

**Article**

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*Empire Falls* and How A Disillusioned Society of the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
Resorts to Romantic Tendencies

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**Abstract**

This paper is principally aimed at analyzing the theme of Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* in its relation with the socio-economic context of its publication in 2001, namely the economic recession that characterizes the earliest decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The analysis will be based on historical approach's assumption of the correlation between literary works and social context in which they are produced. Intrinsically, the novel is dissected into two levels. They are surface level (form) and deeper level (content). The results of the analysis are in the form of philosophical speculations of the novel, which are believed to follow the mood of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, including 1) disillusionment to social mobility, 2) incredulity to human agency, and 3) romantic tendencies. This novel's reaction to the decline of capitalism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to be similar to early romantic reaction to the rise of capitalism by returning to nature and resorting to external forces whether divine entity or otherwise.

Keywords: 21<sup>st</sup> century novel; American economic recession; romanticism.

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**1. Introduction**

*Empire Falls* is a novel about the main character Miles Roby's seemingly stagnated life in a dying small town named Empire Falls. The town's name is an apparent metaphor to the falling corporate empire in the town that is affecting the whole town's economy, setting the mood of despair and pessimism. Francine Whiting, the matriarch of the remains of the empire, is an effective detriment to Miles' life progress. Her manipulative and passive-aggressive nature traps Miles in a constant indecisiveness. Miles himself has to fight his internal urge to avoid conflicts with everyone, who later comes to the resolution when he no longer restrains his rage. Miles' stagnation, or even regress, is not an isolated case. Almost all characters are frustrated by failure to achieve progress.

Miles Roby, as well as the entire community of Empire Falls, easily represents American society in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The accumulated wealth from the preceding century has waned and the majority of people are disillusioned by established social and economic institutions, or in other words, the falling empire. Although critics also point out that instead of exploring the US political landscapes, *Empire Falls* appeals to a generation of readers that responds well with "individual woundedness", [1] it does not contradict this paper's position to consider the novel a manifesto of a disappointed and frustrated society.

*Empire Falls* was published in 2001, around the earliest days of the 2000s recession when the US economy experienced an economic downturn that first hit factory orders and the manufacturing industry. [2] The novel seems to be informed of this factual condition when it describes Empire Falls' decline being

induced by the collapse of the Whiting family's shirt factory. This economic downturn began a decade long recession that is later known as the Great Recession, when Americans became less wealthy than ever.[3]

The economic recession, both the factual and the fictional, plays a major role in setting the despairing mood as its impact goes beyond quantifiable wealth decline. The recession is demoralizing the society. As the US has weaker social safety net compared to other advanced economies, factory closing such as that in Empire Falls, means people losing health insurance, depletion of savings, unpaid bills, and losing home ownership; in short, it damages American inner life.[4]

## 2. Methods

The analysis of this study is based on the assumption that formal structure, in this case characters and themes, expresses philosophical speculations.[5] In reconstructing this philosophical speculation, the novel is intrinsically dissected into two levels. They are surface level (form) and deeper level (content). Characters and themes are analyzed for recurring pattern that forms the larger trend of the novel.[6] Interpretations are thus conducted based on the trend.

The historical approach is used as the underlying argument for the correlation between the novel and the historical background of its production. In this approach, literary texts are considered as "cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written".[7] Secondary data related to economic condition, particularly related to the 2000s Great Recession in the US, will be used as historical perspective to the novel's arguments.

## 3. Discussion

The society's despair in Empire Falls in the novel *Empire Falls* is evident from at least its plot, characters, setting, and tone. The progressive plot is regularly interrupted with flashbacks, creating a sense of constant negotiation between the present and the past and, in this case, stagnation. The characters are trapped in vicious cycle of wrong decisions and fatal degeneration. Settings are described as somber as possible with empty houses, abandoned buildings, and torn up town. The tone, as also noted by Giardina,<sup>1</sup> is almost monotone and forgettable. The choice of tone, instead of an unsuccessful aesthetics, is important in building the whole mood of despair and desperation.

They all contribute to the larger trend of how this novel responds to the factual economic recession in the United States. This paper categorizes this response into disillusionment to social mobility and incredulity to human agency. These characteristics can belong inclusively to romantic literature, but the romantic tendencies are discussed in separate sub-chapter for its particularity as a literary movement.

### 3.1. Disillusionment to Social Mobility

Miles Roby's life is actually designed to move upwards by his mother, Grace Roby. He is sent to college, which is described as something rare in Empire Falls. But fate, or at least Miles' self-sabotage tendencies, takes its course. Miles' mother has terminal illness and he decides to return home; the decision that is dreaded by his mother. This is the end of the dream of social mobility. "I don't cross that river every day of my adult life so my son can come running back to Empire Falls." [8]

The significance of the bridge and the river will be discussed later, but what Grace Roby means in this context is that he has worked hard crossing physical and mental pressure for one goal, that is to transform Miles' life. That statement comes days approaching Grace Roby's death, dramatizing her knowledge that most of her life goal falls to pieces.

This is not an exclusive phenomenon of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, intergenerational social mobility in the US has been in decline since the 1970s,[9] just like how intergenerational mobility between Grace Roby and Miles Roby stagnates. Miles fails to finish his education, an apparent premonition to his daunting future as most Americans believe that higher education plays a major role in social mobility.[10]

Other characters also face stagnation in their lives. In fact, they are more self-conscious than Miles Roby, who seems to be in oblivion about his situation. Janine Roby gets a divorce from Miles literally for the reason of stagnation. She then marries Walt Comeau, who Janine perceives to be wealthy. This is a deliberate attempt to use marriage as a means of social mobility.[11] As it turns out, Comeau almost poetically represents the crippling economy that is built upon shaky ground of mortgages and debts and looming collapse.

