

# Realism

**Realism 1861- 1914:** An artistic movement begun in 19th century France. Artists and writers strove for detailed realistic and factual description. They tried to represent events and social conditions as they actually are, without idealization.

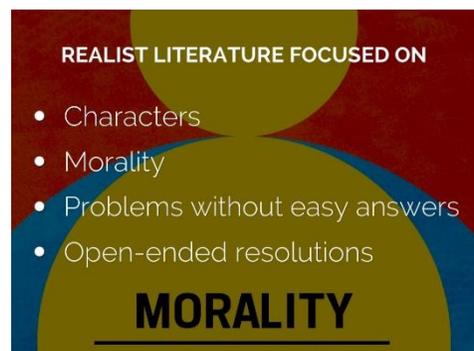
This form of literature believes in fidelity to actuality in its representation. Realism is about recreating life in literature. Realism arose as an opposing idea to Idealism and Nominalism. Idealism is the approach to literature of writing about everything in its ideal form. Nominalism believes that ideas are only names and have no practical application. Realism focused on the truthful treatment of the common, average, everyday life. Realism focuses on the immediate, the here and now, the specific actions and their verifiable consequences. Realism seeks a one-to-one relationship between representation and the subject. This form is also known as mimesis. Realists are concerned with the effect of the work on their reader and the reader's life, a pragmatic view. Pragmatism requires the reading of a work to have some verifiable outcome for the reader that will lead to a better life for the reader. This lends an ethical tendency to Realism while focusing on common actions and minor catastrophes of middle class society.

Realism aims to interpret the actualities of any aspect of life, free from subjective prejudice, idealism, or romantic color. It is in direct opposition to concerns of the unusual, the basis of Romanticism. Stresses the real over the fantastic. Seeks to treat the commonplace truthfully and used characters from everyday life. This emphasis was brought on by societal changes such as the aftermath of the Civil War in the United States and the emergence of Darwin's Theory of Evolution and its effect upon biblical interpretation.

## Characteristics:

- Emphasis on psychological, optimistic tone, details, pragmatic, practical, slow-moving plot
- Rounded, dynamic characters who serve purpose in plot
- Empirically verifiable
- World as it is created in novel impinges upon characters. Characters dictate plot; ending usually open.
- Plot=circumstance
- Time marches inevitably on; small things build up. Climax is not a crisis, but just one more unimportant fact.
- Causality built into text (why something happens foreshadowed). Foreshadowing in everyday events.
- Realists--show us rather than tell us
- Representative people doing representative things
- Events make story plausible
- Insistence on experience of the commonplace
- Emphasis on morality, usually intrinsic, relativistic between people and society
- Scenic representation important
- Humans are in control of their own destiny and are superior to their circumstances

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# American Realism: 1865-1910

~University of West Georgia

In most people's minds, the years following the Civil War symbolized a time of healing and rebuilding. For those engaged in serious literary circles, however, that period was full of upheaval. A literary civil war raged on between the camps of the romantics and the realists and later, the naturalists. People waged verbal battles over the ways that fictional characters were presented in relation to their external world.

Using plot and character development, a writer stated his or her philosophy about how much control mankind had over his own destiny. For example, romantic writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson celebrated the ability of human will to triumph over adversity. On the other hand, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells and Henry James were influenced by the works of early European Realists, namely Balzac's *La Comedie Humaine* (begun in the 1830s); Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches* (1852); and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856).

These American realists believed that humanity's freedom of choice was limited by the power of outside forces. At another extreme were naturalists Stephen Crane and Frank Norris who supported the ideas of Emile Zola and the determinism movement. Naturalists argued that individuals have no choice because a person's life is dictated by heredity and the external environment. In summary, here's how the genres portrayed their characters:

Genre	American Author	Perceived the individual as...
Romantics	Ralph Waldo Emerson	a god
Realists	Henry James William Dean Howells Mark Twain	simply a person
Naturalists	Stephen Crane Frank Norris	a helpless object

## Emergence of American Realism

The industrial revolution that took place at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century changed our country in remarkable ways. People left rural homes for opportunities in urban cities. With the development of new machinery and equipment, the U.S. economy became more focused on factory production; Americans did not have to chiefly rely on farming and agriculture to support their families. At the same time, immigrants from all over the world crowded into tenements to take advantage of new urban opportunities. In the end, the sweeping economic, social, and political changes that took place in post-war life allowed American Realism to prevail.

The realism of the 1880s featured the works of Twain, Howells and James among other writers. American Realists concentrated their writing on select groups or subjects. Examples of this practice include:

- The factory workers of Upton Sinclair and Rebecca Harding David
- Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt's stories of black life
- Kate Chopin's views of marriage and women's roles

The writing during this period was also very regional. The industrial revolution called for standardization, mass production of goods and streamlined channels of distribution. America was leaping into a new modern age and people feared that local folkways and traditions would be soon forgotten. Responding to these sentiments, realistic writers set their stories in specific American regions, rushing to capture the "local color" before it was lost. They drew upon the sometimes grim realities of everyday life, showing the breakdown of traditional values and the growing plight of the new urban poor. American realists built their plots and characters around people's ordinary, everyday lives. Additionally, their works contained regional dialects and

extensive dialogue which connected well with the public. As a result, readers were attracted to the realists because they saw their own struggles in print. Conversely, the public had little patience for the slow paced narratives, allegory and symbolism of the romantic writers. America was shifting into higher gear and readers wanted writers who clearly communicated the complexities of their human experiences.

