Jones, 2008, pp. 118–127). Very soon, readers would reencounter the name of Diedrich Knickerbocker on the cover of the volume *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, supposedly the published manuscript that remained unclaimed in the historian's hotel room. Little did they know then that behind the guise of Knickerbocker was the one who would become the first American writer to achieve transatlantic success—Washington Irving. This fascinating sequence of events, which now strikes as one of the most creative marketing campaigns *avant la lettre*, has been elevated over time to a legendary status, and Knickerbocker gave name not only to an entire group of writers, but it has become a common vernacular for Manhattan residents in general (High, 1986, p. 30).

The volume is an interesting blend of fiction and non-fiction, spanning a number of genres in the process. It mixes historical narrative with humorous anecdotes and events invented by Irving, thus becoming a pseudo-history of New York, which “works to poke fun at Irving’s contemporaries” (Zuba, 2005, pp. 41–42). This style is evident throughout the work, as is the moment when the English conquest of New Amsterdam seems evident:

While all these struggles and dissensions were prevailing in the unhappy city of New Amsterdam, [...] the English commanders did not remain idle. They had agents secretly employed to foment the fears and clamors of the populace; [...] They promised that every man who voluntarily submitted to the authority of his British Majesty should retain peaceful possession of his house, his vrouw, and his cabbage-garden. [...]. That every man should be allowed quietly to inherit his father’s hat, coat, shoe-buckles, pipe, and every other personal appendage; and that no man should be obliged to conform to any improvements, inventions, or any other modern innovations; but, on the contrary, should be permitted to build his house, follow his trade, manage his farm, rear his hogs, and educate his children, precisely as his ancestors had done before him from time immemorial. (Irving, 2004, Ch. 9)

The historical event that will seal the history of the city forever is depicted here in a style that goes far beyond that of a standard historical narrative. The employment of adjectives such as “unhappy” and “peaceful” or adverbs such as “quietly” demonstrates narrative involvement at the textual level and marks the inclusion of the text in the fictional domain. Therefore, one must consider New Amsterdam as it is presented here as an immigrant object, representing a backdrop for the events depicted in the text, adapted from their historical counterparts.

“High Destinies”

In Peter B. High’s (1986, p. 91) assessment of Henry James’s impact on American literature, one encounters the consideration that James was a realist rather than a naturalist. While naturalists like Howells focused on business, politics, and societal conditions, James’s interests lay elsewhere. He primarily observed and delved into the intricacies of the human mind rather than simply documenting the contemporary era. Although this assessment can be deemed accurate in broad terms, one cannot feel that James’s descriptions of New York are something much more than just realistic settings that mirror the personality of the characters that inhabit them. When faced with such descriptions, the reader may indeed feel that Henry James was also a recorder of 19th-century urban life and its unique atmosphere. This is due to the vibrant and sophisticated tones

in which he depicts New York. In *Washington Square* (1881), like in other of James's works, the immigrant object of New York, when used to designate the hometown of one of the characters, automatically implies that the character in question is part of an upper-class society (Haralson & Johnson, 2009, p. 421), and is a sign of the high aspirations that the character has:

The ideal of quiet and of genteel retirement, in 1835, was found in Washington Square, where the doctor built himself a handsome, wide-fronted house, with a big balcony before the drawing-room windows, and a flight of white marble steps ascending to a portal which was also faced with white marble. [...] round the corner was the more august precinct of the Fifth Avenue, taking its origin at this point with a spacious and confident air which already marked it for high destinies. [...] this portion of New York appears to many people the most delectable. It has a kind of established repose which is not of frequent occurrence in other quarters of the long shrill city; it has a riper, richer, more honourable look [...]—the look of having had something of a social history. (James, 2012, pp. 13–14)

James does not fail to highlight here, in the context of the 19th century, the existence of one of the most renowned traits of New York to the present day: its contrasting nature, the striking differences that exist from one neighborhood to another, both in terms of architectural aesthetics, and also in terms established within the highbrow-lowbrow dichotomy.

