

Realism & Naturalism in the American Literature

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I. The Realistic period: (1865-1900).

During this period modern America was born and the American dream has been intellectually lost. After the civil War a strong critical movement toward realism appeared. Realism has been defined by one of its most vigorous advocates, W.D.Howells, as “the truthful treatment of materials” (i.e. realism= verisimilitude “the appearance of being true or real”). * What is realism:

Realistic fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction: romantic writing is said to present life as we would have it be, idealized, more picturesque, more adventurous, more heroic than the actual; realism, to present an accurate imitation of life as it is. The realist sets out to write a fiction which will give the illusion that it reflects life as it seems to the common reader. To achieve this effect, the realist is deliberately selective in his material and prefers the average, the common place, and the everyday over the rarer aspects of the contemporary scene. His characters, therefore, are usually of the middle class or (less frequently) the working class-people without highly exceptional endowments, who live through ordinary experiences of childhood, love, marriage, parenthood, infidelity and death, and who may, under special circumstances, display something akin to heroism. * Major forms of realism in USA:

A. The local color fiction: The local color fiction was the first manifestation of realism in America. It is also referred to as “regionalism”, it means fidelity in writing to a specific geographical region accurately representing its speech, manners, customs, folklore, beliefs, dress, and history. Among many others, Mark Twain adopted that kind of regionalism. He portrayed life in the Mississippi through his famous The adventure of Huckleberry Finn. Many critics and readers see this novel as a great work on American democracy. It is Huck who tells the story throughout, and his language, so limited yet so expressive, is a literary achievement of the first order. One of the great novels of the world, Mark Twain’s story set a new style in fiction by showing the literary possibilities in common, everyday American speech. B. The psychological novel: Henry James is one of the fathers of the psychological novel. He was a realist but not interested in the conditions of the society. What he was interested in is the inner life as well as human relationships, which are scrutinized (examine or inspect closely) i.e. he was the observer of the mind. In major scenes in his fiction he shows up time so that we can sense every nuance in a conversation or a character’s action. C. The social novel: William Dean Howells was a champion of realism. Novels, he believed, should present life as it is, not as it might be. Accordingly his books study types of persons prominent in American life of the time: women in the professions, in ‘Dr. Breen Practice’ (1881); the self-made man, in ‘The Rise of Silas Lapham’ (1885); factory workers and summer resort people, in ‘Annie Kilburn’ (1889). His books also discuss serious social questions honestly: divorce, in ‘A modern instance’ (1882); and social justice, in ‘A Hazard of New Fortunes’ (1889). Taken together, Howells’ novels give a full, clear picture of American life in the last years of the 19th century. II. Naturalism (the harsher form of realism 1900):

Naturalism is sometimes claimed to be an even accurate picture of life than is realism. Naturalism is a mode of fiction that was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a special philosophical thesis. This thesis, a product of post-Darwinian biology in the mid-nineteenth century, held that man belongs entirely to the order of nature; and does not have a soul or any other connection with a religious or spiritual world beyond nature; that man is therefore merely a higher-order animal whose character and fortunes are determined by two kinds of natural forces, heredity and environment. He inherits his personal traits and his compulsive instincts, especially hunger and sex, and he is helplessly subject to the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which he was born. The French novelist Emile Zola, beginning in the 1870's, did much to develop this theory in what he called *Le roman expérimental* (i.e. the novel organized in the mode of a scientific experiment). Zola and naturalistic writers, such as the American Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and James Farrell, try to present their subjects with an objective scientific attitude and with elaborate documentation often including an almost medical frankness about activities and bodily functions usually unmentioned in earlier literature. They tend to choose characters who exhibit strong animal drives, such as greed and brutal sexual desire, and who are victims both of their glandular secretions within and of sociological pressures without. The end of the naturalistic novel is usually "tragic", but not, as in classical and Elizabethan tragedy, because of heroic but losing struggle of the individual mind against gods, enemies, and circumstances. The protagonist of the naturalistic plot, a pawn to multiple compulsions, merely disintegrates, or is wiped out. * The major important American naturalists:

1. Stephen Crane: wrote novels about characters America wanted to disregard and he described them -and the bleak world in which they lived- so graphically that after his death his works became classics. He composed his first novel, for example, about a prostitute. He wrote another entitled *The Red Badge of Courage* about what it meant to be in battle. Set in the civil war, it was marked by convincing sense of reality in spite of the fact that Crane himself has never experienced combat. 2. Theodore Dreiser: was perhaps the first important new American voice of the 20th century. His naturalism and his choice of subject often echo his predecessor, Stephen Crane, but his style and methods are very different. Dreiser treats, through the surface details, the social forces which produce the murderer and the prostitutes. In his novels, he tries to treat human beings scientifically, rather than intuitively with the poetic insight so much prized by writers of the 19th century. He saw that life is hard and found, in social Darwinism and in the theory of Zola and naturalists, the explanation that man is the product of social processes and forces and of an inevitable kind of social evolution. His tone is always serious, never satirical or comic. His major work *Sister Carrie*. 3. Frank Norris: another important follower of Zola, he was preoccupied with *La bête humaine* in a book called *McTeague*. It is a book that depicts a naturalistic process (a movement toward degeneration), there is a chain of events which once set in motion releases forces (energies/ conflicts).

All these novels were written in the mode of literary naturalism, which invited writers to examine human being objectively, as a scientific studies nature. In portraying ugliness and cruelty, the authors refrained from preaching about them; rather they left readers to draw their own conclusions about the life so presented. Naturalistic fiction shocked many readers; but in revealing hitherto neglected areas of life, it greatly broadened the scope of fiction.