## Spurring Change

At its basic level, realism was grounded in the faithful reporting of all facets of everyday American life. According to William Dean Howells, "Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material" (Carter 36). The reading public's preference for realism parallels the changes that were occurring at the end of the 19th and into the 20th century. For example, the modern scientific revolution advocated that truth and knowledge be based on empirical data. Reinforcing that notion, the industrial revolution proclaimed that a better civil society could be built upon machinery and factory labor. Given this atmosphere, several developments occurred around the same time: (1) The growth of investigative journalism; (2) the rise of muckrakers; and (3) the establishment of a new-found fascination with the camera as a means of capturing the realities of a single instant, unvarnished by sentimentality.

In many ways, these turn of the century developments are still alive and well. With regard to contemporary literature, realism is so pervasive that it seems natural and unimportant. However, upon close examination, we realize that realism planted the seeds for many of America's core values.

## Basic Tenets

As with all literary genres, we cannot rely on generalizations to interpret a work. After all, realistic literature reflected more than mere external reality. According to Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, realism has specific social, political, and artistic characteristics that set it apart from other genres. Below are the salient points that Chase makes about realism:

## Plot and Character

- Character is more important than action and plot; complex ethical choices are often the subject.
- Characters appear in the real complexity of temperament and motive; they are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past.
- Humans control their destinies; characters act on their environment rather than simply reacting to it.
- Renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. Selective presentation of reality with an emphasis on verisimilitude, even at the expense of a well-made plot.
- Events will usually be plausible. Realistic novels avoid the sensational, dramatic elements of naturalistic novels and romances.
- Class is important; the novel has traditionally served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class.
- Realism is viewed as a realization of democracy.
- The morality of Realism is intrinsic, integral, relativistic relations between people and society are explored.
- Realists were pragmatic, relativistic, democratic and experimental. The purpose of writing is to instruct and to entertain.

## Structure of Prose

- Diction is the natural vernacular, not heightened or poetic; tone may be comic, satiric, or matter-of-fact.
- The use of symbolism is controlled and limited; the realists depend more on the use of images.
- Objectivity in presentation becomes increasingly important: overt authorial comments or intrusions diminish as the century progresses.

## **Overview of Realism**

### **Principles Of Realism**

- 1. Insistence upon and defense of "the experienced commonplace."
- 2. Character more important than plot.
- 3. Attack upon romanticism and romantic writers.
- 4. Emphasis upon morality often self-realized and upon an examination of idealism.
- 5. Concept of realism as a realization of democracy.

### **Identifying Characteristics Of Realistic Writing**

- 1. The philosophy of Realism is known as "descendental" or non-transcendental. The purpose of writing is to instruct and to entertain. Realists were pragmatic, relativistic, democratic, and experimental.
- 2. The subject matter of Realism is drawn from "our experience," - it treated the common, the average, the non-extreme, the representative, the probable.
- 3. The morality of Realism is intrinsic, integral, relativistic - relations between people and society are explored.
- 4. The style of Realism is the vehicle which carries realistic philosophy, subject matter, and morality. Emphasis is placed upon scenic presentation, de-emphasizing authorial comment and evaluation. There is an objection towards the omniscient point of view.

**Realistic Complexity And Multiplicity:** Complexity refers to the interwoven, entangled density of experience; multiplicity indicates the simultaneous existence of different levels of reality or of many truths, equally "true" from some point of view.

**Realistic Characterization:** There is the belief among the Realists that humans control their destinies; characters act on their environment rather than simply reacting to it. Character is superior to circumstance.

**The Use Of Symbolism And Imagery:** The Realists generally reject the kind of symbolism suggested by Emerson when he said "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." Their use of symbolism is controlled and limited; they depend more on the use of images.

### **Realistic Techniques**

- 1. Settings thoroughly familiar to the writer
- 2. Plots emphasizing the norm of daily experience
- 3. Ordinary characters, studied in depth
- 4. Complete authorial objectivity
- 5. Responsible morality; a world truly reported

### **Realism and Gender Roles - Kate Chopin (1851-1904) ~Annenberg Learner**

While her stories have been praised and frequently anthologized since their publication in the 1890s, critics today generally agree that Chopin's masterpiece is her 1899 novel, *The Awakening*. Taking up Chopin's recurring theme of the conflict between social constraints placed on women and their desire for independence, the novel tells the story of Edna Pontellier, a Creole woman who gradually awakens to her own dissatisfaction with her identity as a wife and mother. Focusing on her own needs and desires, Edna daringly flouts social conventions by moving out of her husband's house and entering into an adulterous affair. Due to its controversial subject matter and its sympathetic portrayal of its unconventional heroine, the novel provoked hostile reviews from critics who dismissed it as "trite and sordid" or even "perverse" and "vulgar." While Chopin did not completely abandon her writing career in the wake of *The Awakening's* harsh reception, she was upset by the criticism and her literary output diminished. She died five years later of a cerebral hemorrhage. *The Awakening* sold poorly in its own day and was largely ignored until the mid-twentieth century, when it was recognized as a masterpiece of feminist and realist literature.

**Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Bio.** <http://www.biography.com/people/charlotte-perkins-gilman-9311669>