In addition to higher education and marriage, entrepreneurship is another means of social mobility[12] that is explored by the novel and, of course, fails. David Roby, Miles' brother, urges his brother from time to time to demand Francine Whiting for long-overdue promise to transfer ownership of the restaurant he manages. It never really materializes. Factors of production, to borrow Marxian terminologies, remains under the control of the old order. The resolution of the novel indicates the characters' acceptance. Changes did not happen to the objective reality, but instead to consciousness. It is a phenomenological instead of material breakthrough.

### *3.2. Incredulity to Human Agency*

C. B. Whiting, the last patriarch of the Whitings, fights hard in a war against watershed next to his house. This is a symbolic war between science/engineering against nature, which reminisces early romantic movement. And similar to most romantic narratives, nature refuses to surrender to human intervention. C. B. Whiting concedes his futile efforts and the very river he tries to engineer kills her wife.

The whole conflict of the novel is mainly built upon the premises of man against nature.[13] Even though arguably most of the conflicts are rooted in man-made socio-economic problems, characters often perceive them as invincible external force. The economic failure, as well as the science/engineering failure, is just a symptom of omnipotent antagonism beyond humanity.

At the end of a second hour spent kneeling at the river's edge, he concluded that he had an enemy all right, and it was none other than God Himself, who'd designed the damn river in such a way.<sup>8</sup>

He further decides his position facing the conflict:

About the best he could do was contemplate the possibility that it had been unwise to go to war with God. If He could deliver unto you an unwanted moose, what was to prevent Him from delivering something even worse.<sup>8</sup>

The failure of science/engineering leads to a surrender to God. In this analysis, "God" is interpreted as universe/nature considering the nuances it carries throughout the novel. C. B. Whiting and other characters tend to refer to "God" to represent a general concept of powerful external force instead of an anthropomorphic God.

The conflict against nature is mainly signified by the river that separates the Whitings residence from the rest of the town. As quoted, the river is recognized by C. B. Whiting as antagonizing him personally. The antagonism is completed by the end of the novel when Francine Whiting is swept by the river to her

death as another case of struggle between human and nature. Francine's failure to evacuate from unavoidable natural disaster negates the characters' prowess that embodies the ideas of human agency.

Less obviously, the river intervenes as a de facto barrier between the residence of the Whitings and the rest of the town, making social divides more transcendental rather than profane. Grace Roby tries to cross the river literally and metaphorically (moving upwards across social classes) when she is about to accept C. B. Whiting's offer to leave Empire Falls together. For a number of complicated reasons, Grace fails to accomplish her intention. The novel depicts the abrupt change just seconds after Grace crosses the river. It is in this crucial moment that the narrative time and again contemplates that human can never actually overcome Nature.

### 3.3. Romantic Tendencies

*Empire Falls'* general pattern is consistent with the tradition of American romantic movement. How the novel reacted to the disillusionment of capitalism ironically has similar characteristics with how romantic literature reacted to the rise of capitalism in the US, which was described by Thoreau as, "...the disfigurement of nature, alienation from one's labor, and a pervasive feeling that men no longer controlled their own lives." [14] These three characteristics are the forefront themes of the novel. The river was disfigured from its natural course by C. B. Whiting. No one is happy with their jobs but has no choice other than doing them for the sole purpose of survival. Finally, as discussed in previous sub-chapter, characters are made unable to control their own lives.

This pattern is also consistent with the emergence of romantic movement in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. [15] The rapid development of commercial society from the Elizabethan period, followed by endless tradition of rationalism during Augustan period, were antecedents to strong reaction against intellectualism. Romantic writers chose nature in the dichotomy of nature/culture. Just like preferred physical locations of romantic works, the isolated rural island of Martha's Vineyard becomes object of an extreme desire for Miles Roby. After the catastrophic school shooting occurs, which is likely an indication of failed "culture", Miles takes his daughter to the healing "nature" of Martha's Vineyard for recovery.

*Empire Falls* goes even further with the character Cindy Whiting. During the advanced stage of the Romantic period in England, the exploration to dark thoughts result in characters such as Frankenstein. Cindy Whiting is Frankenstein in many ways. Her disability makes Cindy Whiting, who is supposed to be the heir of the most affluent family in Empire Falls, marginalized by the society, if not completely considered as subhuman. She is rejected by the society as a result of her creator's mistake, in this case her own father who hit her with a car. Cindy Whiting is the solitary confinement obsessed by the Romantics.

## 4. Conclusions

As demonstrated in the discussion, *Empire Falls* is consistent with the general mood of disillusioned society in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Disappointments in economic and social institutions undermine typical modern worldview, such as the belief in human agency, into more deterministic in tone. As reflected by the characters, individuals are often forced to accept that they are powerless against "nature".

Further sociological study to other literary works in the same period is needed to prove the prevalence of the phenomenon. The result will be a significant contribution to the study of history of literature. Historically, the development of romantic literature, both in England and in the United States, coincided with a shift to commercial society and the rise of capitalism. The aforementioned study will prove whether the decline of capitalism, or at least the crises of it, also induces a romantic movement.

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