

## IMPRESSIONISM

The term derived from a label applied in 1874 by a hostile critic to an exhibition of innovative French painters in Paris. The major Impressionists included Monet, Seurat, Manet, Degas, Renoir, Pissaro and the American Mary Cassatt. Rather than duplicating the known characteristics of objects, Impressionist painters rejected conventional academic techniques and undertook to paint objects as they *appear* to the artist in a particular moment and mood, from a particular vantage point in a particular light. They studied optics and the effects of light.

Instead of painting a tree with a gray or brown trunk because everyone knows tree trunks are gray or brown, the Impressionists were empirical. They painted the *appearance* of the tree as they perceived it, increasing Realism. Monet, setting up his easel at the same position on each occasion, painted the facade of Rouen Cathedral at various times of day as the light changed, a striking example of Impressionism on display in the small museum near the Louvre. Impressionists were not “artistically correct” and were never accepted in the Louvre. The situation is comparable to the revolution initiated by Galileo looking through his telescope. It also recalls the Medieval student who questioned his scholastic professor’s description of a horse and actually went out, looked into the mouth of a horse and counted its teeth.

### IMPRESSIONISM IN AMERICAN FICTION

Many Realist fiction writers adopted techniques they observed in Impressionist paintings, including DeMaupassant, Flaubert, Chekhov, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Crane actually lived with Impressionist painters in New York. He once remarked to his brother, “Will, isn’t that cloud green?... But they wouldn’t believe it if I put it in a book.” In fiction, Impressionism was an extension of the Realist movement, a set of techniques for more effectively evoking real life as it is actually experienced.

(1) Impressionism is the “high” offshoot of Realism with poetic aesthetics that led to Modernism, whereas (2) Naturalism is the “low” offshoot because it led to lesser works of art. Victims in Naturalist novels decline into destruction according to deterministic philosophy as if by a rigid formula. Determinism is mechanical, reductive and predictable, whereas Impressionism is organic, expansive and unpredictable--more vivid and lifelike, advancing the art of fiction. The Impressionist movement in fiction was paralleled by Imagism in poetry, initiated by Stephen Crane and taken up by Pound.

Mark Twain became impressionistic when he narrated through Huckleberry Finn, but he did not share the aesthetics of the Impressionists. Henry James asked only that a novel be interesting, but he also said, “A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a distinct impression of life: that...constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression.” James originated the Impressionist “Method” of narrating from the restricted perspective of a character with limited awareness, in contrast to the omniscient narrator in Victorian and in Naturalist fiction.

Impressionism allowed James and the other Realists to experiment with point of view and become innovative otherwise in ways that evolved through Expressionism into Modernism. In striking contrast to the rambling Victorian novel in Britain and to literal-minded documentary Naturalist novels, Impressionist fiction became more vivid, economical, poetic and complex. All the American Impressionists engaged Naturalism, they agreed that it applied in some cases, but they all rejected its aesthetics and its absolute denial of free will. In “The Beast in the Jungle” by James the beast is the realization by Marcher that he had free will and missed his life because he failed to assert it. As James developed an increasingly elaborate abstract style, his pictorial Impressionism diminished, whereas Wharton remained more visual, though her Impressionism is sometimes reduced by psychological analysis and descriptive detailing.

The interaction of Naturalistic themes with Impressionist techniques create a dynamic tension in *The Awakening* by Chopin and in most of Stephen Crane. Chopin adds lyricism to express the romanticism of characters and to render exotic atmospheres, whereas Crane tends to sustain understatement to generate ironies. Crane is the purest Impressionist in American literature and carries techniques of Impressionism

the farthest--to the extent of fragmenting consciousness. Chopin is the only peer of Crane in the extent to which her finest art illustrates characteristics of Impressionism. Due in part to his extreme Impressionistic compression, Crane attains irony more frequently than any other Americans except Porter and O'Connor. Most of the masterpieces of American Impressionism are short novels, including *Daisy Miller*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Awakening*, *Ethan Frome*, and *The Great Gatsby*.

