

**‘He laid his left hand on his heart – the sword dropped from his right – he burst into tears’ (Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*). Is it reasonable to dismiss sentimental fiction as being unrealistic?
Answer with reference to one or more relevant texts.**

In the quotation from *The Man of Feeling* the word ‘unrealistic’ has a sense of criticising the overt emotional display which is being described. However, when considered in terms of Oliver Goldsmith’s poem *The Deserted Village* the dictionary definition of ‘unrealistic’ as “not representing things as they really are” (OED 1989: unrealistic) is more appropriate.

The poem’s title is the initial unrealistic element as although there has been much discussion about the location and identity of the village it is clearly an imagined place that is presented to the reader as genuine and intrinsically linked with the narrator’s life, past, present and future. This fiction undermines the gravitas of the work as it means Goldsmith is writing about depopulation in abstract rather than realist terms. The idealised pastoral view of this village has been subject to criticism, but nowhere more clearly than in George Crabbe’s poem *The Village* written in 1783 in which he claims to “paint the Cot / As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not” (line 53ff). According to Lutz, Crabbe’s accuses pastoral poems as “frivolously disregarding reality”, and suggests that the depiction of rural poverty in *The Village* “relegates [*The Deserted Village*] to insignificance” (1994:149).

Goldsmith’s rose-tinted view of the village concentrates on the beauty of the natural world and the leisure pursuits of its inhabitants rather than the drudgery of their daily labouring toils. The longest description of anyone performing their role in village life is the prolix passage describing the “village preacher” (line 140-198). These fifty-eight lines portray an individual whose charity knows no bounds and is apparently blessed with supernatural powers over his parishioners as “despair and anguish fled the struggling soul” (174) at his command. He was able to convert those “who came to scoff” (180), his mere appearance “adorned” the church, and “even his failings leaned to virtue’s side” (164). The portrayal of such a moral man would appeal to the sentimental audience, but its veracity is beyond belief and it must be seen as an unrealistic representation of any man.

Montague writes that Goldsmith is attempting to create a “composite picture” to show the “ravages of opulence in Britain by its effect upon the most vulnerable part of society” (1984:93ff) which could suggest that the details which make up Auburn are irrelevant and it is the wider theme of the poem that is important; if this is the case the phenomenon of depopulation should be considered. In the dedication Goldsmith writes that he is “certain of what I allege”, and that he “believes [the] miseries real” (26ff), these excerpts indicate that he acknowledges that opinion on depopulation is not clearly defined. Baines notes that contemporary reviewers were “sceptical” about the ideas of “rural depopulation”, but enthused about the poem as an “imaginative piece” (nd:1). Contemporary opinion can therefore be seen not to dismiss it, but to view it as unrealistic.

As a popular poem of the age Goldsmith has written “within certain traditions available to a poet” (Lutz 1994:151), and his inclusion of sentimentality is “an eighteenth-century commonplace” (Goldstein 1973:355). Montague views the entire work’s emotional appeal as “calculated to wring the withers of the reader” (1984:94), but the characters within the poem are also subject to emotional experiences: the homeless female in London has, in better times, “wept at tales of innocence distressed” (328) suggesting that she too has been moved by examples of contemporary sentimental fiction. In the dedication Goldsmith expresses his concern for the emotional state of his reader and explains his avoidance of writing a lengthy preface to allow for “unfatigued attention” (line 33) to be paid to the poem.

Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* was written a year later than this poem and its sentimentality caused one contemporary reader, Lady Louisa Stuart, to worry that on reading it she would not “cry enough to gain the credit of proper sensibility” (quoted in Bending & Bygrave 2001:xv). However by 1826 the opinion of sentimental writing had altered dramatically and the same emotive passages caused laughter rather than tears. This rapid change in interpretation indicates a more realistic view of the text, which remains to the current day, and it could be seen to emphasize the unrealistic emphases of sentimental literature.

In an “irrevocably lost” (Brewer 1997:651) world where “rural virtues [have left] the land”, and “Contented toil and hospitable care” (line 398ff) have disappeared Goldsmith describes poetry as being “Unfit in these degenerate times of shame” (line 409). If the reader accepts Goldsmith’s premise that the world of the poem is genuine then poetry is an unsuitable medium for expression, but *The Deserted Village* is a poem and indeed described as such in the dedication by Goldsmith. For Goldsmith to have written the poem he must see poetry as an appropriate form of expression, and if it is therefore fit for his age he cannot be writing in a degenerate or shameful epoch. The inclusion of these self-reflective lines must be seen to bring the premises which Goldsmith defends in his dedication and discusses in his earlier essay *The Revolution of Low Life* into question and create an unstable basis for the poem. This instability must also cast doubt on the realism of the work.

The nostalgic sentimentality of the poem could be seen to be a personal yearning for a world that never existed, but it must be remembered that Goldsmith himself had “moved from the peripheries to settle in London” (Trumpener 1997:16). Unlike the disaffected character in the poem, his presence in London saw his success as a writer during his life, which was also acknowledged after his death by a monument in Westminster Abbey. The hypocritical reality of Goldsmith’s criticisms is therefore more striking than the purported reality of the poem.

Overall the description of Auburn’s fate is portrayed in such extreme terms that it becomes a caricature of itself by presenting the downfall of the community in a grotesque manner. Treating the subject in this way undermines any factual basis to it, and the poem becomes nothing more than the imaginative piece of creative writing for which it was celebrated on its publication.

(1023 words)

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