**REALISM**

**A- Definition**

THE TERM “REALISM” IDENTIFIES PRINCIPALLY A LITERARY TENDENCY DOMINANT AMONG THE EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN WRITERS OF FICTION WHO, IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY, DEALT WITH THE USUAL CONDITIONS OF URBAN MIDDLE-CLASS LIFE—ITS MANNERS, CUSTOMS, VALUES, AND ETHICAL.

In general, realism can be defined as the aspect of tending to lean towards being factual and practical on matters of life by representing things, actions, or social circumstances in point of fact, without presenting them in their conceptual form and neither without the influence of feelings or other artistic ideas. However, in order to clearly define or discuss the major distinguishing features of realism, it is best to discuss it under different viewpoints so as to get an extensive description of what this theory of realism in American literature is all about.

**B- Development**

Realism coincided with Victorianism, yet was a distinct collection of aesthetic principles in its own right. The realist novel was heavily informed by journalistic techniques, such as objectivity and fidelity to the facts of the matter. It is not a coincidence that many of the better known novelists of the time had concurrent occupations in the publishing industry. The idea of novel-writing as a “report” grew out of this marriage between literature and journalism. Another fair comparison would be to think of the realist novel as an early form of docudrama, in which fictional persons and events are intended to seamlessly reproduce the real world. The Victorian Period saw growing concern with the plight of the less fortunate in society, and the realistic novel likewise turned its attention on subjects that beforehand would not have warranted notice. The balancing act that the upwardly mobile middle class had to perform in order to retain their position in the world was a typical subject for realistic novels. There arose a subgenre of Realism called Social Realism, which in hindsight can be interpreted as Marxist and socialist ideas set forth in literature.

Advances in the field of human psychology also fed into the preoccupation with representing the inner workings of the mind, and the delicate play of emotions. William James, brother of novelist Henry James, was a gargantuan figure in the early history of human psychology. One can imagine that their conversations proved highly influential in Henry’s creative development. Psychologists were just beginning to understand that human consciousness was far more complicated and various than had previously been considered. Debates about nature versus nurture were as popular then as they are today. More than anything, the understanding that in the human mind there are very few absolutes was critical for the realist sensibility. To put it another way, Realism embraced the concept that people were neither completely good or completely bad, but somewhere on a spectrum.

The overriding concern of all realist fiction is with character. Specifically, novelists struggled to create intricate and layered characters who, as much as possible, felt as though they could be flesh and blood creatures. Much of this effect was achieved through internal monologues and a keen understanding of human psychology. Not surprisingly, the field of psychology was in the process of evolving from metaphysical quackery into a bona fide scientific pursuit. Students of the human mind were beginning to realize that an individual is composed of a network of motivations, interests, desires, and fears. How these forces interact and sometimes do battle with each other plays a large part in the development of personality. Realism, at its highest level, attempts to lay these internal struggles bare for all to see. In other words, most of the “action” of the realist novel is internalized. Changes in mood, in perceptions, in opinions and ideas constitute turning points or climaxes.

Realist novelists eschewed many of the novel’s established traditions, most notably in the form of plot structure. Typically, novels follow a definite arc of events, with an identifiable climax and resolution. They are self-contained and satisfying in their symmetry. Successful careers have been built on the scaffolding of a single story arc. The school of Realism observed that life did not follow such patterns, so for them, neither should the novel. Instead of grand happenings, tragedies, and epic turns of events, the realist novel plodded steadily over a track not greatly disturbed by external circumstances. Nothing truly earth shattering happens in James’s [*The Portrait of a Lady*](http://www.online-literature.com/henry_james/portrait_lady/), despite it hundreds of pages. The same can be said of Dostoyevsky – He composed lengthy and weighty fiction where most, if not all of the action happened in the minds of the characters. Narrative style also changed with realistic fiction. Instead of an omniscient narrator calmly describing the persons and events, readers often confront unreliable narrators who do not have all the information. A popular device for many realistic novelists was the frame narrative, or the story inside a story. This device compounds the unreliable narrator by placing the reader at a further remove from the events of the novel. The purpose of all of these innovations, as with the whole of Realism, was to more accurately simulate the nature of reality – unknowable, uncertain, and ever-shifting reality.

