

## REALISM

Realism is as old as the human race. No doubt primeval hunters returning from their adventures told stories with rhetoric and gestures intended to evoke an "illusion of real life," in the phrase of Henry James. Realism is relative, with visions of reality varying from teller to teller, culture to culture and generation to generation. It must be defined in historical context by intention, subject, themes, focus, techniques and style. The Realist movement in American fiction after the Civil War refers to shared intentions of writers as different as Twain and James, opposite poles of sensibility who were contemptuous of each other. Due to such diversity, the only major American writer whose work as a whole could illustrate standard or typical "Realism" as defined by prevailing literary criticism (his own, which emphasizes the commonplace) is William Dean Howells, its characteristics well exemplified in his story "Editha" and his novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). In practice, some of the best examples of pure commonplace Realism are short stories by local color writers such as Mary Wilkins Freeman.

Though literary Realism is understood as the opposite of Romance, and Expressionism, the romancers developed techniques of realism to make their stories plausible. In 1826 the word *realisme* was used in France to describe a literary method that imitated Nature, in contrast to Classicism. However, as Realism developed, it opposed Romanticism and its aesthetics became Neoclassical. In the United States one of the first examples of Realism--realistic for the most part--is "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861) by Rebecca Harding Davis, sympathetic to workers and the lower class against the upper, in the manner of Charles Dickens. *Madame Bovary* by the French master Gustave Flaubert became an aesthetic model of Realism, especially for Henry James, who regarded Flaubert as an exemplar.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF REALISM IN *MADAME BOVARY* (1857)

1. Neoclassical economy
2. Emotional restraint
3. Detached tone
4. Objective point of view
5. Concreteness of detail
6. Perfection of form

### REALISTIC PERIOD IN AMERICAN LITERATURE (1865-1900)

"But let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions... Let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know--the language of unaffected people everywhere."

William Dean Howells  
*Criticism and Fiction* (1891)

"The Civil War had been, at least in part, a struggle between agrarian democracy and industrial-capitalist democracy, and the result of the Northern victory was the triumphant emergence of industrialism, which was to yield material advances but was also to bring difficulties: severe labor disputes and economic depression. Capitalism was to produce a group of powerful and ruthless "robber barons"; its application to politics, particularly in the rapidly developing cities, begot "bossism" and a species of political corruption known by Lincoln Steffens's phrase, "the shame of the cities"... By the last two decades of the century many thoughtful people had begun to declare that somehow the promise of America had been lost--they often said "betrayed"--and that drastic changes were needed. The Populist party, the Grange, and the socialism of the American intellectual all reflected a disillusionment never before so widespread.

Average Americans were living in a new world... The impact of Darwin, Marx, Comte, Spencer, and others advancing a scientific view sharply at variance with the older religious view was cutting from beneath thoughtful Americans--even while they vehemently denied it--their old certainty about

perfectibility and progress. The passing of the physical frontier around 1890 removed from their society a natural safety valve that had acted to protect them against malcontents and the restless in their world; now they must absorb them and adjust to the fact of their presence; no longer could they seek virgin land...

The passage in 1891 [the year Melville died] of the International Copyright Act protected foreign authors from piracy in America and, by the same token, protected the native literary product.... In fiction...the new turbulence and the growing skepticism and disillusionment found an effective voice. The developing mass audience was served by local color writing and the historical novel, which had a great upsurge of popularity as the century ended. But in the work of Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James, the greatest contributions of the age were made. In the works of these and of lesser writers--largely from the Middle West--realism dominated the scene. William James' pragmatism not only expressed the mood of the period but also shaped its literary expression, an expression that became increasingly critical of American life."

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

### ORIGINS OF AMERICAN LITERARY REALISM

#### 1. American romantics:

Washington Irving's sketches of regional character types  
James Fenimore Cooper's descriptions of landscape and custom  
Poe's rendering of individual sensation  
Hawthorne's psychological analyses  
Melville's empiricism and authentic details

#### 2. Travel literature:

Irving's *Astoria*  
Poe's *Pym*  
Melville's *Typee & Omoo*  
Bret Harte's sentimentalized stories of the West  
Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1869)

#### 3. American humorists:

Twain  
Josh Billings  
Artemus Ward  
Petroleum V. Nasby  
Seba Smith  
Augustus Longstreet  
Johnson Hooper

