**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.

In America, Samuel Clemens was the early pioneer of Realism. Writing under the pen name **Mark Twain**, he was noteworthy for his faithful reproduction of vernacular speech patterns and vocabulary. He more or less gave birth to “local color,” a sub-genre of the novel that still enjoys wide appeal today. Replicating natural speech required not just great listening skills, but a sense of how the written version sounds to the imagination. In addition to the use of vernacular, Twain was an innovator in focusing on middle and lower class characters. Previously, novels had concentrated on the experiences of the elite. Presumably, the upper crust enjoyed seeing their lives of privilege reflected back to them in art, while salt of the earth readers had something to aspire to and fantasize about. It was a revolutionary concept to incorporate unremarkable characters into an art form as serious as the novel. In a development that continues to bewilder, [*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*](http://www.online-literature.com/twain/huckleberry_finn/) is one of the most frequently banned books in the public school system. One imagines that certain language is indeed offensive; however Twain was doing nothing other than representing honest speech.

A great friend of Mark Twain, and an eminent American realist in his own right, was the magazine editor **William Dean Howells**. In charge of the *Atlantic* *Monthly* for several years, Howells exercised a lot of authority over the currents of taste on his side of the ocean. In his role as editor, he was instrumental in promoting the fame of literary rising stars, such as Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Sarah Orne Jewett. Howells wrote copious volumes of fiction of his own, and was an unqualified success in that regard. For a time, he was widely considered the most accomplished of all American Realists. That reputation faded somewhat and today Howells’s work as an editor is held up as his most important contribution. That being said, several of his novels are in the first rank of American Realism. Published in 1885, the ironically titled [*The Rise of Silas Lapham*](http://www.online-literature.com/william-dean-howells/silas-lapham/) tells the story of an ambitious businessman who tumbles out of fortune through his own mistakes and poor judgment. It is an anti-success story, and illustrates one of the central ideas of Realism, that of crafting honest narratives rather than feel-good sentimental fantasies.

Without a doubt, American expatriate Henry James represents the most skilled and accomplished practitioner of Realism in fiction.. Arguably his most famous work was the novella [*Daisy Miller*](http://www.online-literature.com/henry_james/1100/), which relates how a young and rich American girl touring Europe is victimized by sophisticated schemers, with no compunctions about right or wrong. At the height of his powers, Henry James crafted intricate novels that featured completely realized characters. He was remarkable for his ability to dispense with commentary or subjectivity within his narratives. The reader sees the events through the eyes of the characters; James the author makes himself as invisible as possible. In terms of prose style, he was admired for the simplicity and directness of his language, a quality not generally noted during the Victorian Period. His most successful novel was *The Portrait of a Lady*, published as one volume in 1881.

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.

**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.