It is mainly the memorable, vivid Impressionism that made *Gatsby* the most popular model for a literary novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fitzgerald is a lyrical stylist with Impressionism as a component of his repertoire, which in *Gatsby* also includes the 'mythic method' of the Modernists. Gordon enhances her essentially Realist fictions with Expressionism, as in *The Women on the Porch*. The great short novels by Porter and O'Connor contain Impressionism, but are more precisely described as Expressionistic Modernism: *Old Mortality*; *Noon Wine*; *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*; *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPRESSIONISM IN FICTION

1. Point of view restricted mostly to a character with limited awareness
2. This character's awareness grows or fails to grow
3. Effacement of the author to increase objectivity
4. Brevity and economical selection of significant detail
5. Short units of composition
6. More similes, metaphors and symbols, increasing implications
7. Abundance of imagery, especially visual
8. Vividness, spontaneity, naturalness, animation, contrasts and primary colors
9. Blurriness of peripheral details
10. Larger context omitted but implicit
11. More showing, less telling
12. Rapid movement
13. Irony

#### REALISM, IMPRESSIONISM, NATURALISM, EXPRESSIONISM

1. The Realist tries to report truth from a normative collective viewpoint as if objectively detached from the stream of life, focusing upon the commonplace and representative. Like a reporter.
2. The Impressionist tries to render truth from a representative individual point of view as if subjectively carried along in the stream of life, focusing upon vivid elements. Like a painter.
3. The Naturalist tries to reveal truth from a cosmic vantage point as if scientifically analyzing the stream of life, focusing upon extremes. Like a philosopher.
4. The Expressionist tries to express truth from a personal point of view as if deeply submerged in the stream of life. Like a dreamer.

The Realist tries not to distort the consensus view of reality. The Impressionist tries to convey a representative impression of reality without distorting the consensus view. The Expressionist tries to express a personal view by distorting the consensus view. The Naturalist may distort the consensus view to a lesser extent than the Expressionist in order to reveal general truth beyond the limited consensus view. In some writers—such as Crane, Chopin and Wharton—these modes coincide in synthesis, which became a characteristic of Modernism.

Michael Hollister (2015)

#### DEFINITIONS

“Impressionism: The term comes from a doctrine started in France in the first half of the nineteenth century, that a picture should record the immediate sensuous impressions made upon the painter when he looks at the objects which he is representing, and should not be a conventional representation of extraneous facts which may be known from sources other than direct visual experience.”

A. F. Scott  
*Current Literary Terms*  
(Macmillan/St. Martin's 1965)

“Impressionism: A highly personal manner of writing in which the author presents materials as they appear to an individual temperament at a precise moment and from a particular vantage point rather than as they are presumed to be in actuality. The term is borrowed from painting. About the middle of the nineteenth century the French painters Manet, Monet, Degas, Renoir, and others revolted against the conventional academic doctrines and held that it was more important to retain the impressions that an art object makes on the artist than to present the appearance of that object by precise detail and careful, realistic finish. Their special concern was with the use of light on their canvases. They suggested the chief features of an object with a few strokes; they were more interested in atmosphere than in perspective or outline....

The movement had its counterpart in literature, writers accepting the same conviction that the personal attitudes and moods of the writer were legitimate elements in depicting character, setting, or action. The literary Impressionist holds that the registration of such elements as these through the fleeting impression of a moment is more significant artistically than a photographic presentation. The object of the Impressionist, then, is to present material not as it is to the objective observer but as it is seen or felt to be by the Impressionist or character in a single moment. The Impressionistic writer employs highly selective details, the ‘brush strokes’ of sense-data that can suggest impressions. In poetry Impressionism was an important aspect of the work of the Imagists; in fiction it is present in the works of such writers as Henry James, Oscar Wilde, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf and in the ‘Camera Eye’ sections of Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*”