#### 4. European realists:

Gogol, Turgenev, Chekov in Russia  
Flaubert, DeMaupassant, Zola in France  
Dickens, Trollope, Thackeray in England

#### 5. Civil War journalism: John W. DeForest in particular

#### 6. More writers are poor, from the lower class or the frontier

#### 7. Local color regionalism:

#### NEW ENGLAND:

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman  
Sarah Orne Jewett  
Harriet Beecher Stowe  
Annie T. Slosson  
Rowland Robinson

#### THE OLD SOUTH:

Kate Chopin  
George W. Cable  
Paul Dunbar  
Joel C. Harris  
Mary N. Murfree  
Thomas N. Page  
James I. Allen

#### THE WEST AND MIDWEST:

Mark Twain  
Bret Harte  
Hamlin Garland  
Edward Eggleston  
Maurice Thompson  
Edgar Howe

#### THE LOCAL COLOR MOVEMENT

Local color was a popular expression of democratic regionalism, motivated by the desire to preserve in art a vanished or vanishing local culture, especially that of backcountry New England, the Old South and the western frontier. In these regions, old ways of life were disappearing as a result of immigration, industrialization, expanding cities, the spreading tentacles of railroads and post-Civil War reconstruction. Among painters the most notable regionalists are Winslow Homer, Eastman Johnson, Frederick Remington and Charles Russell. In literature, one of the most influential and controversial responses was *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), a manifesto by 12 southern writers. This book helps one to understand William Faulkner, Caroline Gordon and other writers in the South.

The local color artist rendered the scenery, customs, speech, dress, mannerisms, folklore and habits of thought of a particular region at a passing moment in history, emphasizing the unique rather than the universal, which often limited its enduring appeal. Many local color writers were self-educated and most of them had provincial visions of the world. Local color fiction had considerable moral value, and will always have historical value, but most of it, unfortunately, has minimal literary value. Yet there are brilliant exceptions, such as "A Village Singer" (1891) by Mary Wilkins Freeman, a perfect illustration of Realism, and "A White Heron" (1886) by Sarah Orne Jewett. The greatest triumph of local color, far transcending all its usual limitations, is *Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

#### TYPICAL LIMITATIONS OF LOCAL COLOR WRITING

1. Sentimentality and melodrama
2. Lapses into formula writing
3. Tendency to gloss over the uglier aspects of life
4. Reactionary idealization of the past, especially in the South
5. Pursuit of the merely peculiar
6. Exaltation of the mediocre
7. Sometimes incomprehensible dialect

8. Extraneous detail

QUALITIES OF THE BEST LOCAL COLOR

1. Accurate observation
2. Incisive analysis of character
3. Affirmation of humane virtues
4. Correction of stereotypes, such as:

the shrewd Yankee trader  
the shiftless mountaineer  
the Kentucky colonel  
the happy darky

5. Exposure of common faults, such as:

bigotry  
hypocrisy  
opportunism  
shabby gentility  
selfish individualism  
swaggering egotism  
tendency to violence

Local color fiction (1) gave an impetus to Realism, as opposed to Romantic and sentimental writing popular during the matriarchal Victorian Age of the 19th century; and (2) developed cultural traditions—"a usable past"--which enriched the writing of great writers such as Twain and Faulkner, answering to the complaint made by Irving, Hawthorne, James, H. L. Mencken and expatriates of the 1920s that America lacked culture and was puritanically hostile to great art.

WOMEN READERS

Realism was opposed by most women readers and by Victorian males who wanted fiction to conform to their moral conventions and to affirm their ideals, like the Feminists who imposed "political correctness" in the late 20th century. "Until well after the Civil War (some would say until the 1920s) the novel was chiefly a form of literary communication among women." (Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction*, 1978: 32). Melville tried desperately hard but finally gave up writing fiction for the last 34 years of his life--except for *Billy Budd*, left unpublished in a drawer--because he could not please women readers. The Realist movement was a revolt by artists--mostly male, but including Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Willa Cather--against the prevailing sentimentality of women.