The beginnings of the realist narrative style can be attributed to French novelist and playwright **Honoré de Balzac**. His portraits of ordinary French life were remarkable in their careful attention to details. His most famous work, which was left unfinished, was *The Human Comedy*, an assortment of interwoven tales and novels which depict life in early nineteenth century France.. Like the realists who would follow in his footsteps, Balzac did not rely on profound or spectacular events to move his stories along. Instead, he paid attention to the small things, the nuances that made up the experience of typical French life.

Realism came under attack largely because it represented such a bold departure from what readers had come to expect from the novel. The fascination with things falling apart was unpleasant to many, and critics sometimes accused the practitioners of Realism of focusing only on the negative aspects of life. Additionally, the intense focus on the minutiae of character was seen as unwillingness to actually tell a story. Readers complained that very little happened in realistic fiction, that they were all talk and little payoff. Henry James in particular was criticized for his verbosity, especially in his later years. By the end of the nineteenth century, Realism in the pure sense had given way to another form called Naturalism. With Naturalism, authors looked to heredity and history to define character. Ironically, many of the qualities that people found distasteful in realism – the obsession with character, the superficially mundane plots – were all intensified in Naturalism.

**Major Realist (Victorian) Writers**

### Charles Dickens – (1812- 1870)

Charles Dickens is considered one of the greatest and certainly most popular English novelists. Dickens was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire on February 7th 1812 into a large family. His early years were very difficult as he suffered from various illnesses and his father was put in debtor’s prison so young Charles had to leave school and go to work in a factory. His first novel “Sketches by Boz” was published anonymously in 1833. Charles Dickens went on to become the most popular Victorian author who helped define Victorian literature and he is still one of the best-selling authors today.

Charles Dickens’s works include: Pickwick Papers (1836) Oliver Twist (1837) Nicholas Nickleby (1838-9) The Old Curiosity Shop (1841-2) A Christmas Carol (1843) Martin Chuzzlewit (1844-5) Dombey and Son (1846-8) David Copperfield (1849-50) Bleak House( 1852-3 ) Little Dorrit (1857-8 )

### Wilkie Collins – (1824- 1889)

Another prolific novelist of the Victorian era was Wilkie Collins. The son of a well-known artist William Collins, he was born in London in 1824 and is best known for his pioneering work in the detective and mystery genres.. In 1851 he met Charles Dickens and later became his close friend and literary collaborator, working together on many stories and plays.

He wrote many popular novels but is best remembered for ‘The Moonstone’ (1868) which is considered by many as the first true detective novel in the English language. This book introduced many elements that became standard in mystery fiction, like a complex plot, red herrings, and a detective analyzing clues.

He also wrote many mystery novels including Armadale (1866), No Name (1862), and The Woman in White (1860). But Wilkie Collins was more than just a mystery writer, he also tackled contemporary social issues in his books. In one example, his novel ‘The Woman in White’ explores the treatment of women in society and the legal limitations they faced during the Victorian era.

Collins’ writing style was ahead of its time and very influential on those that would follow him it the mystery genre. Using multiple narrators and weaving intricate plots that kept readers guessing made his work very popular and fresh in the Victorian era, and is still enjoyed today.

### Thomas Hardy – ( 1840- 1928)

Perhaps the greatest novelist of Victorian England, Thomas Hardy’s novels express his view on the changing nature of society and its morals, leading to several literary and social controversies during his lifetime.

Thomas Hardy’s novels are renowned for their portrayal of the rural life and landscapes of southwestern England, which he named ‘Wessex’ in his books – a homage to the old Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Wessex.  Hardy’s Wessex however, contained fictional names for the towns and places within. His writing often explored the struggles of the protagonists against their passions or social circumstance. Particularly focusing on how fate and the rigid social structure of the Victorian time impact people’s lives.

