Walt Whitman’s American Realism

American realism is a simple but complicated genre of writing. American realism can seem so simple due to the fact that all the writing for tales is everyday social realities but, realism can get a lot more complicated. From a philosophical standpoint it is extremely difficult to make words feel like a reality. Walt Whitman was a very impactful writer in the civil war time period and he carried a usual positive and uplifting tone on his views of America. Even though Walt Whitman was a pioneer in American realism for his time period, realism is still prominent in today’s books, songs, and movies. An example of modern American realism is Why Nations Fail by Daron Acemoglu which explores America and how it’s economic inequality intertwines with political inequality. Walt Whitman also has two popular poems that show different themes of realism which are “I Hear America Singing” and “A Child Said, What is the Grass?”. In Walt Whitman’s poems“I Hear America Singing” and “A Child Said, What is the Grass?” and in Daron Acemoglu’s book Why Nations Fail, common themes of American realism including extreme perceptions on life as it truly is, showing working middle class beliefs, and addressing social and political problems are all prominent throughout the works.

Firstly, the piece of literature that best coincides with the theme of having extreme and specific ideas on life would be Walt Whitman’s poem “A Child Said, What is the Grass?” because of the narrator’s interesting take on life. The poem is about a child asking the narrator a simple question “What is the grass?”. The narrator proceeds to think about the question but can not give a certain or clear answer of what the grass truly is. The narrator is trying to find a real convincing answer but he himself can not give a definite answer, but instead personifies the grass saying things like “Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic, And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones”(Manwell 28). This quote proves the point that the narrator is just saying whatever comes to mind by saying “I guess”. Just because the narrator is saying whatever comes to his mind doesn’t mean his words do not have meaning. The grass that the child is asking about is actually representing life and death. Even though the narrator is a grown man he still has the same question as the child even though he is still trying to answer that question. When looking closer at quotes like “And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.”(29), one can see that the narrator has a very interesting input on life. The quote means that grass which represents life does not die for no reason. The narrator is explaining in broad terms that everything happens for a reason. In conclusion, the poem “A Child Said, What is the Grass?” by Walt Whitman stays true to the American realism theme of having very specific ideas on reality and life.

Second off, the next piece of literature that best utilizes another American realism theme of highlighting the working middle class is “I Hear America Singing” by Walt Whitman because of how he displays what different middle class workers are doing in this pre civil war time period. One can understand that Whitman is talking about the middle class based off of some of the jobs his characters have including a carpenter, a mason, and a wood-cutter. The quote “The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat,..”(28) shows many similarities between all the workers. First they are all hard working and doing their job that is respectable. Second, all the workers are happy and are all singing a joyful song. All the workers are singing their own happy, unique song which represents how everyone in America is free and happy to do what they please. All the different workers represent how everyone can come together singing to make

one big song just like the symbolic melting pot, which is what America is all about. This proof shows that Walt Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing" has the common theme of American realism of showing off the middle class common man and or woman.

Lastly, Daron Acemoglu's book Why Nations Fail has the theme of bringing up social and political issues in a modern American realism way by talking about our inequalities. America wasn't always a thriving country like it is considered to be today. The book also brings up many different ideologies on why certain countries do not prosper. But, focusing on America, this book concerns itself with the great economic inequality from the elites to the poor. The quote "NATIONS FAIL TODAY because their extractive economic institutions do not create the incentives needed for people to save, invest, and innovate. "(Acemoglu 372) brings up a social issue that is common to hear today. Acemoglu is trying to say that if a government assists the people with certain things like the costs of research development it will help the economy, making the nation thrive. This evidence proves how American realism is still alive today in literature and how it is still addressing social and political problems.

In conclusion, Walt Whitman's works of "I Hear America Singing" and "A Child Said, What is the Grass?" and Daron Acemoglu's book Why Nations Fail all have certain American realism themes including specific ideas on life as it truly is, illustrating working middle class beliefs, and facing social and political struggles are all present throughout the pieces of works. Walt Whitman's "A Child Said, What is the Grass?" brings up the narrator's specific opinions on life itself. "I Hear America Singing" by Walt Whitman demonstrates the working middle class in America and what they were doing at this time. Lastly, Why Nations Fail by Daron Acemoglu is an example of current modern realism, addressing today's social and political problems. To wrap everything up, American realism is and was a great thought provoking genre about the social realities in the great America.