"*The Rise of Silas Lapham* [1885] was a big and a controversial book because it spoke directly to the condition of its time.... Its author was openly out to demolish what he regarded as the false emotions and outworn cliches of the obsolescent and irrelevant Romanticistic past. The most fiercely debated question in many clubs, reported [Hamlin] Garland, was 'Are Howells's heroines true to life or are they merely satiric types?' and most of his feminine critics were fiercely indignant over his 'injustice to women': 'He never depicts a noble woman,' they declared. 'Well,' retorted his male admirers, 'he's just as hard on us. He is not concerned with nobly perfect individuals--he is depicting men and women as they are.' Indeed, nothing about Howells seems to have stirred up quite as much dust in his own time as his effort to shatter the 'chivalric' fiction of women's helpless nobility and set women free to become simple, equal participants in modern culture....

As he saw it, the portraiture of 'ideal' characters was artistically 'offensive'—"and as far as morality goes I believe that when an artist tries to create an ideal he mixes some truth up with a vast deal of sentimentality and produces something...extremely noxious as well as nauseous." But the people who clamored for the ideal females of the sentimental-chivalric [Victorian] tradition...were also the opponents

of realism in general. They went on damning Howells... And even those who sympathized with Realism were sometimes appalled. J. W. DeForest, who had suffered much from the unwillingness of the public to accept his portraits of women wrote: 'You spare neither manhood nor womanhood, and especially not the latter, though it furnishes four-fifths of our novel-reading public. It is a wonder that the females of America...do not stone you in the streets'....

Howells and James made the American girl internationally famous. But the impact of Howells' early heroines and then of 'Daisy Millerism' died away and left both men with a commercially dangerous reaction to avoid... Instead of slacking off his criticism of American women, however, Howells intensified it...in *A Modern Instance* and *Indian Summer*. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* he...studied the marriages of the Laphams and of the Coreys carefully, drawing out in each case the strengths and weaknesses of the wives to show what contribution they made to Silas' fall and rise... Profoundly aided by his extraordinary partnership with keen-witted Elinor Howells [his wife], he was fascinated by the feminine psyche and the (from a male point of view) illogical but often sagacious processes of feminine thought. He believed women to be morally and esthetically superior to men... [Victorian] Bad education and foolish romances encouraged women to be childish, he thought, and he aimed to use his access to the feminine novel-reading audience to correct that. A feminist in the best of all senses, he wished to help women become freer psychologically and intellectually, more honest, more mature, more realistic, healthier."

Edwin H. Cady  
*The Road to Realism* (Syracuse U 1956)

#### MAJOR AMERICAN REALISTS

John W. DeForest (1826-1906) is credited with writing the first purely realistic American novel, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867). He was a cosmopolitan who served as a Captain in the Union Army during the Civil War, wrote accounts of his experiences in battle, such as "The First Time under Fire" (1864), and published his novel after yielding to censorship from his editors at *Harper's*:

I make no objection to your moral reform of the story. If it goes into the *Monthly* of course it ought to be made proper for families. Only I think it ought to be understood, for the sake of *verisimblance*, that the Colonel *did frequently swear* and that the Louisiana lady was not quite as good as she should be.

In part because of his frank realism, DeForest never attained popularity. Since most novel readers and popular writers were women, they sustained the dominance of genteel Romantic taste. Howells reviewed *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* and remarked that "the heroes of young-lady writers have been everywhere fighting the late campaigns over again, as young ladies would have fought them." DeForest's battle scenes are as powerful as those of Stephen Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage* written 30 years later. Howells said of DeForest, "Finer, not stronger workmen succeeded him, and a *delicate realism*, more responsive to the claims and appeals of the feminine oversoul, replaced his inexorable veracity."

William Dean Howells (1837-1920), as a novelist but especially as a critic, was the most influential American champion of Realism. He set forth his principles in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), advocating "simplicity, naturalness, honesty, truth, sincerity, vigor, unpretentiousness." "Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material." The Neoclassical roots of his Realism are evident in his view that "Jane Austen was the first and last of the English novelists to treat material with entire truthfulness." His sensibility was genteel like the Victorians, but his strictures against sexuality in fiction were Neoclassical in affirming restraint, decorum and good taste. He is also Neoclassical in depicting representative characters or types, common experience and general truths so as to be useful to society. The duty of the novelist is to interpret human nature "known to us all." He believed that Realism advanced Democracy and he emphasized fidelity to real life, using common language and factual accuracy:

At the beginning of the century...Romance was making the fight against effete Classicism which Realism is making today against effete Romanticism... Romanticism then sought, as Realism seeks now, to

widen the bounds of sympathy, to level every barrier against aesthetic freedom, to escape from the paralysis of tradition. It exhausted itself in this impulse; and it remained for Realism to assert that fidelity to experience and probability of motive are essential conditions of a great imaginative literature. It is not a new theory, but it has never before universally characterized literary endeavor. When Realism becomes false to itself, when it heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it, Realism will perish too. Every true Realist instinctively knows this, and it is perhaps the reason why he is careful of every fact, and feels himself bound to express or to indicate its meaning at the risk of over-moralizing. In life he finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character; nothing that God has made is contemptible.... He feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of men; his soul is exalted, not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities, in which alone the truth lives.

Mark Twain (1835-1910) grew up on the frontier, became a steamboat pilot and saw life in the raw: the lowlife along the river, sadistic white racists like Pap Finn, slave hunters and backwoods cutthroats with Barlow knives who set dogs on stray pigs and laughed as they watched them torn apart, or drenched the dogs with turpentine and set them on fire. He traveled widely, had adventures in the mining camps of Nevada related in *Roughing It* (1871), worked as a roving journalist and immersed himself in the roughneck culture of saloons and billiard parlors in frontier San Francisco, becoming known as the wild man from the West. His major contributions to the Realist movement were (1) humor; (2) irreverence; (3) use of common language; and (4) the unreliable yet appealing narrator.

At a birthday dinner for the poet Whittier in Boston in 1877, Twain made a speech that included an anecdote about three drunks in the Sierra Mountains who impersonated the venerated elder statesmen of American literature, the genteel Emerson, Longfellow and Holmes. The diners were shocked. He might as well have mocked the Holy Trinity. As Howells put it, Twain stood there "with his joke dead on his hands." Afterward, he sent his apologies: "Ah, well, I am a great and sublime fool. But then I am God's fool, and all his works must be contemplated with respect."

He had a yearning for gentility himself, and acquired some by marriage. His near fanatical veneration of women and their purity was Victorian, as is evident in his *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896): "I wouldn't have a girl that I was worthy of." All three of the leading Realists--Howells, Twain and James--idealized women in the Victorian tradition and were squeamish about sex. Tom Sawyer is a Romantic in *Huckleberry Finn*, as is the mawkish sentimental poet Emmeline Grangerford. Huck is a Realist. He does not know himself, but he knows the real world and how to survive in it. As a runaway slave with a family still in bondage, Jim has to be realistic. His subordination of himself to Huck at times is not the behavior of an Uncle Tom, but the adaptation of a realistic fugitive to his circumstances.

Henry James (1843-1916) was the most influential practitioner of Realism among novelists in the late 19th century. He said, "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent *life*." "It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of *reality*." In "The Art of Fiction" (1884) he compares the novelist to a philosopher, to an historian and above all to a painter. By example and by exacting criticism--contrary to his claim that all he required of a novel is that it be "interesting"--he established some new governing principles for literary fiction.

James abolished the omniscient narrator so prominent in Victorian and Naturalist fiction, absolutely excluding any direct intrusion whatsoever by the author into the narrative. To him, violation of this principle was a sacrilege. As James Joyce says through Stephen Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), published the year James died: "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." In their priestly dedication to aesthetic and moral ideals, James and Joyce were father and son. Though with very different styles and visions, the one social and the other mythic, both strove to forge in

their souls “the uncreated conscience” of their race. This exalted mission turned the artist into a spiritual hero among the Modernists. In the fiction of James, the fate of the true artist is a test of society.

#### AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES OF JAMES

1. Objectivity—“the tone of the historian”
2. Concreteness—“solidity of specification”
3. Selecting the “typical”
4. Evoking “the illusion of life”
5. Maximizing scene, or showing
6. Intensifying “impressions” like a painter
7. Expanding consciousness using a “central intelligence”--his “Method”
8. Organic unity
9. Perfection of form

He shared 5 of the 6 characteristics of Realism in *Madame Bovary*, lacking only economy. He shared 12 of 16 aesthetic characteristics of Neoclassicism, if concentration is understood as intensity, and logic as narrative structure, again lacking economy, as well as clarity and utility, though these judgments are a matter of taste. His principle of organic unity is in the Romantic tradition: “A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts.” He shared this principle also with Joyce.