Born in 1840, he became an architect’s apprentice at age 16. He left the profession after his first novel ‘The Poor Man and the Lady’ was published in 1867 under a pseudonym. Hardy went on to publish many novels including Far From the Madding Crowd (1874) and The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886).

Some of Hardy’s work was very controversial at the time, particularly ‘Tess of the d’Urbervilles’ (1891) and ‘Jude the Obscure’ (1895). After the mixed reception of ‘Jude the Obscure,’ Hardy turned away from novels and spent the last 30 years of his life focusing on poetry, producing several collections that are equally esteemed for their emotional depth and mastery of form and language.

### Anthony Trollope – (1815- 1882)

Another well-known British novelist of the Victorian era was Anthony Trollope. He began work as a junior clerk at the General Post Office and worked there full time from 1840- 1859. While employed there wrote over 40 novels including Barchester Towers (1857). Trollope’s work explored ideas of the era around morality, class and modernisation.

Trollope created detailed characters and explored meaningful themes, but his contribution to literature extends far beyond his prolific output. His series of novels set in the fictional county of Barsetshire, are well known for their depiction of the clergy and the gentry. In his work, Trollope offers both a satirical yet empathetic look at the lives and struggles of these ‘men  in position’ and offered a glance behind the curtain that resonated with his audience.

### The Bronte Sisters

In the heart of Yorkshire’s moors lies the cherished home of the Brontë family from 1820 to 1861. The three Bronte sisters Charlotte, Emily, and Anne are often mentioned together because they shared this home called ‘The Parsonage’ in the town of Haworth in Yorkshire. Now the Brontë Parsonage Museum, this modest home was the birthplace of some of the most beloved works in English literature.

Each of the sisters wrote novels during the Victorian era with all three becoming published authors by 1846. Their most famous novels are probably Charlotte’s ‘Jane Eyre’ which was published in 1847, under the pseudonym Currer Bell, Emily’s ‘Wuthering Heights’, and Anne’s ‘The Tenant of Wildfell Hall’ (1848).

The Brontë sisters remarkable story is unique in literary history. Living in a society where class often dictated one’s destiny, their education set them apart in their small village. The Parsonage, modest compared to the homes of wealthier clergy, was a haven where their creativity blossomed. Despite the Victorian era’s rigid social structures, the sisters’ novels broke barriers. They each wrote under pseudonyms that were both Christian and masculine. This ‘guise’ helped them to explore themes of love, class, and identity while concealing their true identity which may have been looked down on at the time.

### Robert Louis Stevenson – (1850- 1894)

Another prolific Victorian author was Robert Louis Stevenson. He was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on November 13th, 1850. His most famous works include ‘Treasure Island’ (1883), ‘Kidnapped’ (1886 ), and the collection of poems ‘New Arabian Nights’ (1882). In addition, he was also a poet and essayist whose ‘Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes’ (1879) remains popular today.

Stevenson was not just a master storyteller, he was a remarkable traveller and adventurer too. These qualities deeply influenced his writing and his life was every bit as colourful and varied as his novels. Plagued by poor health, Stevenson often travelled in search of healthier and warmer climates. It was these travels and the experience that came from this that enriched his imagination and his literary works so well. None of his work captures his adventurous spirit quite as vividly as Treasure Island. A novel that set the standard for pirate adventure stories and introduced the iconic character Long John Silver.

In his work, the lines between good and evil are often blurred, with complex characters, reflecting his deep interest in the human psyche. It wasn’t just adventure books Stevenson excelled in though. One of his most prolific characters delving into the dark side, was introduced in ‘The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’ (1886). This was a profound – often troubling – exploration of dual personalities and Victorian morality.

Stevenson’s diverse contributions, and his range including many introspective essays, have cemented his legacy as a versatile and enduring Victorian writer.