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon  
*A Handbook to Literature*, 6th edition  
(Macmillan 1936-92)

“Impressionism: a movement in painting, music, and literature whose aim was to force the beholder, listener, or reader to participate in recreating the experience of the artist and whose method was to suggest the ‘impression’ or effect on the artist rather than to make precise and explicit the objective characteristics of things or events. Popularized in France in the latter half of the 19th century by the painters...Degas, Manet, Monet, Pissaro, and Renoir, the movement took its name from Monet’s painting of a sunrise, *Impression: Soleil Levant* (1874). These artists achieved their distinctive effects by their use of color and sketchy lines, in a ‘sort of pictorial stenography, disdainful of details which a rapid vision cannot seize.’ Debussy and Ravel represent the musicians of this group. Their compositions are intended to evoke a mood rather than to present a logical structure and are marked by great delicacy and striking chromatic effects.

In literature, the term has been applied loosely to the symbolist and Imagist poets and to writers using the stream-of-consciousness technique. Their method is to present through vivid peripheral details the immediate impression of experience derived from the senses without analysis or synthesis, the impression as it is seen or felt subjectively in a single fleeting moment. They do not wish to explain the essential

central thought or to organize all the details explicitly into a conventional formal relationship to the central idea.”

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, ed.  
*The Reader's Companion to World Literature*  
(Dryden/Mentor 1956) 220

“Impressionism: This is a term for an artistic method emphasizing sense impressions of experience on the observer rather than objectivity. In painting it is applied to the French Impressionists of the 1870's who experimented with light effects, in literature to a branch of Realism. Gustave Flaubert used Impressionist techniques to produce the illusion of reality; he described carefully selected details of a character or scene and left it to the reader to organize these impressions for himself. Impressionism later became a part of the technique of any writer who employed symbolism, Naturalism, or Expressionism, and was never really thought of as a separate school of writing. Joseph Conrad was an Impressionist in the tradition of Flaubert and Maupassant; among American authors, Henry James and Stephen Crane have been called Impressionists. A parallel technique in poetry was Imagism.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

### CRITICS DISCUSS

“A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct *impression* of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the *impression*... If experience consists of *impressions*, it may be said that *impressions* are experience, just as...they are the very air we breathe.... There is no *impression* of life, no manner of seeing it and feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place.” [italics added]

Henry James  
“The Art of Fiction” (1884)

“In descriptions of Nature one ought to seize upon the little particulars, grouping them in such a way that, in reading, when you shut your eyes, you get a picture. For instance, you will get the full effect of a moonlight night if you write that on the mill-dam a little glowing star-point flashed from the neck of a bottle.”

Anton Chekhov  
*Letter* (1886)

“Fiction--if it at all aspires to be art--appeals to temperament. And in truth it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments... Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because temperament, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion. All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses; its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music... My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see. That--and no more, and it is everything.”

Joseph Conrad  
Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1898)

“An Impressionistic style is one in which the logical structure appears to have been distorted in order to produce a direct correspondence with the writer's sensation. The projection of sensations or emotions into a given form is known in aesthetics as ‘empathy’ (feeling into), and Impressionism is the creation of means that facilitate this process. An ‘Impressionist’ painting, for example, is one into which the spectator ‘enters’ with all the sensations and emotions that accompany the actual scene depicted (girls dancing, horses racing, etc.). An Impressionist prose style is one that gives the illusion that the reader is participating in the events, scenes or actions described.

Like Impressionism in painting, Impressionism in writing is a specifically modern style, though Sterne might be regarded as a precursor.... It is only when we reach Proust in French literature, and Virginia Woolf in English, that a purely Impressionistic style is created [this overlooks Stephen Crane, Joseph Conrad and others]. *The Waves* is perhaps the best example of Mrs. Woolf's Impressionistic style, but a more extreme example is provided by William Faulkner.... The final stage of Impressionism is reached in the so-called interior monologue, which James Joyce used with such brilliance in the last section of *Ulysses*. All trace of the author's personality has disappeared: he is completely identified with the character he is describing."

