**Realist Style**

**Stylistic Characteristics of Realist Texts**: A stylistic analysis of realist texts should attempt to describe the devices used to construct the appearance of reality. Some of the defining stylistic features of realist texts are:

1. **They are readerly texts:** In the introduction to his analysis of a short story by Balzac, *S/Z,* Barthes defines a **‘readerly’** text as one which enables the reader to be a ‘consumer’ of the meanings, narratives and characters which are presented to them by the text, whereas **a’writerly’** text is one which makes the reader actively engage in producing those meanings (1975:4). Readerly texts are those whose structures seem to be ‘smooth’ on the outside, the narration ‘flows’ and the language seems ordinary and natural. Writerly texts, on the other hand, challenge the reading process in some way, and make the reader work much harder to produce meanings from a range of different possibilities, undermining the ‘naturalness’ of the text.

We can illustrate this difference between readerly and writerly texts by using two contrasting examples: extract one is from *The Prodigal Daughter* by Jeffrey Archer and extract two from Russell Hoban’s novel *Ridley Walker*.

1

It had not been an easy birth, but then for Abel and Zaphia Rosnovski nothing had ever been easy, and in their own ways they had both become philosophical about that. Abel had wanted a son, an heir who would one day be chairman of the Baron Group. By the time the boy was ready to take over, Abel was confident that his own name would stand alongside those of Ritz and Statler and by then the Baron would be the largest hotel group in the world. Abel had paced up and down the colourless corridor of St.Luke’s Hospital waiting for the first cry, his slight limp becoming more pronounced as each hour passed. Occasionally he twisted the silver band that encircled his wrist and stared at the name so neatly engraved on it. He turned and retraced his steps once again, to see Doctor Dodek heading towards him.

2 There is the Hart of the Wud in the Eusa Story that were a stage every knows that. There is the hart of the wood meaning the verýes deap of it thats a nother thing. There is the hart of the wóod where they bern the chard coal thats a nother thing agen innit. Thats another thing. Berning the chard coal in the hart of the wood. That’s what they call the stack of wood you see. The stack of wood in the shape they do it for chard coal berning. Why do they call it the hart tho? That’s what this here story tels of.

The first extract makes few demands on the reader. There is little difficulty or effort involved in interpreting this text. The characters and events are presented through third person narration, the hospital setting is familiar to the majority of readers, the action of a father pacing the corridor, waiting for the birth of his child is recognizable (even stereotypical), and the language does not draw attention to itself in any way.

The second extract, in contrast, not only foregrounds the use of language by using nonstandard spellings and grammar, it also poses problems of interpretation for the reader. Meaning is not transparent in this text. The first person narrator points out that there are three possible meanings for the ‘Hart of the Wud’, and none of them is straightforward to understand.

Reading writerly texts often involves a process of rereading; something that Barthes claims is ‘contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society’ (1975:15).

2. **The language of the text is not foregrounded** (i.e. it does not draw attention to itself and is a mirror of reality)

3. **Third Person Omniscient narrator**

The presence of an ‘omniscient narrator’ in realist texts allows the writer to build up a picture of the world of the text and the people in it as if they were real. The narrator not only tells the story, but also comments on and makes judgements about the events and the characters. The passage below is taken from George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch;* Dorothea, a young woman with a provincial upbringing, is engaged to Mr Casaubon. She hopes he will teach her Latin and Greek, in part so that she can help him in his work:

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She would not have asked Mr Casaubon at once to teach her the languages, dreading of all things to be tiresome instead of helpful; but it was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek. Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly. As it was, she constantly doubted her own conclusions, because she felt her own ignorance: how could she be confident that one-roomed cottages were not for the glory of God, when men who knew the classics appeared to conciliate indifference to the cottages with zeal for the glory? Perhaps even Hebrew might be necessary—at least the alphabet and a few roots—in order to arrive at the core of things, and judge soundly on the social duties of the Christian. And she had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband; she wished, poor child, to be wise herself. Miss Brooke was certainly very naive with all her alleged cleverness. Celia, whose mind had never been thought too powerful, saw the emptiness of other people’s pretensions much more readily. To have in general but little feeling, seems to be the only security against feeling too much on any particular occasion.

4. **Representation of place and Time**

Another device found in realist writing to create an impression of a real world is to describe places in great detail, which was taken to even further lengths in the ‘naturalist’ novels (Hardy, Zola and Flaubert in France) of the nineteenth century. In the following extract from Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1878), the narrator gives a detailed description of a place called ‘the Hall Farm’ which paints a very vivid picture of the building and surrounding land:

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Evidently that gate is never opened; for the long grass and the great hemlocks grow against it; and if it were opened, it is so rusty that the force necessary to turn it on its hinges would be likely to pull down the square stone built pillars, to the detriment of the two stone lionesses which grin with a doubtful carnivorous affability above a coat of arms, surmounting each of the pillars. It would be easy enough, by the aid of the nicks in the stone pillars, to climb over the brick wall with its smooth stone coping; but by putting our eyes close to the rusty bars of the gate, we can see the house well enough, and all by the very corners of the grassy enclosure. It is a very fine old place, of red brick, softened by a pale powdery lichen, which has dispersed itself with happy irregularity, so as to bring the red brick into terms of friendly companionship with the

limestone ornaments surrounding the three gables, the windows, and the door place. But the windows are patched with wooden panes, and the door, I think, is like the gate—it is never opened: how it would groan and grate against the stone floor if it were!

**-** There is also a concern in realist novels to situate the narrative **in real, historical time, by referring to events that actually took place, ranging from the very specific to more general references to a given historical perio**d:

Our tale begins in 1793; about seven years after the commencement of one of the earliest of those settlements, which have conduced to effect that magical change in the power and condition of the state, to which we have alluded.

**5. Representation of dialogue:** Realist writers are known for their excessive use of dialogue dialogue that captures the idioms of natural speech and creates a sense of reality.

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