

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF REALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

The American literature developed very rapidly. The first widely read American author was Benjamin Franklin. Basically, the development of American literature is a path from romanticism to realism. Washington Irving (*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*) was the first American to gain an international literary reputation. Mark Twain still captivates readers with his unique—and uniquely American—humor and insight. Realism is any effort to portray life as it truly is. Realism in literature was part of a wider movement in the arts to focus on ordinary people and events. In the spirit of general "realism," Realist authors opted for depictions of everyday and banal activities and experiences, instead of a romanticized or similarly stylized presentation. "Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. In America realism was an early 20th century idea in art, music and literature that showed through these different types of work. Characteristic American novels of the period depict the damage of economic forces. Pulling away from fantasy and focusing on the now, American Realism presented a new gateway and a breakthrough — introducing modernism, and what it means to be in the present. For Berthoff, realism is committed to “capturing the special immediate air of American reality. For Benardete, realism is “the record of life, the real, the true”. Donald Pizer (1984) has modified a commonly accepted definition of realism based on three criteria—verisimilitude, representativeness, and objectivity. Alfred Habegger (1982) has suggested that realism was more specifically opposed to women's fiction. Hamlin Garland was his counterpart in the countryside. His collections of stories published and known as prairie realism. Josephine Donovan (1983) has argued that women's local color literature can be firmly situated within the anti-romantic tradition of women's realism. Howells equated romanticism with the Old World aristocracy and therefore considered realism to be the appropriate aesthetic for the emerging institution of American literature.

**Keywords:** Romanticism, women's realism, criteria, verisimilitude, objectivity, representativeness, literature, realism, prairie realism, reality, development, author, reflection, movement, tradition, American.

### INTRODUCTION

American literature has a relatively short but colorful history. The first widely read American author was Benjamin Franklin, whose witty aphorisms and sound advice written in the yearly journal “*Poor Richard’s Almanack*” helped shape ideas of what it means to be an American. Washington Irving (*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*) was the first American to gain an international literary reputation. James Fenimore Cooper’s verbal landscapes in his “*Leather stocking Tales*” captured the nation’s vast beauty. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson broke from poetic tradition and brought a sense of individuality to the nation’s literature. Mark Twain still captivates readers with his unique—and uniquely American—humor and insight. The modernists of the 1920s and 1930s produced such talents as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest

Hemingway. Today, writers like Toni Morrison and Cormac McCarthy continue to make American literature relevant and exciting.

Realism (from Latin “realis”-“material”, “actual”) describes any manifestation of philosophical realism, the belief that reality exists independently of observers, whether in philosophy itself or in the applied arts and sciences. A break from Romanticism, Realism is any effort to portray life as it truly is. In the middle of the 19th century, kings and queens, warriors and knights, demonic cats, ghosts, sea creatures, and monsters gave way to farmers, merchants, lawyers, laborers, and bakers. Realism in literature was part of a wider movement in the arts to focus on ordinary people and events

Literary realism most often refers to the trend, beginning with certain works of nineteenth-century French literature and extending to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors in various countries, towards depictions of contemporary life and society "as they were." In the spirit of general "realism," Realist authors opted for depictions of everyday and banal activities and experiences, instead of a romanticized or similarly stylized presentation. Jorge Luis Borges, in an essay entitled "The Scandinavian Destiny", attributed the earliest discovery of Realism in literature to the Northman in the Icelandic Sagas, although it was soon lost by them along with the continent of North America.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

"Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. It would apprehend in all particulars the connection between the familiar and the extraordinary, and the seen and unseen of human nature. Beneath the deceptive cloak of outwardly uneventful days, it detects and endeavors to trace the outlines of the spirits that are hidden there; to measure the changes in their growth, to watch the symptoms of moral decay or regeneration, to fathom their histories of passionate or intellectual problems. In short, realism reveals. Where we thought nothing worth of notice, it shows everything to be rife with significance."

