

**He Said, She Said: An Exploration of the Use of Accents, Dialects, and Languages  
Throughout American Realist Novels**

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**Abstract**

One of American Realism's defining characteristics lies in the authors' ability to realistically mimic an accent, dialect, or language of a person or group of people. Through the capture of the spoken word, authors use this unique style of writing to create a specialized persona for a character. Accents and dialects (or the lack of) allow the author to shape the readers' perspective of a character by distinguishing their class, region, race, gender and/or their intellect for political, social, or personal gain. The integration of different languages into a text validates and/or complicates a country's language and culture since it forces the reader to have an understanding of the language to completely read the text.

American Realist literature is known for its realistic depiction of people, including their use of language. Accents, dialects, and languages play a vital role in how an author develops a character. This usage can pose a unique form of characterization since authors can distinguish characters through regionalism, class, race, and even their level of intelligence. The lack thereof can also promote an author's personal agenda through the clarity of speech. Adding vocabulary from different languages also allows the reader to take part in another culture. The texts being analyzed in this paper display several attempts at capturing multiple accents spoken throughout America, with each attempt giving a unique insight into the authors' characterizations and agendas. By examining the factors displayed in each work, the reader can distinguish how American Realist authors use the ever-changing nature of language to impact how the reader may view a certain person or topic.

Many realist authors attempted to capture accents, dialects, or languages in their work. This technique tries to "indicate...the speech of an ethnic, regional or racial group" (Zanger 40). With such a wide range of groups in the United States, authors are able to use the different dialects in several ways for all different reasons. William Dean Howell's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* plays with several accents such as German, Virginian, Midwestern, and Southern. Despite the story taking place in the Boston and New York City areas, there is little to no American Northeastern accent represented in the text. Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* also takes place in the

Northeast, but deals with the regional, coastal accents present in Maine. On the Pacific West Coast of the United States, Jack London's *The Sea Wolf* looks at how dialect defines the civilized and the barbaric nature of man. Américo Paredes' *George Washington Gómez* examines how language relates to a person's identity. Spanish is embedded into the dialogue of the Hispanic characters as well as the narration of the book, reflecting on the value of the Spanish language and culture. In contrast, Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* validates African Americans' intellectual capabilities by not having some of them speak in an accent at all. However, accents are still used in defining other characters.

*A Hazard of New Fortunes* is filled with an array of dialects, all from different parts of the world and inflicting different meanings for the readers. One of the first accents encountered is that of Colonel and Miss Woodburn from Virginia. Even though Colonel Woodburn does not have much of a Virginian accent, it is important to note his affiliation with it because his ideas on slavery come from a Virginian stereotype. Some of the defining qualities of their Virginian accent are the removal of the "r" sound in words and the elongation of hard vowel sounds. The word "poor" would become "poo'" and "write" would become "wrahte" (Howells 103,102). When pronounced aloud, the sound reflects an old-money, Southern family stereotype and is considered strange by the other characters in the book. The Woodburns say they are a church-going family and Colonel Woodburn's political stances suggest a pro-slavery ideology if it

were more efficient. However, they come off to other characters as “blooming, bubbling, [and] bustling” (Howells 102). Collectively, the Woodburns are intended to act as stereotypical Southerners: self-righteous and friendly, but morally questionable. Due to the novel taking place during or shortly after post-Civil War Reconstruction, the Woodburns can act as a political device to question what is and is not an acceptable approach to slavery. In contrast, this portrayal could also be due to Howells’ personal “bitterness toward the South” and their handling of slavery (Cecil 13). Although Howells worked on separating his feelings from his writing, his purpose in the characterization of the Woodburns is left to the reader.

In comparison, the Dryfoos family brings in a Midwestern, new-money accent. Once again, the males in the family do not have as prominent of a Midwestern accent, but Mr. and Conrad Dryfoos are still associated with the connotations. Their accent is defined by improper verb usage, overuse of the words such as “ain’t” and “reckon,” and removal of the “g” from verbs ending in “-ing.” On several occasions, they use “was” where the verb “were” should be. While using the word “reckon” can be acceptable, the Dryfooses use it in a manner that suggests a lack of education. Their use of “ain’t” also suggests that considering it is an improper contraction. Also, since they remove the “g” from words ending in “-ing,” words like “going” become “goin’” (Howells 205). The image of them being uneducated displays the rift between the old and new money families. Since the Dryfooses came into their fortune through natural

gas, their wealth is newfound unlike the old money families who inherited their fortunes. Many old money families look down on new money and do not consider them of equal status so the Dryfooses act as an emerging business group that is the result of American industrialization.

