



Feeling New York: Classless urban geographies and affective capitalist reconciliation in Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*



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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging the productive impulses of the affective turn, this paper examines the affective impacts of urban architecture conveyed by Horatio Alger in his novel *Ragged Dick*. Without any strict adherence to a particular school of thought, I draw instead on those concepts and theories that promise enriching for an analysis of a nineteenth-century Bildungsroman and its socio-spatial representation of New York's architecture, for instance Central Park and Wall Street. The results underline the flexibility of the affective nexus used in literary geographies, finding the metropolis not as a passive dramaturgical backdrop but as an active agent, whose structural composition works towards the integration of its literary subjects into the affective discourses of its historical period and literary genre. Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* directs this very agency towards the protagonist's integration into the hegemonic structures of sentimentality. In the story, this becomes visible in the mythical abilities of empathy to transcend class divisions and the reconciliatory appeal of the capitalist ideology. Ultimately, affect and emotionality are used to maintain and perform the proper feelings for certain architectural structures, manifesting themselves as a sentimental performance of systemic allegiance.

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1. "I Myself Am Not a Dream": Introduction

Cut off as I am, it is inevitable that I should sometimes feel like a shadow walking in a shadowy world. When this happens I ask to be taken to New York City. Always I return home weary but I have the comforting certainty that mankind is real flesh and I myself am not a dream. — Helen Keller, Midstream: My Later Life

When the Norwegian Expressionist Edvard Munch created *Der Schrei der Natur* (*The Scream of Nature*) more than a century ago, it was understood by some as a depiction of the torment of existence in what appeared to the painter's contemporaries as an increasingly technocratic and godless world. Ever since, the Nietzschean demise of Western metaphysics and its cathartic ways of channeling emotionality through religious practice, the age of reason and scientific rationality, and the postmodern "waning of affect"¹ together have formed an epistemological and literary environment in which

sentimental writing is often viewed as a fatuous genre. Nonetheless, in spite of accusations of "bleeding heart" kitsch from twentieth-century naysayers (Solomon, 2004: ix), recent decades have witnessed several cultural turns that revived scholarly interest in the dynamics between affect, emotions, subjectivity, and their literary representation.

This renewed interest in the composition of feelings² is commonly subsumed under the term affective turn. Building upon Spinoza, Deleuze, and others, affective turn scholarship emphasizes the correspondence between the agential abilities of the body and the mind as well as the results of their interaction. Affective studies hence "illuminate [...] both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it" (Hardt, 2007: ix). This affective "power" of literature experienced a major concentration during the Gilded Age from the mid to late nineteenth century as advances in print technology enabled the mass production of more generally affordable books, making reading a more democratic pastime that increasingly included consumers across all classes. In the light of

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¹ By using the formula "waning of affect," Frederic Jameson denotes the "virtual deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself, which seems to have dominated much of what we call high modernism" (1984: 61).

² "Feelings" here refer to those emotions that are expressed through "an experience of 'feeling toward' [...]: the emotion is felt as being about an object, a person, or a situation—the objects, rather than bodily sensations, are the focus of one's emotional attention" (Proust, 2015: 2).

growing literacy rates, authors and publishers also saw the opportunity of catering to children and adolescent readers with new genres and formats like “broadsides, chapbooks, penny dreadfuls, series books, story papers, comics, and pulp fiction” (Baxter, 2011: 116). On the one hand, the works of authors like Mark Twain—by idealizing rebellious behavior and using ‘profane’ language and vernacular—were sometimes regarded as corrupting influences for the expanding demographic of adolescent Americans, a newly invented category and hotly debated issue of the time that harks back to several postbellum economic ‘panics’ as well as fears of moral deterioration through rising rates of unemployment, domestic migration, non-white immigration, urbanization, ghettoization, and juvenile delinquency. The next generation, some elites feared, was getting out of control and threatened to take the moral fabrics of the entire country down with them. In this historical moment, writers like Horatio Alger (1832–1899) made it their personal mission to counter these developments by confronting with their (in the case of Alger over one hundred) works the supposed moral-economic downward spiral of the nation’s youth. Alger concentrated his efforts particularly on the dire situation of young boys that lived on the streets and in the back alleys of New York City, scraping by from day to day by selling newspapers and polishing the shoes of the well-to-do.