However, the most important contribution that James makes in this analysis is concerned may be found in "Crapy Cornelia" (1909), as the depictions of New York present in his works become increasingly gloomier. In the case of this particular literary piece, New York takes on personal nuances that stem from the part of the character. Thus, when the character distinguishes between two distinct versions of New York, the city is elevated to the status of a surrogate object, a literary device that can be considered truly innovative and unique at this point in literary history: "He could have lived on in his New York, that is in the sentimental, the spiritual, the more or less romantic visitation of it; but had it been positive for him that he could live on in hers?" (James, quoted in Haralson & Johnson, 2009, p. 421).

The "Feel" of New York

In 1924, one of the cornerstones of 20th-century American literature was set by H. L. Mencken, who described post-war New York as fertile ground for the basis of new literature. This new literature would exploit all the up-to-then hidden facets of the city, especially the commotion surrounding life in Manhattan, described as a "spectacle, lush and barbaric in its every detail, [which] offers the material for a great imaginative literature" (Mencken, as cited in Berman, 2001, p. 81). In due course, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

would concentrate and deliver in the form of a kernel of the experience of New York as it was during the Roaring Twenties. Indeed, as literary critics argue (Berman, 2001, p. 81), Fitzgerald's novel is as much about New York as it is about Jay Gatsby or Nick Carraway. In this way, it can be argued that the fictional object of New York climbs up in rank to the status of a character equal to the novel's protagonists, a mark of true literary innovation. The city is even described as another character, as a living body:

I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. [...]. At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others—poor young clerks who loitered in front of windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant dinner—young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life. (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 63)

In tone with Nick's position ("within and without") in the novel, the passages depicting New York contain ambivalent elements ("the racy, adventurous feel" versus "a haunting loneliness"). Moreover, the approach towards the city changes from one point of the novel to another, ranging from the enthusiasm with which it is infused at the beginning, where it can be read as a fascinating world that has just been revealed, to the gloomy atmosphere which prevails after Gatsby's death, when New York and the East become "haunted" for Nick (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 183). This change in attitude towards the city blurs even further the line between New York as an immigrant object and New York as a surrogate object in the case of *The Great Gatsby*. While for the vast majority of the novel New York is the vivid backdrop onto which the events unfold, in which case it can be regarded as an immigrant object in the purest sense of the word—when the city moves from the background into the foreground, it might be stated that the nature of the object in turn shifts from immigrant to surrogate, thus mirroring both narrative construction and the trajectory that the city marks in Nick's consciousness.

Auster(e) Alienation

The alienation that Nick Carraway began to feel towards New York explodes to heightened proportions in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1987) after postmodernism has firmly established itself on the literary stage. By the 1980s, New York had become an entire universe itself, producing reactions as diverse as the mentalities of the people that inhabit them. One needs only to compare the romanticized view of New York as depicted in Woody Allen's films and the blunt and rugged image painted of the city in the films of Martin Scorsese. Literature has not made an exception to this cultural trend concerning New York.

Out of Auster's *Trilogy*, the first part, *City of Glass* (1985), seems to contain *in nuce* the feeling that the metropolis of New York seems to exert on the characters who find themselves in conflict with the city, as they strive for individuality and to exist outside of the larger crowd (Martin, 2008, p. 146). *City of Glass* contains two approaches towards New York, which at first seem to be divergent, but in the end prove to be two sides of the same coin, as one dimension effortlessly contains the other. The protagonist, Quinn, is struck by the sheer size of New York, and he constructs an image of the city in the form of a Borgesian labyrinth:

New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. [...] New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (Auster, 2006, p. 4)

The metamorphosis from immigrant object to surrogate object becomes recurrent in postmodernist fiction, as seen in the fragment above. Investing a part of oneself into the city marks a unique relationship between character and setting, as the two become indistinguishable from the other; thus, it becomes impossible to talk about one without talking of the other as well.

This immensity of the city allows each individual to construct their version of New York, which produces an inexorable sense of alienation because the notion is no longer shared at a collective level. This is what connects Quinn's view of the city to that of Peter Stillman, but the latter's version of New York is automatically contained within the first one. In this way, it is also paradoxically devoid of individuality: "I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal" (Auster, 2006, p. 77). This almost oxymoronic connection between alienation and lack of individuality, which can be encountered within these two versions of New York and in the fictional surrogate object contained in *City of Glass*, is the element that brings Auster's originality to the surface.