Berthold Lindau brings a German accent to the book, representing part of the lower-class and highlighting Howells' skills as a writer. A few defining characteristics of his accent include reversing some American consonant sounds, including "b" and "p," and "t" and "d". He also replaces the "w" sound for a "v". So, words like "Basil" would become "Passil" and "don't" would become "ton't" (Howells 327). Words like "work" would become "voark" (Howells 310). Howells also uses several consonant replacement techniques to further develop Lindau's accent in a minor degree. This in-depth fixation on Lindau's accent displays Howells' mastery as a writer since he is able to capture not only an accent with precision, but an accent of a multilingual person. Lindau also serves as the lower-class representation in the book, even though he may not prove to be the most accurate portrayal. He is knowledgeable of several languages and advocates for workers' rights, but since he is the only person in the lower class, this is one of the only images the reader is given of the lower class. This may not be beneficial since most people in the lower class were not as educated nor as political involved. Even so, his involvement in the workers' rights movement addresses the industrialization taking place in America during that time and the problems needing to

be addressed because of it. His role in the book revolves more around the social changes of that time rather than depicting a true representation of the lower-class.

For the rest of the characters, many of the ones who live and are from the Northeast do not speak with an accent even though they probably would have one. Basil and Isabel March, Mr. Fulkerson, Angus Beaton, and Alma Leighton do not speak with an accent. This clarity of speech could be due to making the storyline more understandable to the reader as well as the characters serving as literary vehicles. Basil and Isabel represent the emerging middle-class family that is not wealthy, but able to get by with relative ease. Mr. Fulkerson acts as the energetic entrepreneur that would be present in the rise of industrialization. While Angus and Alma are both artists, Angus represents the successful, arrogant artist while Alma shows the struggle of female artists since their work is not held in as high esteem. Through each character's use of "diction, grammar, and syntax, [they] become an index to the qualities of a character and [their] society" (Nettel 314). While the characters may not speak with a New York or Boston accent, they are still defined by how they speak through their unique use of words. Their unaccented speech also makes for easier reading since they serve in a major role to the plot of the story.

Next, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* captures the regional dialect of coastal Maine. In this book, dialects serve by presenting an authentic representation of a person rather than representing a political or social aspect of society. Mrs. Todd, a knowledgeable

herbalist in the town, has a distinguishable dialect due to her shortening of multiple words. Her accent is filled with “longshore high flavor” that distinguishes her region from the rest of the United States (Jewett 11). Even if her language may not be extremely polished, she is still respected by many people in the town for her knowledge of the area and the herbs it contains, such as “pennyr’yal” (Jewett 32). Her dialect allows the readers to explore the land’s stories and define natural qualities from a local’s perspective. This developed, personalized dialect shows the beauty of the nature and traditions enveloped in Dunnet Landing, Maine.

Captain Littlepage also shares a part of the regional dialect but is somewhat of an outsider. His accent is not as prominent, but he also shortens several of his words, similar to Mrs. Todd. He is well-educated, making a “quotation...from Paradise Lost” as well as references to Shakespeare (Jewett 9). As a shipmaster, he is partially outside of the regional scope due to his activity on the sea. Even so, his dialect contributes to a significant part of the region since the town relies heavily on seafaring. Captain Littlepage also contributes to the region’s folklore since he shares a story about a ghost town that disappears when he sails away. He serves to add to the mystical feel that lingers throughout Dunnet Landing.

In relation to seafaring dialect, *The Sea Wolf* examines how dialect plays with the line of civilized and barbaric. Humphrey van Weyden and Wolf Larsen speak mostly with perfect clarity throughout the story, suggesting an educated image onto both of

them. Both characters are well-read and display a critical understanding of literary works. However, Wolf Larsen differentiates slightly. Occasionally, he will exclude a “w” in the middle of some of his words. This tiny difference defines his character in a significant way due to his radical, philosophical ideas. This omission represents how even though he is able to think critically, he still lacks a level of textual understanding. Humphrey has a refined intellect shaped by the civilized world due to being a “gentleman” and literary critic (London 24). While Wolf Larsen is also intellectual, his ideologies can come off as outlandish since he has a different perspective than most scholars, particularly ones who studied Christianity. Through a reading from Ecclesiastes, he launches a debate with Humphrey about the value (or rather lack thereof) of life and the afterlife. While they are both reading through it, Humphrey interprets the stanzas with an optimistic view, while Wolf Larsen “[invests] them with an unrest and passionate revolt that was well-nigh convincing” (London 105). From the reading, Wolf Larsen argues there is no value in a person’s life since the immortality of the soul can never be touched, while Humphrey is appalled at his suggestion. Even though they may sound similar in speech, the two characters leave to question the line between what is civilized and what is barbaric due to their slight pronunciation variations.