In America realism was an early 20th century idea in art, music and literature that showed through these different types of work, reflections of the time period. Whether it was a cultural portrayal, or a scenic view of downtown New York City, these images and works of literature, music and painting depicted a contemporary view of what was happening; an attempt at defining what was real. In America at the beginning of the 20th century a new generation of painters, writers and journalists were coming of age. Many of the painters felt the influence of older American artists such as Thomas Eakins, Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, James McNeill Whistler, Winslow Homer, Childe Hassam, J. Alden Weir, Thomas Pollock Anshutz, and William Merritt Chase. However they were interested in creating new and more urbane works that reflected city life and a population that was more urban than rural in America as it entered the new century.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In the second half of the 19th century, the United States was transformed into a modern, industrial nation. As industrialization grew, so did alienation. Characteristic American novels of the period, for example by Stephen Crane and Jack London, depict the damage of economic forces and alienation on the weak or vulnerable individual. Survivors, like Mark Twain's Huck Finn, endure through inner strength involving kindness, flexibility, and, above all, individuality.

During the late 19th century, and into the 20th century artists and musicians contributed to the idea of realism in the American setting. Each, though slightly different in concept or subject, was defining what was going on in front of his or her eyes, without imagining a past or a future. While it has been stated that American Realism was a neoclassical movement borrowing from ancient classical interpretations of art and architecture, this statement is false. American Realism was actually the opposite; instead of reflecting back to antiquities, artists, writers and musicians were concerned with recording the grit and the true reality of the early 20th century in America.

From the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, the United States experienced enormous industrial, economic, social and cultural change. A continuous wave of European immigration and the rising potential for international trade brought increasing growth and prosperity to America. Through art and artistic expression (through all mediums including painting, literature and music), American Realism attempted to portray the exhaustion and cultural exuberance of the figurative American landscape and the life of ordinary Americans at home. Artists used the feelings, textures and sounds of the city to influence the color, texture and look of their creative projects. Musicians noticed the quick and fast paced nature of the early 20th century and responded with a fresh and new tempo. Writers and authors told a new story about Americans; boys and girls real Americans could have grown up with. Pulling away from fantasy and focusing on the now, American Realism presented a new gateway and a breakthrough — introducing modernism, and what it means to be in the present.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

American Realism in literature was a late nineteenth-century movement that began as a reaction against romanticism and the sentimental tradition associated primarily with women writers. Chief among the authors writing in this genre were William Dean Howells, Henry James, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Jack London, Kate Chopin, and Stephen Crane. Although the realist aesthetic influenced European as well as American literature, the American tradition emerged somewhat later in the century and employed slightly different conventions than its continental counterpart. American Realism was most commonly a feature of narrative fiction, although authors occasionally applied its themes and literary techniques to poetry and drama as well. Further, the critical debate surrounding the proper definition and literary validity of realism spawned a considerable number of essays—often by the same authors who were writing realistic novels and short stories—in the literary journals of the day.

To many writers and critics of the late nineteenth century, realism was synonymous with the works of the French novelist Emile Zola, whose works emphasized sexuality, immorality, and the lives of the lower classes. America, still under the influence of Puritanism, resisted such themes as inappropriate for literature and continued to cling to the optimism and idealism associated with the Romantic Movement. The pessimism that followed European industrialism and the population shift from country to city arrived in America more slowly, perhaps as late as the 1880s, although some scholars insist that the realist movement actually began shortly after the Civil War. Warner Berthoff (1965) has made a case for the former, claiming that “the great collective event in American letters during the 1880s and 1890s was the securing of ‘realism’ as the dominant standard of value.” Jane Benardete (1972) has chosen a slightly earlier date, claiming that realism “flourished in the last three decades of the nineteenth century,” and the majority of literary historians tend to agree with her.

As Berthoff's quotation marks around the term "realism" suggest, the definition of what he calls a "dominant standard" varies, and the works that are included under its umbrella are diverse in both form and theme. For Berthoff, realism is committed to "capturing the special immediate air of American reality in the familiar American dialect." However, he does question whether realism was "anything more than a name, a borrowed label which happened to come so strongly into fashion ... that no one could avoid deferring to it." For Benardete, realism is "the record of life, the real, the true," although she has conceded that her definition "only opens new difficulties." Donald Pizer (1984) has modified a commonly accepted definition of realism based on three criteria—verisimilitude, representativeness, and objectivity—to include a much wider range of human experience than is normally considered typical or representative, and to include the humanistic colorings of "ethical idealism" or "pragmatic realism."