Herbert Read  
*English Prose Style*  
(1928; Beacon 1952-63) 154-56

"Modern technology...introduces an unprecedented dynamism in the whole attitude toward life and it is above all this new feeling of speed and change that finds expression in Impressionism.... It is an urban style, because it describes the changeability, the nervous rhythm, the sudden, sharp but always ephemeral impressions of city life. And precisely as such, it implies an enormous expansion of sensual perception, a new sharpening of sensibility...it signifies one of the most important turning points in the history of Western art....which completely dissolves the static world-view of the Middle Ages. A continuous line can be traced from the Gothic to Impressionism comparable to the line leading from late medieval economy to high capitalism....

The dominion of the moment over permanence and continuity, the feeling that every phenomenon is a fleeting and never-to-be-repeated constellation, a wave gliding away in the river of time, the river into which 'one cannot step twice,' is the simplest formula to which Impressionism can be reduced. The whole method of Impressionism, with all its artistic expedients and tricks, is bent, above all, on giving expression to this Heraclitean outlook and on stressing that reality is not a being but a becoming, not a condition but a process.... The Impressionistic vision transforms Nature into a process of growth and decay. Everything stable and coherent is dissolved into metamorphoses and assumes the character of the unfinished and fragmentary. The reproduction of the subjective act instead of the objective substratum of seeing, with which the history of modern perspective painting begins, here achieves its culmination....

Stylistically, Impressionism is an extremely complex phenomenon. In some respects it represents merely the logical development of Naturalism. For, if one interprets Naturalism as meaning progress from the general to the particular, from the typical to the individual, from the abstract idea to the concrete... Then the Impressionistic reproduction of reality, with its emphasis on the instantaneous and the unique, is an important achievement of Naturalism. The representations of Impressionism are closer to sensual experience than those of Naturalism...and replace the object of theoretical knowledge by that of direct optical experience more completely than any earlier art.... All earlier art is the result of a synthesis, Impressionism that of an analysis. It constructs its particular subject from the bare data of the senses, it, therefore, goes back to the unconscious psychic mechanism and gives us to some extent the raw material of experience.... Before Impressionism, art reproduced objects by signs, now it represents them through their components, through parts of the material of which they are made up....

The first collective exhibition of the Impressionists takes place in 1874, but the history of Impressionism begins some twenty years earlier, and already comes to an end with the eighth group exhibition in the year 1886. About this time Impressionism as a uniform group movement breaks up and a new, post-Impressionist period begins which lasts until about 1906, the year of Cézanne's death.... Impressionist painting discovers...sensations which poetry and music also attempt to express and in which they adapt their means of expression to painterly forms. Atmospheric impressions, especially the experience of light, air and colour, are perceptions native to painting, and when the attempt is made to reproduce moods of this kind in the other arts, we are quite within our rights to speak of a 'painterly' style of poetry and music. But the style of these arts is also painterly, when they express themselves, forgoing distinct 'contours,' with the aid of colour and shade effects, and attach more importance to the vivacity of the details than to the uniformity of the total impression....

When Paul Bourget points out that, in the style of his time, the impression made by the single page is always stronger than that of the whole book, that made by a sentence deeper than that of a page and that of the single words more striking than that of a sentence, what he is describing is the method of Impressionism --the style of an atomized, dynamically-charged worldview. Impressionism is not, however, merely the style of a particular period dominating all the arts, it is also the last universally valid 'European' style--the latest trend based on a general consensus of taste....