Alger’s most successful novel *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks* was serialized in *Student and Schoolmate* journal in 1867. In the preface to its first full-length publication in the following year, Alger stressed the book’s intent to evoke “the sympathies of his readers in behalf of the unfortunate children whose life is described, and of leading them to co-operate with the praiseworthy efforts now making [sic] by the Children’s Aid Society and other organizations to ameliorate their condition” (1868: viii). In this paper, I argue that this appeal towards the empathy of Alger’s readership (and, of course, their checkbooks) is complemented by the ways in which the novel depicts the affective dynamics between its characters and its urban setting. This argument is brought forward in the conviction that a re-appraisal of the Gilded Age’s sentimental literature is needed not only in the light of the affective turn but also as an effort to gain a more complete understanding of the era’s idiosyncratic conjunctions between a turbo-capitalistic class society and the idea that the universality of emotions could somehow overcome the dividing lines between classes and thereby facilitate upwards mobility within a *laissez-faire* economy. In fact, what other city would be more qualified for such an inquiry than a literary rendition of New York’s ever-changing habitat, whose architectural magnificence and grandeur equally reflect back on its inhabitants, eliciting a highly emotionalized interplay between citizens from different economic backgrounds and the ostensibly lifeless materiality that surrounds them, and resulting in what Cynthia Ozick poetically termed “the synthetic sublime” (1999: 152). In fact, American authors have regularly likened the metropolis to a living organism that was, starting at the middle of the nineteenth century, increasingly seen as being infected with the disease of poverty caused by the exploitation of the growing ranks of the working classes. For instance, Jack London in *The People of the Abyss* describes with disgust Spitalfields Gardens in London, a public space that is overflowing with sleeping impoverished people: “‘A lung of London,’ I said; ‘nay, an abscess, a great putrescent sore’” (1903: 64).

In contrast to such emotional literary outbursts, it has been suggested that “the discipline of geography often presents us with an emotionally barren terrain, a world devoid of passion, spaces ordered solely by rational principles and demarcated according to political, economic or technical logics” (Bondi et al., 2007: 1). However, few would actually deny that our everyday architectural surroundings regularly engage in closely-knit entanglements with

our emotional life. The places that we love and those that we fear—spaces that we associate with past experiences and hopes for the future together constitute the patterns that form our human geographies of affect. In *Cities in Modernity*, Richard Dennis, for example, explains that “Brooklyn Bridge could be a place for romantic meetings but also the ideal location for suicide: a consummation of the individual’s new-found freedom, or of the city’s potential for alienation. [...] The bridge was a parable of what America could become, a moral as well as a mystical symbol” (2008: 7–8). Zooming in on this interplay between architecture and affect, this paper aims at bringing into focus Alger’s literary representation of socio-spatial interactions in order to historicize and theorize the cultural functions of New York’s literary geography during the Gilded Age. Acknowledging the productive impulses of the affective and spatial turns, I examine the impact of urban architecture on the text’s characters, plot, and central themes with the goal to arrive at a dialogical approach equivalent to Mikhail Bakhtin’s insight that “[t]ruth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (1984: 110; original emphasis).³ The results of this “dialogic interaction” in Alger’s novel underline the potential of affective studies to provide new perspectives on literary topics that are seen as already decoded and exhausted, hence energizing efforts of re-evaluating ‘classic’ works through the lenses of fresh methodological approaches. In the following examination of *Ragged Dick*, I contend that Alger writes the metropolis not as a passive dramatic backdrop but as an active agent that works towards the integration of its literary subjects into the era’s dominant discourses of time and space; or, in Bakhtin’s terminology, the era’s chronotopical⁴ landscape and the idea that “specific works are expressions of certain historically specific senses of space and time” (Brandist, 2002: 123). Alger’s novel uses the agency of affective spaces to integrate its protagonist into the capitalistic-hegemonic structures of buildings and cultural landscapes like Dick’s first apartment, a bank, an East River ferry, and Central Park. These environments are used to demonstrate the possibility of overcoming the deepening socio-economic fault lines of the Gilded Age and ‘rehabilitate’ the possibility of the precariat’s upwards mobility. Finally, Alger’s use of New York’s affective power turns into a performance of systemic allegiance, if not doxology of unfettered capitalism, by depicting the discursive exercise of affect mainly as a privilege of upper class members. In this conception, class transcendence for impoverished individuals is only possible through their willingness to submit to an elitist discourse, which prescribes the ‘proper’ exercise of emotionality via a person’s relationship with and reactions to certain spaces and their ingrained symbolic values.

2. Transcending class barriers through urban geography

What strikes contemporary readers of *Ragged Dick* is that the suffering and struggle of its subaltern bootblack characters is depicted chiefly as a personal tragedy that is detached from any discernible political macro-patterns or fundamental social

³ In the same vein, Marc Brousseau proposes that scholars of the geo-humanities should “move away from the analysis of how a particular novel writes *our* geography (or ‘geographical novel’), towards a dialogue with its specific way of writing people and places in their various interactions that may constitute a fictional geography in its own right (or ‘novel-geographer’)” (1995: 92; original emphasis).

⁴ Bakhtin defines the concept of the “chronotope (‘time space’) [as] the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. [...] [I]t expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)” (1981: 84).

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