### Bram Stoker – (1847- 1912)

Another author who was not known for his children’s stories, Bram Stoker is best remembered for his 1897 Gothic novel ‘Dracula’. Similar to Mary Shelley he had little formal education and worked as a civil servant. He first became interested in the theater after seeing Henry Irving act. His most famous work was published in 1897 and was a classic of Gothic horror fiction. Dracula has been adapted many times for film and other media including stage, opera, ballet, and graphic novels. it has also inspired a whole genre of fantasy writing in the vampire universe.

While Dracula is to this day, his most famous work, it was not his first and Stoker indeed wrote many pieces both before and after his vampire epic. Other notable work of Stoker includes – ‘The Snake’s Pass’ (1890) Stoker’s first novel, a romantic adventure story set in Ireland, ‘The Watter’s Mou’ (1895) A novel that explores themes of love and betrayal, ‘The Shoulder of Shasta’ (1895) A romance novel set in California, and ‘The Lady of the Shroud’ (1909) A vampire novel with a Balkan setting.

### Alfred Tennyson – (1809- 1892)

One of the most famous Victorian writers and poets of all was Alfred Lord Tennyson. Tennyson wasn’t just any poet, he was actually the Poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland during much of Queen Victoria’s reign. This lofty title meant he was officially appointed by the queen to write poetry for special occasions.

​He often wrote about deeply philosophical questions, as well as other soul touching themes of nature and love. Portraits of dramatic moments of life, tales of heroic exploits, satire, romance, verse drama, prayer, conversation, prophecy, and elegies. All of these were typical of Tennyson’s work and much of Tennyson’s [poetry](https://victorianchildren.org/victorian-poetry/) was inspired by classical literature. His poetry is famous still to this day, for its beautiful language and rhythm.

One of his most famous works ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade,’ is a narrative poem about a battle during the Crimean War. He also wrote ‘In Memoriam A.H.H.,’ a long poem mourning the death of his friend. Tennyson’s work often reflects like a mirror to the values and issues of the Victorian era. The struggle between science and religion for example. His poetry is  timeless, every bit as enjoyable and meaningful today as it was in the 19th Century.

### Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – (1859 – 1930)

Considered by many to be the greatest mystery writer of all time, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has an incredibly impressive bibliography that includes novels, short stories, poems, plays, and books on spiritualism. He was born in Edinburgh Scotland where he became a medical student at age 18. His first novel ‘The Mystery of Cloomber’ was published in 1888 after being serialized but it wasn’t until 1891 when he created Sherlock Holmes that he received widespread fame.

While Sherlock Holmes is by far his most famous and influential work, his literary prowess extended to other genres as well. He had a deep interest in Science Fiction which comes through in his work ‘The Lost World’ (1912), but also had a deep interest in medieval history which comes through in his ‘The White Company’ (1891) and ‘Sir Nigel’ (1906). His later writing revealed his deep interest in spiritualism, and this can be seen in ‘The Coming of the Fairies’ (1922) and ‘The History of Spiritualism’ (1926). He was an incredibly diverse, intelligent and deeply talented story writer.

### Rudyard Kipling – (1865 – 1936)

Another author of the Victorian era whose work is still very popular today was Rudyard Kipling. He was born in Mumbai, India, and attended school there before going to England at the age of 16 to work as a journalist.

His first novel ‘Barrack-Room Ballads’ was published in 1892 and he is most well known for his poems including ‘Gunga Din’ and ‘If’. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907 and was also awarded the C.B.E., Légion d’honneur, and Order of Merit.

Beyond poetry, Kipling’s literary catalogue includes a rich collection of short stories and novels. You can see in much of his work a reflection of his experiences in India, and his personal views on the British Empire.

His most famous work, ‘The Jungle Book’ (1894), is a collection of stories set in the Indian jungle. A much loved classic to this day, with its vivid storytelling and moral lessons. It was the inspiration to one of the earliest Disney animated classics, which itself is stil one of their most popular films to this day. Other notable works include ‘Kim’ (1901), and ‘Just So Stories’ (1902), a delightful collection of children’s tales explaining various natural phenomena.