James was a bridge from the 19th century to Modernism, along with Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane and Kate Chopin--all four of them Impressionists, the first painterly American fiction writers, though the abstraction and amplitude of James obscured the usually vivid effects of Impressionism, which increase in proportion to economy. The late prose style of James conveyed multiple subjective points of view by locating the action in the mind of a central intelligence.

#### MODERNIST CHARACTERISTICS OF JAMES

1. Rejection of materialism
2. Healing dissociation of sensibility
3. Individuation
4. Expanding consciousness
5. Multiple vision
6. Objectivity as ideal
7. Synthesis of Neoclassical and Romantic aesthetics
8. Transcendence of society and nature in Art
9. Pure art in transcendental mode
10. Aesthetic mysticism
11. Artist as hero
12. Perfection of form

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is in some respects the most exemplary Realist in American fiction: She is more purely “realistic” than James, who integrates his Realism with Romance and even fairy tale. Her “illusion of real life” and her complex characterizations, though her voice is aloof, are more consistently true to reality than is Twain, who is down-to-earth and realistic in his vision of human nature but is inclined to stereotypes among his minor characters and to the humorous exaggeration, parody, burlesque and farce that makes his fiction greater than pure Realism.

Wharton is so intelligent and refined she makes Howells seem pedestrian, Lewis shallow and Dreiser a clumsy bumpkin. At her best, her imagery is vividly comparable both to Realist and to Impressionist painting. Her prose sparkles with metaphor and wit, her situations ring with multiple ironies and her structures are resonant. Her best fictions are intricate in thematic patterns, rich in psychological insights and superior to the novels of the Naturalists both intellectually and aesthetically. Wharton took Realism to a greater depth and complexity and to an aesthetic height well above most of her contemporaries. She is the

most Neoclassical novelist in American literature after Charles Brockden Brown and before Hemingway: Her best fiction exhibits all the Neoclassical aesthetic values, most obviously decorum, good taste, order and the appeal to intellect evident in wit, irony, satire, antitheses, balanced phrasing and logical, clearly linear form. Wit and irony are economical and concentrated. Combined with psychological insights and brilliant metaphors, the effect of her style is a sense of restraint, accuracy and moral authority. She had as much sense of form--social and aesthetic--as James. Rereading her best fiction increases an appreciation of her sense of proportion, symmetries, harmony and grace.

For utility and clarity, in contrast to James, she retained the traditional omniscient narrator, but her subtle voice is restrained rather than intrusive--she has impeccable manners. She is most a Realist in her objectivity, her debunking of romanticism, her focus on society, her detailing of environments and her presentation of character types. She exhibits many of the qualities of James while being more clear, vivid and dramatic; and she renders the interaction of determinism and free will with greater intellectual sophistication than any other American writer except Porter. Her Neoclassicism makes her a bridge from the 18th century, while at the same time, her vivid Impressionism and mastery of the novel of manners greatly influenced F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The holistic form of *The House of Mirth* (1905)--the many instances of synecdoche and the multiple sustained ironies--make it also a bridge to the holistic forms of the Modernists later in the 20th century.

Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) was an urbane Realist who aggressively criticized American society for conformity, provincialism and philistinism, particularly in small towns, most notably in *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922). Though often very funny, as in his story "Virga Vay & Allan Cedar," his writing tends to be monotonal satire--blunt, flat and cartoonish: "They were afraid of Mr. Vay and of Allan's fat and vicious wife Bertha" (a reference to Big Bertha, the biggest cannon used in WWII). Lewis is the opposite of Henry James. The limitations of his taste are indicated by his judgment that John Dos Passos is a better writer than Joyce, Proust or Cather. (*Saturday Review*, December 1925)

With some exceptions, such as *Arrowsmith* (1925), considered his best, Lewis is so acerbic he lacks sensibility, as noted by Sherwood Anderson, who wrote from the heart: "The texture of the prose written by Mr. Lewis gives one but faint joy and one cannot escape the conviction that for some reason Lewis has himself found but little joy, either in life among us or in his own effort to channel his reactions to our life into prose. There can be no doubt that this man, with his sharp journalistic nose for news of the outer surface of our lives, has found out a lot of things about us and the way we live in our towns and cities, but I am very sure that in the life of every man, woman, and child in the country there are forces at work that seem to have escaped the notice of Mr. Lewis." (*New Republic*, 11 October 1922)

