

## REALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** This article investigates not only the impact of realism in literature on contemporary literary movements, but also its enduring influence on the portrayal of everyday life, social issues, and human experience. With examining the characteristics of realism in American literature, such as regionalism, social issues, psychological realism, objectivity, and its influence on later literary, this study sheds light on the importance of realism as a foundational element in the American literary tradition.

**Keywords:** Realism, American literature, regionalism, social issues, psychological realism, objectivity, literary movements, human experience, contemporary literature.

**Аннотация:** В этой статье исследуется не только влияние реализма в литературе на современные литературные движения, но и его устойчивое влияние на изображение повседневной жизни, социальных проблем и человеческого опыта. Изучая характеристики реализма в американской литературе, такие как регионализм, социальные проблемы, психологический реализм, объективность и его влияние на более позднюю литературу, это исследование проливает свет на важность реализма как основополагающего элемента в американской литературной традиции.

**Ключевые слова:** Реализм, американская литература, регионализм, социальные проблемы, психологический реализм, объективность, литературные движения, человеческий опыт, современная литература.

**Izoh:** Ushbu maqola nafaqat adabiyotidagi realizmning zamonaviy adabiy harakatlarga ta'sirini, balki uning kundalik hayot, ijtimoiy muammolar va inson tajribasini tasvirlashdagi doimiy ta'sirini ham o'rganadi. Amerika adabiyotidagi realizmning mintaqaviylik, ijtimoiy muammolar, psixologik realizm, ob'ektivlik va uning keyingi adabiyotga ta'siri kabi xususiyatlarini o'rganib chiqqan holda, ushbu tadqiqot realizmning Amerika adabiy an'analarida asosiy element sifatidagi ahamiyatini yoritadi.

**Kalit so'zlar.** Realizm, Amerika adabiyoti, regionalizm, ijtimoiy muammolar, psixologik realizm, ob'ektivlik, adabiy harakatlar, inson tajribasi, zamonaviy adabiyot.

"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”.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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.’<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup>Pizer, Donald. "The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: From Howells to London." Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Howells, William Dean. "Criticism and Fiction." [University of Nebraska](http://www.unl.edu) Press, 2002.

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. 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. 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, Cynthia J., and Marius Bewley. “American Realism: New Essays.” Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002

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.”<sup>4</sup>

Other journalists, popularly known as “muckrakers,” reported on the human cost of industrialization and urbanization in fact-based non-fictional works. 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).

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