For some, it is easier to define realism in terms of what it is not—which is primarily romanticism. After the Civil War, American authors and scholars turned against the irrationality and vanity of contemporary literature. According to Benardete, some even blamed the conventions of romanticism—idealism, chivalry, heroism, absolute moral stances—for fostering a national vision which inevitably led to war, causing Americans "to fight when they might have negotiated, to seek empty glory though it cost them their lives." Alfred Habegger (1982) has suggested that realism was more specifically opposed to women's fiction, to which it "bore in part an adversary or corrective relation." Women's fiction presented idealized models of marriage and female roles; realism offered "detailed verisimilitude, close social notation, analysis of motives, and unhappy endings which were all part of a strategy of argument, an adversary polemic."

Many authors and critics, including those involved in the contemporary debate, have asserted that realist literature must fulfill a social function or a moral purpose in an age and in a country where no official religion or state church existed to guide citizens on moral and ethical issues. The era's increasing levels of class division and labor unrest prompted some authors, such as Edward Bellamy in *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, to offer possibilities for change in the form of "utopian realism." David E. Shi (1995) has explained the apparent contradiction: "Although usually considered pure fantasies, most of the era's utopian novels reflected the impact of literary realism and the reform impulse. In their efforts to use an ideal future to shed light on the evils and excesses of the present, utopian authors, most of whom were practicing journalists, included meticulously detailed descriptions of current social conditions." Other journalists, popularly known as "muckrakers," reported on the human cost of industrialization and urbanization in fact-based non-fictional works. The most famous of these was Jacob Riis, whose 1890 collection of stories and photographs, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, became one of the most influential books of the late nineteenth century. According to Shi, Riis's attempt to make the suffering of the poor of the Lower East Side visible to the middle and upper classes "remains a classic example of the genre, and his career epitomizes the fact-worshipping strand of reformist realism." If Riis served as the spokesman for the urban poor, Hamlin Garland was his counterpart in the countryside. His collections of stories published in the early 1890s exposed the plight of the rural poor on Midwestern farms, creating a sub-genre known as prairie realism.

Closely associated with prairie realism was the local color literary movement, which emphasized specific, detailed descriptions of actual places and reproduced regional dialects in the characters' dialogue. Scholars have been divided on whether local color literature qualifies as part of the realist tradition given that it does not necessarily address contemporary social and ethical issues; nevertheless, many critics have included local color as a subset of realism based

on its utilization of similar literary techniques. For his part, Berthoff has maintained that a major element of American Realism is “a haunting sense of loss, as at some irreversible falling away from a golden time,” and claims that local color literature is most especially associated with this loss. Josephine Donovan (1983) has argued that women's local color literature can be firmly situated within the anti-romantic tradition of women's realism, which sought to represent the actual conditions of women's lives, no matter how grim. Habegger, however, has claimed that while realism and local color “were born together and remained in close touch ... the difference—local color's adherence to old times rather than the passing scene—cannot be too much emphasized.” Habegger insists that local color should be treated as a separate aesthetic since it fails to deal with contemporary realities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Commentators have generally maintained that William Dean Howells and Henry James were the foremost practitioners of American Realism, although many have included Mark Twain as part of the “great authorial triumvirate” of the realist movement, as Benardete has put it. An advocate for realism in his fictional works and as editor-in-chief of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Howells equated romanticism with the Old World aristocracy and therefore considered realism to be the appropriate aesthetic for the emerging institution of American literature. Further, he believed that American Realism should concentrate on common life experiences which could instruct and inform readers rather than on the gross, immoral subject matter and pessimistic tone of European Realist literature. Howells's works include “A Modern Instance” (1882), “The Rise of Silas Lapham” (1885), and “A Hazard of New Fortunes” (1890). James was perhaps the most technically refined novelist and short story writer of the American Realist movement. He has been admired by many scholars as a true student of the craft, creating highly sophisticated narratives and inventing psychologically complex characters. For James, an artist did not need to gather information and employ factual events and situations to produce realistic literature; rather, an artist only needed to rely on the limitless imagination to recreate realistic characters, scenes, and circumstances. Some of James's most significant contributions to realism were “The Portrait of a Lady” (1881) and “What Maisie Knew” (1897). Twain had been widely regarded as the most celebrated late nineteenth-century American author to contribute to the realist movement. While some critics have taken exception to including Twain's “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” (1884) within the opus of American Realism, others have pointed out that this tour de force addresses many of the same nineteenth-century social and ethical issues as other realist writers but with less pessimism and more of Twain's trademark caustic humor and acerbic wit.

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