## OUTGROWTHS OF REALISM

As it evolved from the late-19th into the 20th century, the Realist movement divided into three currents: (1) the commonplace Realism of Howells became more satirical and no longer "commonplace" in Wharton and more severe in Lewis; (2) Naturalism, beginning with *Maggie* (1893) by Stephen Crane; and (3) Impressionism leading into Expressionism and Modernism. Crane and Chopin were essentially Realists, but the dominance of their Naturalist themes and Impressionist techniques set them apart from the earlier Realists. In 1930 the triumph of Realism was symbolized by the Nobel Prize given to Lewis. In the Modernist tradition beginning in the early 20th century, T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway in particular developed techniques for increasing what Henry James emphasized as supremely important to Realism--"the illusion of real life"--by evoking specific emotional responses in a reader:

## ICEBERG PRINCIPLE

Hemingway perfected the iceberg principle: "It if is any use to know it, I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show... First I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become a part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened."



Ernest Hemingway  
*Writers at Work:*  
*The Paris Review Interviews*, 2nd series  
(Viking Compass 1965) 235-36

### OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE

“The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art...a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”

T. S. Eliot  
“Hamlet” (1919)  
*Selected Essays*  
(Harcourt 1932)

“I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action: what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced...the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion.”

Hemingway  
*Death in the Afternoon*  
(Scribner’s 1932) 2

### MAINSTREAM TRADITION OF REALISM

Realism was so successful during the 1930s-50s it became the standard by which fiction was usually evaluated. The masterpieces of the great Modernists in fiction--Joyce, Proust, Mann, Faulkner, Porter--were mountains too high for most to climb, rising from a plain of realistic fiction with lesser peaks and hills. Such novels as *Ulysses* (1922), *The Magic Mountain* (1924), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and *Ship of Fools* (1962) were intimidating to both critics and later novelists, unique achievements too rare and complex to be well understood except by a few specialists, though their techniques were adopted by many aspiring writers. Among critics and teachers, Feminists in particular, a Realist bias was comfortable to those lacking the inclination or the talent to cope with literary complexity. It resulted in interpretations that overlooked symbolism and allegory, distorting their readings of Hawthorne, for example, and crudely oversimplifying Hemingway, Porter, Gordon, and O’Connor.

Many of the best fiction writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century continued in the tradition of Realism, including Caroline Gordon, Wallace Stegner, Anne Tyler, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolfe, Bobbie Ann Mason, and James Alan McPherson. A few got rich by spicing up their Realism with sexual liberation, such as John Updike and Philip Roth. Others combined Realism with techniques and themes in the Modernist tradition, such as Gordon, Steinbeck, Stegner, Salinger, Bellow, and Styron. The near monopoly of Realism ended in the 1960s with the emergence of: (1) Romantic countercultural fiction of rebellion; (2) cynical solipsistic Expressionism, which became the elite mode of fiction among Postmodernist academics; (3) Naturalism continuing in fiction of victimization and social protest especially by minority writers; (4) Gothicism and “black humor”; (5) science fiction; and (6) fantasy. Nevertheless, Realism continues as the most popular tradition, especially in domestic fiction and in creative writing programs.

### DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN ROMANTIC AND REALIST FICTION in the 19th century

#### ROMANTIC

1. Context *cosmic* and *eternal*
2. Emphasis *abstract* and *universal*
3. Tenor *metaphysical*

#### REALIST

1. Context *social* and *temporal*
2. Emphasis *concrete* and *particular*
3. Tenor *empirical*

## 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 *commonplace* or *representative* elements. Like a reporter.
2. The Impressionist tries to *render* truth from a *representative individual* point of view as if *subjectively* immersed in the stream of life, focusing upon vivid *pictorial* 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 *extreme* elements. Like a philosopher.
4. The Expressionist tries to *express* truth from a deeply *personal* point of view as if submerged in a *dream* of life, *projecting* an internal vision. 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. Realism was the foundation of Modernism in Cather, Hemingway, Porter, Gordon, and O'Connor, making Stegner the major Realist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although he enhanced his Realism with techniques of Modernism, his highest aesthetic priorities remained Realistic.