What contributes to the rise of Impressionism as a collective movement is above all, on the one hand, the artistic experience of the city, the beginnings of which are to be found in Manet, and, on the other hand, the amalgamation of the young painters which is brought about by the opposition of the public. At first sight, it may seem surprising that the metropolis, with its herding together and intermingling of people, should produce this intimate art rooted in the feeling of individual singularity and solitude. But it is a familiar fact that nothing seems so isolating as the close proximity of too many people....

And what is the whole modern novel, in the last analysis, but the exact, minute and increasingly precise description of concrete spiritual reality?... The history of literature reveals a much more complicated picture than that of painting. As a literary style, Impressionism is, intrinsically, not a very sharply defined phenomenon; its beginnings are hardly recognizable within the total complex of Naturalism and its later forms of development are completely merged with the phenomenon of symbolism. Chronologically, too, a certain discrepancy is to be observed between Impressionism in literature and painting; in painting, the most productive period of Impressionism is already past, when its stylistic characteristics are first beginning to emerge in literature....

Aestheticism reaches the pinnacle of its development in the age of Impressionism.... The aesthetic philosophy of Impressionism marks the beginning of a process of complete inbreeding in art. Artists produce their works for artists, and art, that is, the formal experience of the world, *sub specie* art is, becomes the real subject of art. Raw, unformed Nature untouched by culture loses its aesthetic attraction and the ideal of naturalness is thrust aside by an ideal of artificiality. The city, urban culture, urban amusements...seem not only incomparably more attractive, but also much more spiritual and soulful than the so-called charms of Nature. Nature itself is ugly, ordinary, shapeless; art alone makes it enjoyable. Baudelaire hates the country, the Goncourts regard nature as an enemy and the later aesthetes, especially Whistler and Wilde, speak of it in a tone of contemptuous irony. This is the end of the pastoral... [This also describes Postmodernism] The enthusiasm for the artificiality of culture is in some respects again only a new form of Romantic escapism. Artificial, fictitious life is chosen, because reality can never be so beautiful as illusion and because all contact with reality, all attempts to realize dreams and wishes must lead to their corruption....

The age of Impressionism produces two extreme types of the modern artist estranged from society: the new bohemians and those who take refuge from Western civilization in distant, exotic lands.... The voyage into remote lands, as an escape from modern civilization, is as old as the bohemian protest against the bourgeois way of life. Both have their source in romantic unreality and individualism.... Toward the end of the century Impressionism becomes the predominant style throughout Europe. From now on a poetry of moods, of atmospherical impressions, of the declining seasons of the year and the fugitive hours of the day is to be found everywhere. People spend their time puzzling over lyrics which express fleeting, scarcely palpable sensations, indefinite, indefinable sensual stimuli, delicate colours and tired voices.

The undecided, the vague, that which moves on the nethermost boundaries of sensual perception, becomes the main theme of poetry; it is, however, not objective reality with which the poets are concerned, but their emotions about their own sensitiveness and capacity for experience. This unsubstantial art of moods and atmosphere now dominates all forms of literature; they are all transformed into lyricism, into imagery and music, into timbres and nuances. The story is reduced to mere situations, the plot to lyrical scenes, the character drawing to the description of spiritual dispositions and trends. Everything becomes episodic, peripheral to a life without a center.... In literature outside France the Impressionistic features of the exposition are more strongly marked than the symbolistic. With only French literature in mind, one is easily tempted to identify Impressionism with symbolism....

Impressionistic thinking finds its purest expression in the philosophy of Bergson, above all in his interpretation of time--the medium which is the vital element of Impressionism. The uniqueness of the moment, which has never existed before and will never be repeated, was the basic experience of the nineteenth century, and the whole Naturalistic novel, especially that of Flaubert, was the description and analysis of this experience. But the main difference between Flaubert's philosophy and Bergson's was that he still saw time as an element of disintegration by which the ideal is destroyed. The change in our conception of time and hence of the whole of our experience of reality took place step by step, first in Impressionist painting, then in Bergson's philosophy, and finally, most explicitly and significantly of all, in the work of Proust....

