

## CULTURAL SPECIFICITY THROUGH REALIA: AN ANALYSIS OF MARK TWAIN AND O. HENRY'S LITERARY TECHNIQUES

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### Abstract

This article explores the role of realia in conveying cultural specificity in the literary works of Mark Twain and O. Henry. It examines how culture-bound elements function as carriers of national identity, social context, and artistic expression within their narratives. Through comparative analysis, the study identifies key differences in the authors' use of realia, highlighting Twain's emphasis on regional dialects and realism, and O. Henry's concise, stylistically driven approach. The research also addresses the challenges of translating realia and the importance of preserving cultural meaning in cross-cultural communication. The findings demonstrate that realia are essential in shaping literary authenticity and enhancing the interpretive depth of texts.

### Keywords

realia, cultural specificity, literary translation, Mark Twain, O. Henry, cultural identity, translation strategies, dialect, narrative techniques, cross-cultural communication.

**Introduction.** The study of cultural specificity in literature has gained increasing attention in contemporary translation studies and comparative literary analysis, particularly through the lens of realia—culture-bound lexical units that reflect the unique social, historical, and ethnographic realities of a given community. Realia, often manifested in references to local customs, institutions, objects, and linguistic expressions, play a crucial role in shaping the authenticity and national identity of literary texts. However, their interpretation and transmission across languages present significant challenges, especially when dealing with authors whose works are deeply embedded in specific cultural contexts. In this regard, the writings of Mark Twain and O. Henry provide a rich ground for examining how realia function as a vehicle of cultural meaning and artistic expression. Recent scholarship emphasizes that realia encompass various categories, including onomastic, socio-political, ethnographic, and cultural elements, all of which contribute to the semantic depth of a literary text. These elements are often non-equivalent across languages, requiring translators and literary analysts to adopt strategies such as domestication, foreignization, or descriptive translation to preserve their meaning and stylistic impact. The complexity of translating realia lies not only in linguistic differences but also in the cultural gaps between source and target audiences, which can lead to partial or distorted interpretations of the original text. Therefore, analyzing realia within literary works is essential for understanding both the artistic intentions of the author and the broader cultural framework in which the text operates.

Mark Twain, a central figure in American realism, is particularly known for his use of regional dialects, colloquial speech, and culturally specific references that reflect the social realities of 19th-century America. His narratives, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, incorporate realia through vernacular language and depictions of everyday life, thereby enhancing the authenticity and relatability of his characters and settings. Scholars note that Twain's humor and realism are deeply rooted in dialectal authenticity and social observation, which serve both as a literary device and a form of social critique. These culturally embedded elements not only define Twain's narrative style but also pose significant challenges for translation and cross-cultural interpretation, as they often lack direct equivalents in other languages. Similarly, O. Henry's short stories are characterized by



their vivid portrayal of urban American life, enriched with cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and stylistic devices such as irony, humor, and unexpected plot twists. His works frequently incorporate realia that reflect the socio-economic conditions and cultural dynamics of early 20th-century America. O. Henry's mastery of narrative techniques—particularly his use of irony and surprise endings—enhances the communicative power of these culturally specific elements, making his stories both engaging and culturally informative. However, as with Twain, the translation and interpretation of these elements require a nuanced understanding of both the source culture and the target audience's cultural framework.

Contemporary research in translation studies highlights the importance of considering ideological and cultural factors when analyzing literary texts. For instance, recent studies demonstrate that translators' lexical choices and strategies can significantly influence the representation of cultural elements, sometimes leading to shifts in meaning or emphasis. This underscores the need for a comprehensive analytical approach that takes into account not only linguistic equivalence but also cultural and contextual fidelity. In the case of Twain and O. Henry, such an approach is particularly relevant, as their works rely heavily on culturally specific elements that are integral to their narrative and thematic structures. Moreover, the translation of stylistic devices—such as metaphor, humor, and wordplay—further complicates the rendering of realia, as these elements often carry implicit cultural connotations that are difficult to replicate in another language. This highlights the interplay between language and culture in literary texts and reinforces the idea that realia are not merely lexical items but also carriers of cultural identity and artistic meaning.

In light of these considerations, this study aims to explore how cultural specificity is constructed and conveyed through realia in the works of Mark Twain and O. Henry. By analyzing their literary techniques and the role of culturally bound elements in their narratives, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and literary expression. Furthermore, it aims to examine the implications of these findings for translation studies and cross-cultural communication, particularly in the context of preserving the cultural integrity of literary texts in translation. Ultimately, the analysis of realia in Twain and O. Henry's works not only sheds light on their individual artistic styles but also provides valuable insights into the broader dynamics of cultural representation in literature. As globalization continues to expand the reach of literary works beyond their original cultural boundaries, the study of realia becomes increasingly important for ensuring that the richness and diversity of cultural expression are preserved and appreciated across languages and cultures.