Michael Hollister (2014)

## HISTORICAL SURVEY OF REALISM BY STEGNER

“Defining Realism implies defining the real, and defining the real can involve us with solipsistic theories that dissolve our terms. It may be that reality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, that perception and its echo memory, are the only truth. Nevertheless, James and Crane were the only nineteenth century realists much concerned with the person of the observer, and even their Impressionism did not hinder them from admitting the existence of the external, objective, sensuously perceptible world, and defining Realism, essentially, as the literary method which proposed to present it without distortion....

Realism set limitations upon the ways in which observed details might be *arranged*. It set high value upon scientific detachment and objectivity; it prohibited a writer from warping his materials to the service of a thesis or a sentiment. In admitting the tests of experience and verification, as Howells, Twain, DeForest, Eggleston, and almost the whole tribe did, realists implied a preference for the ordinary events, the observable characters, the real places, as against the heroic, the bizarre, the exotic, the spectacular. Experience they were likely to appraise by the consensus method [according to] the democratic mass.... The phrase ‘without distortion’ will keep us close to the intentions, if not always the practice, of the realistic school: to Mark Twain’s insistence on accuracy of observation, his invocation of the authority of personal experience, his hatred of the ‘Sir Walter Scott disease’...to Howells’ championship of the commonplace and his belief that Realism is ‘nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material’...

A preliminary distinction should be made between what we may call Realism of *method* and Realism of *intention*. The first is a technique of persuasion whose end is verisimilitude, a shoehorn to ease us into the ‘temporary suspension of disbelief’ that Coleridge called poetic faith.... Realism of method is a tool of every sort of writer, especially the writer of the fantastic. On the other hand, Stephen Crane could handle individual images and details with a most cavalier Impressionism and still make them serve a larger Realism of intention. Intentional Realism makes a cardinal virtue not of cleverness or vividness, but of honesty... Since man himself is a part of observable nature, Realism must be extended to include the honest penetration of motives, aberrations, states of consciousness and thus give shelter to ‘psychological realists’ such as James and Crane....

Take the realistic movement, then, not as a coherent and purposeful system but as a series of approximations whose period of closest approximation in America was 1865 to 1890.... The frontier ended with the census of 1890... The process of national self-discovery...became the principal motivation for literature after the Civil War. The most visible product of that self-discovery was the vast literature of local color, much of it nostalgic and sentimental but much of it overlapping with and contributing to Realism. From his desk at the *Atlantic* and later from the Easy Chair of *Harper's*, William Dean Howells directed both movements with the clear perception that they were closely linked.... The literary exploitation of the American regions may be said to have begun with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Pearl of Orr's Island* in 1862. It got a great thrust into popularity with Bret Harte's first mining camp stories in 1868... The common man and woman...dominated local color fiction.... The factual literature of place helped focus American eyes on the local, but it was from oral and journalistic humor that writers learned the native language and the native tone of voice.... Of the native tradition...Mark Twain was the triumphant consummation....

The characteristic rebellion of Realism, first against the aristocratic, romantic, and sentimental, and later against narrow and limiting Victorian conventions of art and morals, is present in James much more than in Howells.... Even in Howells, Realism was an approximation. 'The truthful treatment of material' would do for a theory [but] when reality as Howells knew it refused to be bound within the restricting theory, theory went out.... Despite Howells' contention that novels should deal with the commonplace and not the catastrophic, 'three plots turn on train wrecks, three on fires, two characters are removed by brain fever, a number by sudden sickness; two commit suicide with poison; one hero is shot, another knocked down by a horsecar, and two others killed by locomotives.' His own theories bound him tighter than he was content to be bound.... The generation that came on after 1890 would keep insisting that it wished to treat material truthfully, but its 'truthful' meant something much more aggressive than it had to Howells. It meant for some a vigorous attack on Victorian convention...

Around 1890 the nation turned a corner; industrialism corroborated what Spencer's survival of the fittest threatened. For Henry Adams and Mark Twain, and to some extent even for Howells, the century washed out in a sense of failure and lost hope, and it is a fact that our fiction has never recovered the buoyancy and optimism and confidence in our more smiling destiny that it had until the end of the 1880's. The faith in progress, growth, cultural flowering, the freshness of the new world, and the serene belief in American innocence, are somehow inextricable from the literary philosophy that we have here called Realism... They all went out together, and the Naturalism which came in to replace Realism as the dominant movement in serious fiction was actually not so much a continuation as a repudiation."

