

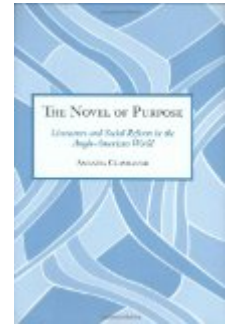
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Amanda Claybaugh. *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. 264 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4480-7.

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Published on H-SHGAPE (November, 2007)



## Realists and Reformers in the Nineteenth Century

Amid the violence and tensions of contemporary globalization, it is perhaps unsurprising that American literary historians of the last decade have been preoccupied by literary transnationalism. As with the work of such critics as Anna Brickhouse, Wai Chee Dimock, and Kirsten Silva Gruesz (among many others), this field of research has carefully exposed the international contexts of American literature and put pressure on the nationalist borders that have always delimited literary history. Amanda Claybaugh's new book, *The Novel of Purpose*, is a worthy contribution to this growing field of transnational literary history.[1]

In a work of impressive range and depth, Claybaugh focuses on the exchanges and reciprocal influences of American and English novelists of the nineteenth century. Several concentric arguments thread through Claybaugh's book, but the most foundational is the contention that English-language print culture in the nineteenth century was above all transnational, bound together by transatlantic reprinting, circulation, and mutual influence. And of all these connective links, social reform, Claybaugh argues, was particularly potent in binding together the two nations and their literatures, functioning as a "central conduit for these exchanges" (p. 27). As writers on both sides of the Atlantic crafted narratives documenting social ills, they not only consolidated this transatlantic interconnection but also produced a literary genre, "the novel of purpose" (p. 34), which would flourish through the end of the century. With ample textual evidence and useful case studies, Claybaugh shows how readers and reviewers came to expect pur-

posefulness from novels and how writers, as varied as Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, consequently complied by adopting the forms of the novel of purpose—even if they were sometimes unsympathetic to the reformist campaigns they depicted. And it is in pursuit of this inquiry that Claybaugh makes her most compelling and important argument: that the nineteenth-century novel was composed and read "according to expectations learned from social reform" (p. 7). That is, they were expected to adopt a moral position and use narrative to effect social change.

Claybaugh's book proceeds chronologically, beginning with a discussion of Harriet Martineau's 1830s reformist tours of the United States and closing with Twain's denunciation of Belgian imperial aggression in the early twentieth century. The book's first two chapters function as an extended introduction and carefully plot out the foundational terms of her argument: the interconnectedness of literary Anglo-America and the relation of reformist fiction to realist fiction. Five chapters on individual writers' engagements in purposeful fiction follow, and they impressively span from Dickens to Twain and Thomas Hardy, with studies of Anne Brontë, George Eliot, Henry James, and Elizabeth Stoddard along the way. Many of Claybaugh's case studies are unexpected and fresh. Rather than examining such true believers as William Dean Howells, one of the chief American exponents of purposeful fiction, Claybaugh instead analyzes ambivalent and even suspicious writers who complied with or resisted these generic expectations. In so doing, she shows how pervasive and even mandatory such

concessions were in a literary climate still suspicious of novels. In addition, Claybaugh provides illuminating and original interpretations of such reluctant reformist novels as Stoddard's *Morgesons* (1862) and Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), tracing how these writers adapted stock reform narratives and characters to their own political and novelistic ends.

The book is organized by a demonstrable interest in exploring the dynamics of literary pairings and couples. This manifests itself in the book's inquiry not only into the literary relations of England and the United States but also into the connections between individual pairs of writers who, though separated by the Atlantic, read and reviewed each others' works, as with the chapters devoted to the relationships between Brontë and Stoddard and between Eliot and James. Even chapters devoted to single authors evince this thematic of pairs; for example, in her chapter on Dickens, Claybaugh characterizes his disastrous 1842 tour of the United States as a turning point in his attitudes toward reformist fiction, and this pivot enables her to juxtapose his writings before and after his disillusionment with American life and manners. Typically, however, Claybaugh begins her chapters by introducing the relationships that link these pairs, examines them individually, and then recouples them thematically at the end of the chapters. Claybaugh nimbly manages what might be a strained arrangement in someone else's hands, and these pairs enable her to explore particular features of purposeful novels, such as their handling of the marriage plot or the expectation of exemplary characters.

*The Novel of Purpose* is densely packed with finely honed arguments and observations, but a few points merit mention. First, Claybaugh's discussion of realism is a refreshing and important contribution to a well-worked-over field. With admirable poise, she offers a precise and clear definition of realism, distinguishes Anglo-American from continental realism, and charts the complicated history of realist criticism over the last several decades. She differentiates her own work from the 1980s practice of analyzing the politics of realist writers,

such as Howells, James, and Wharton, only to pronounce them unacceptable; instead, Claybaugh steps away from this transhistorical critical practice to provide useful, historically rooted analyses of nineteenth-century writers within their own political contexts and within their own terms. Second, temperance narratives have received a revival of attention in recent years, and Claybaugh's contribution to the field is rich and fascinating. She dubs temperance reform "the storytelling reform" (p. 59) because of its reliance on narratives tracing ruinous poverty to alcohol consumption. She detects two pervasive narratives in temperance literature, and she shows how they came to be widely used by writers who adapted them to their own interests in marriage reform, as was the case with Stoddard and Brontë.

Claybaugh's chapter on Hardy is perhaps the least successful. It seeks to show how he, like Dickens, disavowed reformist fiction only to embrace its successes retroactively, but the argument is not well served by the chapter's organization, which is broken up into discrete sections on such topics as the New Woman and loses the argument's thread. The chapter, too, lacks the transatlantic dimension of the book's other chapters, though her reading of *Jude the Obscure* (1895) is no less significant.

These matters aside, *The Novel of Purpose* is well written, impressively researched, and wide ranging. Claybaugh offers an important and long overdue analysis of this novelistic genre, and her book deserves to rank among the finest recent contributions to transnational literary history.

#### Note

[1]. See Anna Brickhouse, *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

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**Citation:** Claudia Stokes. Review of Claybaugh, Amanda, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World*. H-SHGAP, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13868>

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