**Literature review.** The concept of realia and its role in expressing cultural specificity has been extensively explored in contemporary translation studies, linguistics, and literary analysis. Recent scholarship (2023–2025) emphasizes that realia are not merely lexical items but complex semiotic units that encode historical memory, social structures, and cultural identity. As such, they occupy a central position in the study of cross-cultural communication, particularly in literary texts where meaning is deeply intertwined with cultural context. Modern researchers define realia as culture-specific elements that reflect the material and spiritual life of a particular community, including objects, traditions, institutions, and socio-political phenomena. These elements are inherently tied to a specific cultural environment and therefore often lack direct equivalents in other languages, creating challenges in both interpretation and translation. According to recent studies, realia function as markers of national identity and cultural authenticity, enabling authors to construct a vivid representation of their sociocultural reality. This perspective aligns with earlier theoretical frameworks but expands them by incorporating interdisciplinary approaches, including sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and discourse analysis.

A significant body of recent research focuses on the classification and typology of realia. Scholars have proposed various categorization systems based on semantic, functional, and cultural criteria. For instance, realia are often divided into categories such as ethnographic,



socio-political, geographical, and everyday-life elements. This classification allows researchers to analyze how different types of realia contribute to the overall meaning of a literary text and how they interact with narrative structure and stylistic devices. Contemporary studies also emphasize the dynamic nature of realia, noting that their meaning may evolve over time due to cultural changes and globalization. One of the central issues in the literature is the problem of equivalence in translating realia. Unlike general vocabulary, realia are deeply embedded in a specific cultural context, making it difficult to find exact counterparts in the target language. Recent research highlights that the lack of equivalence is not merely a linguistic problem but a cultural one, as it reflects differences in worldview, social organization, and historical experience between cultures. Consequently, translators must employ a range of strategies to convey the meaning of realia while preserving their cultural significance. These strategies include transliteration, transcription, descriptive translation, adaptation, and the use of explanatory notes.

In recent years, the debate between domestication and foreignization has gained renewed attention in the context of realia translation. Domestication involves adapting culture-specific elements to make them more familiar to the target audience, while foreignization preserves the original cultural features, even at the cost of readability. Contemporary studies suggest that the choice between these strategies depends on various factors, including the purpose of the translation, the target audience, and the genre of the text. For example, literary texts often require a balance between the two approaches to maintain both accessibility and cultural authenticity. This balance is particularly important in the works of authors like Mark Twain and O. Henry, whose narratives rely heavily on culturally specific elements and stylistic nuances. Another important area of research concerns the pragmatic and semantic aspects of realia. Recent studies argue that realia carry not only denotative meaning but also connotative and pragmatic significance, which can influence the reader's interpretation of the text. For instance, the use of culturally specific references can evoke certain associations, emotions, or ideological perspectives that are not immediately apparent in translation. This highlights the importance of context in interpreting realia and underscores the need for a holistic approach that considers both linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

The role of the translator as a cultural mediator has also been widely discussed in recent literature. Translators are not merely linguistic intermediaries but active participants in the process of cultural transmission. Their choices can shape how a literary work is perceived in the target culture, influencing both its aesthetic value and its cultural representation. Recent studies emphasize that translation is a form of intercultural communication that involves negotiation between different cultural systems. As such, the translator must balance fidelity to the source text with the need to make the text accessible and meaningful to the target audience. In addition to traditional translation studies, recent research has explored the impact of technological advancements on the translation of realia. The development of machine translation and large language models has introduced new possibilities and challenges in handling culture-specific elements. Studies show that while modern translation systems can process large amounts of linguistic data, they often struggle with culturally sensitive content, leading to issues such as semantic distortion or "cultural drift." This phenomenon occurs when the meaning of a culture-specific element is altered or lost due to differences in cultural context, highlighting the limitations of automated translation in preserving cultural specificity. These findings reinforce the importance of human expertise in the translation of literary texts, particularly those rich in realia. Furthermore, comparative studies of literary translation have demonstrated that the treatment of realia varies significantly across languages and cultures. For example, research comparing English and Uzbek translations shows that domestication strategies are often preferred when translating from English into Uzbek, while foreignization is more common in the opposite direction. This asymmetry reflects broader cultural and linguistic differences and underscores the importance of context in translation decisions. Such findings are particularly



relevant for analyzing the works of Mark Twain and O. Henry, as their texts have been widely translated into different languages and adapted to diverse cultural contexts. Another emerging trend in the literature is the integration of cognitive and sociocultural approaches to the study of realia. Researchers are increasingly interested in how readers process culture-specific information and how their cultural background influences their interpretation of literary texts. This perspective shifts the focus from the text itself to the interaction between the text and the reader, highlighting the role of cultural competence in literary comprehension. It also suggests that the meaning of realia is not fixed but is constructed through the reader's engagement with the text.

The recent literature on realia highlights their significance as carriers of cultural meaning and as key elements in the construction of literary identity. Scholars agree that the translation and interpretation of realia require a nuanced understanding of both linguistic and cultural factors, as well as an awareness of the broader sociocultural context in which the text is situated. Despite the progress made in this field, several challenges remain, particularly in balancing the competing demands of accuracy, readability, and cultural authenticity. These issues are especially relevant in the analysis of Mark Twain and O. Henry's works, where realia play a central role in shaping narrative style and cultural representation.