Wallace Stegner

Introduction

*Selected American Prose 1841-1900: The Realistic Movement*  
(Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1958, 1962) v-x, xv, xix, xxi, xxiii, xxv

#### MORE DEFINITIONS

Realism: "Term applied to literary composition that aims at an interpretation of the actualities of any aspect of life, free from subjective prejudice, idealism, or romantic color. It is opposed to the concern with the unusual which forms the basis of Romance, but it does not proceed, as does Naturalism, to the philosophy of determinism and a completely amoral attitude.... As an attitude of the writer toward his materials, it is relative, and no chronological point may be indicated as the beginning of Realism, but the 19th century is considered to mark its origin as a literary movement. The example of science, the influence of rational philosophy, the use of documentation in historical study, as well as the reaction against attenuated Romanticism, all had their effect in creating the dominance of Realism at this time."

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

"A term used to designate a theory of artistic practice which proposes that the work of art should present an objective rendering of actual life, of literal fact, without idealization or the alteration of given actuality in the interest of moral or religious preconceptions.... A native American Realism can be traced back to the

Puritans, who were not opposed to facing the facts of life and fate. The Yankee in literature, though frequently a comic character, was also eminently a realist... William Dean Howells...more than any other deserves the title of the first American Realist in the modern sense.”

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

“The great collective event in American letters during the 1880s and 1890s was the securing of ‘realism’ as the dominant standard of value... Even in the 1950s and 1960s, the great run of talents in American writing remains committed with a positively inhibiting single-mindedness to the premise of Realism, the work of capturing the special immediate air of American reality in the familiar American dialect.”

Walter Berthoff  
*The Ferment of Realism, 1884-1919*  
(Macmillan, The Free Press 1965) 1-2

“By Realism, I mean simply a literary technique based on reporting the facts of daily life within a meaningful humanistic framework. Realists shunned the unusual and decadent, trying to avoid prejudice, false idealism, or sensationalism. Though they believed that literature should teach life’s realities, stressing its ‘good’ qualities, they tried to let the reader draw his own conclusions.”

H. Wayne Morgan  
*American Writers in Rebellion: From Mark Twain to Dreiser*  
(Hill & Wang 1965)

“Realism--the representation of the quotidian world in its familiar shapes, unmediated by idealism or artifice--is considered...to be the prime literary value.”

M. M. Liberman & Edward E. Foster  
*A Modern Lexicon of Literary Terms*  
(Scott, Foresman 1968)

“(1) A theory of writing in which the familiar, ordinary aspects of life are depicted in a matter-of-fact, straightforward manner designed to reflect life as it actually is; (2) treatment of subject matter in a way that presents careful descriptions of everyday life, often the lives of the so-called middle or lower classes.”

Harry Shaw  
*Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*  
(McGraw-Hill 1972)

“Realism...bore in part an adversary or corrective relation to a major type of novel, women’s fiction. Women’s fiction was characterized by an idealized heroine, a strong appeal to the reader’s fantasies or daydreams, a great deal of ‘domestic’ social and psychological detail, and a plot based on love interest that led up to a decisive speech—‘I love you.’ As a social institution, this genre was closely tied in to contemporary female roles and definitions of marriage... The detailed verisimilitude [of Realism], close social notation, analysis of motives, and unhappy endings were all part of a strategy of argument, an adversary polemic.”

Alfred Habegger  
*Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature*  
(Columbia U 1982) 106

“Realism tends to disregard and displace a literature based on fantasy, magic, or spiritualism. It also seems to exclude elaborate techniques, in which the ‘normal’ is deconstructed or reconstructed, reshaped, refocused. In many of its guises, although certainly not in all, it parallels journalism; it least parallels poetry, although some of its prose may be ‘poetic.’ Our traditional realists are usually not associated with experimentation or innovation in narrative; no Faulkner or Joyce for them, although they may *play around* [condescension by a PC liberal who exalts Postmodernist fiction] with involved temporal sequences and interpolated or interrupted scenes. They are...straightforward, their narratives clearly defined so that the

reader feels comfortable. Strategies, narrative or otherwise, are *rejected as alien* [stupidly implies that Realists are stupid] to the very realism that such authors *purport* [more bias] to present.” [italics added]

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions: 1980-2000*  
(Xlibris 2001) 226-27

Michael Hollister (2015)