The cook of the ship, Thomas Mugridge, has a distinct dialect, suggesting the barbaric nature of himself and other crew members. Like Wolf Larsen, Mugridge omits

letters in his speech, but to a greater extent. He completely removes the letter “h” from his words and elongates the short “o” sound. Words like “hate” would become “ate” and “God” would become “Gawd” (London 122,123). His lack of completed words suggests he is barbaric as well as illiterate. When Humphrey firsts joins the ship, he is abused and threatened by Mugridge. This treatment from Mugridge takes form in thievery, physical abuse, and mental abuse when Mugridge continues “whetting his knife” to intimidate Humphrey (London 90). While London does not discriminate against any specific character’s actions, the dialect differences displayed by Wolf Larsen and Thomas Mugridge conveys a level of barbary of the two men.

Situated in Mexico and Texas, *George Washington Gómez* inspects the role of language in defining personal identity. Throughout the book, Spanish words are intertwined in the dialogue of the Mexican characters as well as the narration of the story. Many Spanish phrases and words such as “*cantina*,” “*vieja*,” and “*rinche*” are embedded throughout character dialogue and narration (Paredes 119, 84, 63). The mixing of languages into the core of the story sets the Spanish language and Mexican culture as the underlying foundation for the book and validates the importance and “certain dignity” of the language (Paredes 118). By doing this, the author also forces the reader to undertake some understanding of the Spanish vocabulary in order to understand the full extent of the novel.

Language also relates to the main character Gualinto's identity in relation to his name: George Washington Gómez. Language plays a role from the beginning since his parents choose to name him with an American and Mexican name. This division of American and Mexican language in his name also inherently divides Gualinto's identity. His family is proud of being Mexican and wants him to embrace it as well, but even so, the white people he encounters debate whether or not to even address him as Mexican so as "to avoid giving offense" (Paredes 118). So, while his family may be proud of their heritage, he is conflicted since his relations with white society are not so fondly embraced. By the end of the book, he no longer is referred to by his Mexican name, Gualinto, but rather the name he chooses for himself, "George" (Paredes 302). This embracing of his American name shows the rejection to the other half of his heritage and his full acceptance of his personal identity.

In *Contending Forces*, the reader needs to understand the lack of accents from the major characters in the novel and the noticeable accents of the less significant characters. Specifically, Sappho does not speak with an accent even though it is likely that she had one due to her location and heritage. However, the clarity of the speech could be due to the message the author was trying to convey through her characters. Sappho's education reflects Pauline Hopkins' own education since both had a classic training and are well-versed in African, African-American, British, and American literature. By giving Sappho this prestigious, academic background, Hopkins is trying

to “elevate the status of women of African descent in [America’]” (Lewis 622). This characterization portrays African Americans as exceedingly capable of fully and critically understanding all kinds of literature, which is significant due the educational disadvantages many African Americans faced at that time.

The supporting characters may not have carried such a heavy role in relaying the author’s agenda, however, their accents added to the realistic nature of the text. Some characters have “Southern tones and quaint Northern dialect” while others are plainly from the South (Hopkins 131). One of Sappho’s friends, Doctor Peters, has a distinct accent that is meant to be heard with expression and humor. While his accent can be distracting to readers at times, he is “a well-read man” who serves to show the readers how a freed slave might sound (Hopkins 130). Since he was a slave in his childhood, his accent seems to reflect that since it is inherently different from Sappho’s. In the first half of the book, two of Anson Pollock’s white henchmen, Bill and Hank, have strong Southern dialects. They come off as unintelligent due to their almost unrecognizable pronunciation of words, lack of vocabulary, and frequent use of vernacular curse words. This unfavorable portrayal could be due to their association with the murderous Pollock and the pro-slavery stances he favors. Even the slaves have their own dialects that can be seen through the songs they sing. They are never given speaking lines throughout the book, though. This could be an attempt by the author to capture the idea

of slaves not having the liberty to speak freely; their only avenue for expression is available through song.

All of the texts analyzed in this paper stress the importance of realistically displaying accents, although the way these accents are interpreted can vary upon different readings. Texts of a political nature can arguably need a “line between interpretive levels...in the political import of deviating from standard English to represent speech” (Leigh 363). Considering this potential need for more interpretation considerations, the texts being observed may be subject to a more severe scrutinization due to the complex nature of writing political pieces. This deeper interpretation process could lead to different readings of the nature of these texts.

Even today, people often make assumptions about the people they meet based upon their accents or use of language. While this may rely on partial stereotypes to form characterizations, it also provides insight to the biases of particular groups of people and their lifestyles. Also, since language is ever-changing, the attempts at capturing different dialects show the transformation of speech over time. Language is never fixed, so the foundation for certain dialect attempts may completely change. Understanding these changes can be the key to fully understanding a piece of literature and the agenda it is trying to portray. By understanding a language, one understands a culture and a way of life.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

I certify that I have no affiliation or involvement with any organization, financial or non-financial, involving the subjects or topics discussed in this manuscript.

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