The justification of Bergson's philosophy is the Proustian novel; it is here that Bergson's conception of time first becomes really creative. Existence acquires actual life, movement, colour, an ideal transparency and a spiritual content from the perspective of a present that is the result of our past. There is no other happiness but that of remembrance and the revival, resuscitation and conquest of time that is past and lost; for, as Proust says, the real paradises are the lost paradises.... Proust is the first to see in contemplation, in remembrance and in art not only one possible form but the only possible form in which we can possess life. The new conception of time...gives...nothing but the appearance of conciliation; for Proust's philosophy is merely the self-consolation and self-deception of a sick man, of a man already buried alive."

Arnold Hauser

*The Social History of Art IV*

(Random House/Vintage 1951) 167-71, 174-77, 182-83, 189, 205-06, 224-25

"The word Impressionism had been widely used to characterize the school of novelists to which Ford and Conrad both belonged. Clearly deriving its label from that applied to French painters like Monet, the school wished neither to follow Zola's sociological approach to reality, nor to use the artificial patterns of the plotted Victorian novel to achieve the essence of the real. They believed, rather, that this essence was to be captured only by a careful selection of telling detail and a concentration on the seemingly casual aspects of human relationships which so often, as in real life, provide true insights into personal relationships and human activities. Above all, it depended on visual information, which meant that the Impressionist could not tell the reader what was going on, either internally or externally. Instead, he had to show the reader these things."

Frank McShane, ed.

*Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*

(U Nebraska 1964) 33

"Always consider the impressions that you are making upon the mind of the reader, and always consider that the first impression with which you present him will be so strong that it will be all that you can ever do to efface it, to alter it or even quite slightly to modify it.... The first speech of a character you are introducing should always be a generalization--since generalizations are the really strong indications of character.... Impressionism is a thing altogether momentary....

Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass--through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you. For the whole of life is really like that; we are almost always in one place with our minds somewhere quite other.... Certain quite rigid unities must be observed. The point is that any piece of Impressionism, whether it be prose, or verse, or painting, or sculpture, is the record of the impression of a moment; it is not a sort of rounded, annotated record of a set of circumstances--it is the record of the recollection in your mind of a set of circumstances that happened ten years ago--or ten minutes. It might even be the impression of the moment--but it is the impression, not the corrected chronicle....

You would give your reader the impression that he was witnessing something real, that he was passing through an experience... The Impressionist author is sedulous to avoid letting his personality appear in the course of his book. On the other hand, his whole book, his whole poem is merely an expression of his personality.... No artist had the right to call for any effort from his audience. A picture should come out of its frame and seize the spectator....

But it was perhaps Crane of all that school or gang--and not excepting Maupassant--who most observed that canon of Impressionism: You must render; never report. You must never, that is to say, write: 'He saw a man aim a gat [gun] at him'; you must put it: 'He saw a steel ring directed at him.' Later you must get in that, in his subconscious, he recognized that the steel ring was the polished muzzle of a revolver. So Crane rendered it in 'Three White Mice' which is one of the major short stories of the world. That is Impressionism!"

Ford Madox Ford  
"On Impressionism" (1913)  
*Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*  
ed. Frank MacShane  
(U Nebraska 1964) 39-43, 48, 67

"Poetry has advantages and limitations unlike those of other arts, and these affected its attempts to emulate Impressionist painting. But Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Mallarme in France, and later the 'Imagist' poets such as Amy Lowell in America, all showed the influence of Impressionist painting and music. In prose, Henry James in America, Marcel Proust in France, and James Joyce in Ireland and England, developed this approach at length. To be sure, the use of words to describe fleeting images and to call up vague hints of their emotional overtones, was not a new creation of modern French or English poetry. Nature poetry and prose had helped to show the Impressionist painters where to look."

Philip P. Weiner, Editor in Chief  
*Dictionary of the History of Ideas*  
(Scribner's 1973) 575

Michael Hollister (2015)