Fictionalizing 9/11 or: How the Fictional Object Learned to Stop Worrying and Heal Its Scars

For over a decade, the literary responses to one of the most pivotal events in contemporary history have continuously reinvented New York, painting it in myriad colors. In an attempt to find a common direction to the works that can be grouped under the common umbrella

of “9/11 fiction,” Benjamin Bird (2007, p. 561) considers that these novels address “the consequences and etiology of the attacks in oblique and suggestive ways that are more often arresting than the more ponderous assertions of social scientists” and New York provides both the background and the foreground for these examinations at the fictional level, twisting yet again the borderline between immigrant and surrogate object.

Don DeLillo’s (2011) *Cosmopolis* takes place one year before 9/11, but the atmosphere in New York seems to already be in tune with the events that will occur one year later. The fictional anti-capitalist riot described in the novel seems to foreshadow the prevalence of fear that will make the transition into reality onto the streets of New York after the fall of the Twin Towers. Times Square seems to be an almost native object that DeLillo has created instead of a fictionalized version of its real counterpart, as, in the context of this fictional version of New York, it has become a veritable battlefield:

The rain came washing down on the emptying breadth of Times Square with the billboards ghost-lighted now and the tire barricades nearly cleared dead ahead, leaving 47th Street open to the west. [...] the credible threat was the thing that moved and quickened him. (DeLillo, 2011, pp. 106–107)

In *Falling Man*, DeLillo (2008) turns the event of 9/11 itself into an immigrant object and uses it to open the novel by expanding the powerful battlefield image of Times Square in *Cosmopolis* to the entire area of Lower Manhattan and, indeed, to the entire world itself:

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. [...] Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall. (DeLillo, 2008, p. 3)

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the paranoia that more attacks might follow, Joseph O’Neill’s (2008) *Netherland* contains a version of Times Square not wholly different from the one conveyed by Don DeLillo (2011) in *Cosmopolis*, only the focus is changed from street level to the underground:

She had fears of her own, in particular the feeling in her bones that Times Square, where the offices of her law firm were situated, would be the site of the next attack. The Times Square subway station was a special ordeal for her. Every time I set foot in that makeshift cement underworld [...] I tasted her anxiety. Throngs endlessly climbed and descended the passages and walkways like Escher’s tramping figures. (O’Neill, 2008, Ch. 5)

What surprises the reader is the extent to which the details of the disaster are, in Bird's words, obliquely suggested. The power of suggestion, therefore, serves to emphasize the depth that this event has had on the characters' consciousness. Hans van der Broek, the protagonist of *Netherland*, cannot even mention 9/11 as such, and the references he makes to it when he explains his decision to leave New York are highly elliptical:

Now that I, too, have left that city, I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody once told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you're the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory's repetitive mower—on the sort of purposeful postmortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course. (O'Neill, 2008, Ch. 1)

Thus, the surrogate object is invested here with traits that might prove to be the catalyst that will trigger the process of healing and regeneration. In this way, it is suggested that the state induced by 9/11, as is the case with all past tragedies that have left deep imprints on the present, can be overcome, although its traces will linger in collective memory.

Conclusions

What this analysis has essentially foregrounded is the fact that the evolution of the fictional object, in its three incarnations, parallels the history of the real counterpart on which it is constructed. Thus, significant developments in the literary representation of New York can be traced, which parallel ensuing cultural and/or historical phenomena, such as the move away from ostentatious industrialization and rapid modernization to more romantic and adventurous vistas and ultimately to post-traumatic sites of memorialization following the events of 9/11.

However, this evolution does not stop with the mere employment of New York as a surrogate object. As highlighted by the examples provided above, the surrogate object, in turn, has subsequent layers of meaning added to it, which enhance both the way the New York setting is conveyed, but, in turn, amplifies the effect that the novels at hand have on the reader. This addition of layers can be read as an aesthetic expansion of the dimensions inscribed within the literary works at hand. Thus, valuable contributions have been made to the complexity and intricateness of the novel as an art form, which invites the reader to dig deeper beyond the surface of the text and to engage it critically, promoting active reading and individual readings of both the fictional objects and the texts themselves.

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