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Course Title: American Realists

### **American Realists**

American captivity narratives in the previous century had been very popular and shaped an enduring image of the Orient for American readers. In the nineteenth century, American travellers to the MENA region aimed at describing the place and its people rather realistically but the influence of Romanticism is not very far.

William Mayo is an American author who visited North Africa and more precisely Morocco and penned an Oriental tale in 1850 titled: *The Berber or The Mountaineer of the Atlas: A Tale of Morocco*. He is also the author of *Kaloolah: or, Journeyings to the Djébel Kumri: an autobiography of Jonathan Romer* (1848).

He claims that *Mountaineer of the Atlas* is accurate and authentic about Moorish customs and not an Oriental tale in the Romantic sense as he clearly states in its preface:

#### **From William Mayo's *The Berber or The Mountaineer of the Atlas: A Tale of Morocco***

##### **Preface**

The principal object of the author, in the following pages, has been to tell an agreeable story in an agreeable way. In doing so, however, an eye has been had to the illustration of Moorish manners, customs, history and geography-to the exemplification of Moorish life as it actually is in Barbary in the present day, and not as it usually appears amid the vague and poetic glamour of the common Moorish romance. It has also been an object to the common Moorish romance. It has also been an object to introduce to the acquaintance of the reader a people who have played a most important part in the world's history, but of whom very few educated people know anything more than the name.

A few orthographical liberties may, perhaps, be noticed in the spelling of proper names and titles; but the orthography of Arabic words is so perfectly arbitrary, and the authorities so widely discrepant, that perhaps no apology is necessary for any oddities of the kind.

In relation to the historical incidents introduced or alluded to, however strange and incredible they may seem to readers living in a religious, political, and social state, so widely different, the author has only to say that they are well authenticated, and that there can be no question of their truth (7-8).

Mayo provides his American readers with slices of life in the Moroccan mountains, which portray North Africans in a better light than the familiar captivity narratives of the preceding century.

American Realist Mark Twain, best known for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* also visited North Africa and the Middle East as a journalist reporting on the daily lives of the American pilgrims on their European and Oriental tour. The result is a travel book, ***Innocents Abroad; or, the New Pilgrim's Progress (1869)***. It is an autobiographical account of the places and people of the East interspersed with criticism of American character.

### **From Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad; or, the New Pilgrim's Progress***

#### CHAPTER VIII.

This is royal! ...Tangier is the spot we have been longing for all the time.

Elsewhere we have found foreign-looking things and foreign-looking people, but always with things and people intermixed that we were familiar with before, and so the novelty of the situation lost a deal of its force... Here is not the slightest thing that ever we have seen save in pictures—and we always mistrusted the pictures before. We cannot anymore. The pictures used to seem exaggerations—they seemed too weird and fanciful for reality. But behold, they were **not wild enough**—they were **not fanciful enough**—they have not told half the story. Tangier is a foreign land if ever there was one, and the true spirit of it can never be found in any book save ***The Arabian Nights***. Here are no white men visible, yet swarms of humanity are all about us. Here is a packed and jammed city enclosed in a massive stone wall which is more than a thousand years old. All the houses nearly are one-and two-story, made of thick walls of stone, plastered outside, square as a dry-goods box, flat as a floor on top, no cornices, whitewashed all over—a crowded city of snowy tombs! And the doors are arched with the peculiar arch we see in Moorish pictures; the floors are laid in varicolored diamond flags; in tessellated, many-colored porcelain squares wrought in the furnaces of Fez; in red tiles and broad bricks that time cannot wear; there is no furniture in the rooms (of Jewish dwellings) save divans—what there is in Moorish ones no man may know; within their sacred walls no **Christian dog** can enter. Isn't it an **oriental picture**?

There are stalwart Bedouins of the desert here, and stately Moors proud of a history that goes back to the night of time; and Jews whose fathers fled hither centuries upon centuries ago; and swarthy Riffians from the mountains—born cut-throats—and original, genuine Negroes as black as Moses; and howling dervishes and a hundred breeds of Arabs—all sorts and descriptions of people that are foreign and curious to look upon. And their dresses are strange beyond all description. Here is a bronzed Moor in a prodigious white turban, curiously embroidered jacket, gold and crimson sash, of many folds, wrapped round and round his waist, trousers that only come a little below his knee and yet have twenty yards of stuff in them, ornamented scimitar, bare shins, stockingless feet, yellow slippers, and gun of preposterous length—a mere soldier!—I thought he was the Emperor at least. And here are aged Moors with flowing white beards and long white

robes with vast cowls; and Bedouins with long, cowled, striped cloaks; and Negroes and Riffians with heads clean-shaven except a kinky scalp lock back of the ear or, rather, upon the after corner of the skull; and all sorts of barbarians in all sorts of weird costumes, and all more or less ragged. And here are Moorish women who are enveloped from head to foot in coarse white robes, and whose sex can only be determined by the fact that they only leave one eye visible and never look at men of their own race, or are looked at by them in public. Here are five thousand Jews in blue gabardines, sashes about their waists, slippers upon their feet, little skullcaps upon the backs of their heads, hair combed down on the forehead, and cut straight across the middle of it from side to side—the selfsame fashion their Tangier ancestors have worn for I don't know how many bewildering centuries. Their feet and ankles are bare. Their noses are all hooked, and hooked alike. They all resemble each other so much that one could almost believe they were of one family. Their women are plump and pretty, and do smile upon a Christian in a way which is in the last degree comforting.

Mark Twain pretends to write an authentic travel book about what he himself witnessed, but the numerous references to *The Arabian Nights* and the repetition of stereotypes about wildness, fantasy and extravagance are characteristic of the persistence of Orientalist influences on American realistic literature about the Middle East and North Africa.

### Conclusion

After examining a large array of literary texts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century written by British and American authors about the Middle East and North Africa, the perception that can be inferred from their study appears to be in evolution. There is no stagnant or monolithic aspect about the orient, each period and every author displays a particular view of the Orient with specific purposes.

The image varies from a very negative one to a highly laudatory vision, sometimes even showing the superiority of the Orient over the West, as in Lady Montagu's *Turkish Letters*. *The Arabian Nights* wielded a definite influence on the nineteenth century whether for Romantic literature or even Realism, giving birth to stereotypes about the Orient that persist to the present time. The desert is also a powerful image associated with the MENA that is so persistent that, even nowadays, Western travellers expect to find sand dunes and camels right as they step out of ports of airports.

The perception of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries remains to be examined with the introduction of new notions such as fanaticism and terrorism.