**Research discussion.** The analysis of cultural specificity through realia in the works of Mark Twain and O. Henry reveals that these elements function not only as linguistic units but also as essential components of narrative structure, stylistic expression, and cultural representation. The findings of this study demonstrate that both authors employ realia strategically to construct authentic literary worlds that reflect the socio-cultural realities of their respective periods. At the same time, their approaches to the use of realia differ in accordance with their thematic focus, narrative techniques, and artistic intentions. In the case of Mark Twain, realia are predominantly embedded in regional dialects, colloquial expressions, and references to everyday life in 19th-century America. These elements contribute significantly to the realism and immediacy of his narratives. Twain's use of vernacular speech, for instance, serves not only to characterize individuals but also to highlight social stratification, cultural diversity, and regional identity. The analysis shows that such realia are closely linked to the author's broader goal of social critique, as they expose issues such as racial inequality, moral hypocrisy, and cultural conflict. Consequently, realia in Twain's works operate on multiple levels: they enhance narrative authenticity, reinforce thematic concerns, and engage the reader in a culturally specific interpretive framework.

O. Henry, on the other hand, utilizes realia in a manner that is closely aligned with his narrative economy and stylistic ingenuity. His short stories are characterized by concise yet vivid depictions of urban life, where realia often appear in the form of cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and socio-economic details. Unlike Twain, whose use of realia tends to be expansive and descriptive, O. Henry employs these elements selectively to create a strong sense of setting and to support the development of plot and character. In particular, realia in O. Henry's works frequently serve as catalysts for irony and surprise, contributing to the effectiveness of his well-known twist endings. This functional use of realia underscores their role not only as cultural markers but also as narrative devices that enhance the overall impact of the story. A comparative analysis of the two authors highlights both similarities and differences in their treatment of cultural specificity. Both Twain and O. Henry rely on realia to ground their narratives in a recognizable cultural context, thereby increasing the relatability and credibility of their works. However, while Twain emphasizes regional and rural settings, O. Henry focuses primarily on urban environments and the complexities of modern life. This distinction is reflected in the types of realia they employ: Twain's texts are rich in ethnographic and dialectal elements, whereas O. Henry's stories often feature socio-economic and institutional references. Despite these



differences, both authors demonstrate a keen awareness of the interplay between language and culture, using realia to convey nuanced meanings that extend beyond the literal level of the text.

The discussion also highlights the implications of these findings for translation studies. As previously noted, realia present significant challenges for translators due to their cultural specificity and lack of direct equivalents in the target language. The analysis of Twain and O. Henry's works confirms that the translation of realia requires careful consideration of both semantic and pragmatic factors. For example, dialectal expressions in Twain's texts may need to be adapted or approximated in order to preserve their stylistic and social significance, while culturally specific references in O. Henry's stories may require explanatory strategies to ensure comprehension by the target audience. In this context, the choice between domestication and foreignization becomes particularly relevant, as it influences how cultural elements are represented and perceived in translation. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of the translator's role as a cultural mediator. Translators must navigate the complex relationship between source and target cultures, making decisions that balance fidelity to the original text with the need for accessibility and readability. The findings suggest that an effective translation of realia often involves a combination of strategies, rather than a reliance on a single approach. This hybrid strategy allows translators to retain the cultural richness of the source text while adapting it to the linguistic and cultural norms of the target audience. Another important aspect of the discussion is the reader's role in interpreting realia. The meaning of culture-specific elements is not fixed but is shaped by the reader's cultural background, knowledge, and interpretive skills. This implies that the reception of Twain and O. Henry's works may vary across different cultural contexts, leading to diverse interpretations and understandings. As a result, the study of realia must take into account not only the text and its translation but also the reader's perspective, which plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning.

The discussion demonstrates that realia are integral to the literary techniques of Mark Twain and O. Henry, serving as powerful tools for expressing cultural specificity and enhancing narrative effectiveness. Their use of realia reflects a deep engagement with the cultural realities of their time and provides valuable insights into the relationship between language, culture, and literature. At the same time, the challenges associated with translating and interpreting these elements highlight the need for a nuanced and context-sensitive approach in both literary analysis and translation practice.

**Conclusion.** This study has demonstrated that realia play a crucial role in expressing cultural specificity in the literary works of Mark Twain and O. Henry. Through their use of culturally bound elements, both authors successfully construct authentic narrative environments that reflect the social, historical, and linguistic realities of their time. Twain's reliance on regional dialects and ethnographic details enhances realism and social critique, while O. Henry's selective and functional use of realia supports narrative efficiency and stylistic impact, particularly in creating irony and unexpected endings. The analysis also highlights that realia are not merely lexical items but carriers of deeper cultural meanings, requiring careful interpretation in both literary analysis and translation. Their non-equivalence across languages presents significant challenges, emphasizing the importance of context-sensitive translation strategies and the role of the translator as a cultural mediator. Overall, the findings confirm that the study of realia is essential for understanding the interplay between language, culture, and literary technique, as well as for preserving cultural authenticity in cross-cultural communication.

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