Some **Victorian poets** worth mentioning are Robert and Elizabeth Browning (husband and wife), Gerald Manley Hopkins (1844-1849), a precursor of Modernism, and **the pre-Raphaelites** (school of painters and poets) Christina and Gabriel Rosseti (brother and sister). **Lord (Alfred) Tennyson** (1809-1892) was Poet Laureate during most of Queen Victoria’s reign and sang the values of the British Empire and the Victorian Age in some of his poems, like “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (1854). These Imperial values were also sung by **Rudyard Kipling** (1865-1936) several years later in his poems and in novels like *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888) and *The Jungle Book* (1894)

**C-THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERISTICS OF REALIST FICTION**

1. THE SETTINGS ARE URBAN— THE HOMES, FACTORIES, OFFICES, RESORTS, AND OTHER PLACES FREQUENTED BY BOTH THE UPPER AND LOWER MIDDLE CLASS.
2. THE PLOTS ARE BASED ON THE PRACTICAL AND ETHICAL PROBLEMS FACED BY MEMBERS OF THIS CLASS, AND THE DECISIONS THAT THEY MUST MAKE--FOR EXAMPLE,
   * CHOICE OF SPOUSE CONDITIONED BY ECONOMIC AND ETHICAL AS WELL AS ROMANTIC OR SENTIMENTAL FACTORS;
   * CHOICE OF PROFESSION;
   * CHOICE BETWEEN SELF-INTEREST AND INTEGRITY IN BUSINESS DEALINGS OR PERSONAL AFFAIRS.
3. THE PROTAGONISTS ARE TYPICAL MEMBERS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AND REFLECT THE ATTITUDES AND VALUES AS WELL AS THE CUSTOMS AND MANNERS OF THIS CLASS.

(SOME CHARACTERS MAY BELONG TO OTHER CLASSES.)

4. UNLIKE ROMANTIC HEROES AND VILLAINS, THE CHARACTERS ARE NEITHER EXTREMELY GOOD NOR EXTREMELY BAD, BUT HAVE A MIXTURE OF BOTH QUALITIES.

1. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE CHARACTERS IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE EXTERNAL ACTION OF THE PLOT—
2. THE READER IS EXPECTED TO BE AS INTERESTED IN HOW A CHARACTER DEALS WITH HIS OR HER REALITY AS IN HOW THE STORY ENDS.
3. NARRATORS AVOID THE OVERTLY EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE OF ROMANTICISM:
   1. JUDGMENTS MAY BE EXPRESSED OR IMPLIED;
   2. THE NARRATOR MAY REMAIN NEUTRAL, LEAVING THE READER TO FORM HIS OR HER OWN JUDGMENTS.

8. THE NARRATIVE TONE MAY BE NEUTRAL, MILDLY COMIC, OR SATIRIC.

**D. THE PRINCIPAL NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES OF REALISM**

1. EXPOSITION IS NOT LIMITED TO EXPLICIT INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL IN THE INITIAL PARAGRAPHS OF THE TEXT, BUT SCATTERED THROUGHOUT.
2. AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE IT IS REVEALED THROUGH THE DIALOGUE, AS IN DRAMA.
3. IN KEEPING WITH THE RELATIVELY OBJECTIVE TONE, THE AUTHOR AVOIDS PERSONIFICATION AND STRONGLY AFFECTIVE TERMS IN ESTABLISHING THE SETTING.
4. THE DESCRIPTIVE DETAILS COME FROM DELIBERATE OBSERVATION OF REAL PEOPLE AND PLACES; THE REALIST NEITHER INVENTS NOR EXAGGERATES, BUT OBSERVES AND RECORDS.
5. THE CHARACTER’S—OR EVEN THE NARRATOR’S—VALUES ARE IMPLIED OR SUGGESTED THROUGH THE DETAILS RATHER THAN EXPRESSLY STATED.
6. THE WRITERS USE DIALOGUE AND GESTURE (BODY LANGUAGE) AS WELL AS EXPLICIT ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION TO REVEAL A CHARACTER’S PSYCHOLOGY, EMOTIONAL STATES AND MOTIVATION.

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