

# **American Realism**

## **Introduction to American Realism**

American Realism was a literary movement that emerged in the latter half of the 19th century, specifically after the Civil War, roughly from the 1860s to the early 20th century. It marked a shift from the idealized, romanticized depictions of life in earlier American literature (such as Romanticism) to a more direct, unvarnished portrayal of reality. Realist authors aimed to depict life as it truly was, without exaggeration or idealization.

Unlike Romanticism, which focused on emotion, imagination, and the sublime aspects of nature, Realism was concerned with the everyday lives of ordinary people, addressing social, economic, and political issues. Realist writers often emphasized the ordinary struggles of common people, their social conditions, and the realities of the human experience, including aspects like poverty, class, race, and morality.

## **Historical Context: The Birth of Realism**

The rise of American Realism coincided with several significant events in American history:

1. **The Civil War (1861–1865):** The war had a profound impact on the nation, causing deep divisions and challenging the country's ideals. The horrors of war, the struggles of Reconstruction, and the emotional aftermath contributed to a demand for literature that portrayed reality in a more grounded and truthful manner.
2. **Industrialization:** Following the Civil War, the U.S. underwent rapid industrialization. Factories, railroads, and urban centers expanded, and America saw the growth of cities, while rural life began to change. Realist writers focused on the challenges and injustices that arose from these social and economic changes, including labor exploitation and the disparity between rich and poor.
3. **Urbanization:** As people migrated from rural areas to cities for work, new urban problems emerged, including poverty, crime, and social inequality. Realism was the literary response to these issues, depicting both the hardships and the complexities of urban life.
4. **The Rise of Photography:** The invention and popularization of photography during the 19th century also played a role in the development of Realism. Photographers were able to capture the "real" world, and this influence was reflected in literature, where writers aimed to create an equally accurate representation of reality.

## **Key Characteristics of American Realism**

1. **Focus on Everyday Life:** Realist writers focused on the lives of ordinary people, especially those who were working-class, poor, or marginalized. Their characters

often faced the challenges of daily life, such as economic hardship, social constraints, and moral dilemmas.

2. **Objectivity and Truthful Depiction:** Realist authors aimed to depict life as it truly was. This meant avoiding idealization and romanticism. Instead of writing about grand, heroic deeds or noble characters, they wrote about flawed, complex individuals who struggled with their own limitations.
3. **Detailed Descriptions:** Realist literature is known for its attention to detail. Writers often described characters, settings, and events with precision, capturing the minutiae of life in an effort to paint an accurate and complete picture of reality.
4. **Social Criticism:** Realists were deeply interested in social issues, such as class inequality, racial tensions, and the effects of industrialization. Through their work, they often critiqued societal norms, injustices, and the way systems of power operated to maintain inequality.
5. **Character over Plot:** While Realist novels often had complex plots, the focus was on character development rather than on sensational or dramatic events. The characters' inner lives and their psychological states were often explored in depth.
6. **Dialect and Vernacular:** Realist writers used local dialects and colloquial speech to reflect the authentic voices of their characters. This gave a sense of realism by showing how people in different regions or social classes actually spoke.
7. **THE SETTINGS ARE URBAN— THE HOMES, FACTORIES, OFFICES, RESORTS, AND OTHER PLACES FREQUENTED BY BOTH THE UPPER AND LOWER MIDDLE CLASS.**
8. **THE PLOTS ARE BASED ON PRACTICAL AND ETHICAL PROBLEMS**
9. **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE CHARACTERS IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE EXTERNAL ACTION OF THE PLOT—**
10. **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.
11. **THE NARRATIVE TONE MAY BE NEUTRAL, MILDLY COMIC, OR SATIRIC.**
12. **EXPOSITION IS NOT LIMITED TO EXPLICIT INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL IN THE INITIAL PARAGRAPHS OF THE TEXT, BUT SCATTERED THROUGHOUT.**
13. **AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE IT IS REVEALED THROUGH THE DIALOGUE, AS IN DRAMA.**
14. **IN KEEPING WITH THE RELATIVELY OBJECTIVE TONE, THE AUTHOR AVOIDS PERSONIFICATION AND STRONGLY AFFECTIVE TERMS IN ESTABLISHING THE SETTING.**

15. THE DESCRIPTIVE DETAILS COME FROM DELIBERATE OBSERVATION OF REAL PEOPLE AND PLACES; THE REALIST NEITHER INVENTS NOR EXAGGERATES, BUT OBSERVES AND RECORDS.
16. THE CHARACTER'S—OR EVEN THE NARRATOR'S—VALUES ARE IMPLIED OR SUGGESTED THROUGH THE DETAILS RATHER THAN EXPRESSLY STATED.
17. 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.

### **Major Authors and Works of American Realism**

1. **Mark Twain (1835–1910):**
  - **Notable Works:** *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)
  - Twain is one of the most famous American Realist writers. His works, particularly *Huckleberry Finn*, explore themes of race, class, and morality in the pre-Civil War South. Twain's use of dialect and vivid descriptions of life along the Mississippi River captured the real struggles of American society, especially issues surrounding slavery and freedom.
2. **Henry James (1843–1916):**
  - **Notable Works:** *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)
  - James, known for his complex narratives and deep psychological insight, focused on the lives of upper-class Americans and Europeans. His works explore social relationships, the conflicts between American innocence and European sophistication, and the internal struggles of individuals. His emphasis on character psychology and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals makes him a key figure in Realist literature.
3. **William Dean Howells (1837–1920):**
  - **Notable Works:** *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *A Modern Instance* (1882)
  - Howells is often called the "Dean of American Realism." He focused on depicting ordinary Americans and the middle class. His works critique the social, moral, and economic forces at work in American society, particularly the rapid rise of capitalism and its effects on individuals.
4. **Kate Chopin (1850–1904):**
  - **Notable Works:** *The Awakening* (1899), *The Story of an Hour* (1894)
  - Chopin explored the lives of women in late 19th-century America. Her works challenge traditional gender roles and depict the complex inner lives of her female characters, particularly regarding issues of marriage, sexual identity, and personal freedom.
5. **Stephen Crane (1871–1900):**
  - **Notable Works:** *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893)

- Crane is known for his portrayal of individuals facing the brutality of life. *The Red Badge of Courage* is a masterpiece about the Civil War, capturing the fear, confusion, and bravery of a soldier in the face of battle. His works often explored social and psychological issues and the way external circumstances shape human behavior.

6. **Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945):**

**Notable Works:** *Sister Carrie* (1900), *An American Tragedy* (1925)

- Dreiser's works focus on the harsh realities of life, particularly the impact of ambition and societal pressures on individuals. He often examined how people are influenced by their environment, particularly in urban settings, and how success or failure is determined by social forces.