

Unit 04: American Realism 1860 - 1919

Content Area: **English**
Course(s): **English 3**
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Unit Introduction

REALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE 1860-1919

Definitions

Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality" or "verisimilitude," realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing. Although strictly speaking, realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life. A reaction against romanticism, an interest in scientific method, the systematizing of the study of documentary history, and the influence of rational philosophy all affected the rise of realism. According to William Harmon and Hugh Holman, "Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence" (*A Handbook to Literature* 428).

Many critics have suggested that there is no clear distinction between realism and its related late nineteenth-century movement, [naturalism](#). As Donald Pizer notes in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London*, the term "realism" is difficult to define, in part because it is used differently in European contexts than in American literature. Pizer suggests that "whatever was being produced in fiction during the 1870s and 1880s that was new, interesting, and roughly similar in a number of ways can be designated as *realism*, and that an equally new, interesting, and roughly similar body of writing produced at the turn of the century can be designated as *naturalism*" (5). Put rather too simplistically, one rough distinction made by critics is that realism espousing a deterministic philosophy and focusing on the lower classes is considered [naturalism](#).

In American literature, the term "realism" encompasses the period of time from the Civil War to the turn of the century during which William Dean Howells, Rebecca Harding Davis, Henry James, Mark Twain, and others wrote fiction devoted to accurate representation and an exploration of American lives in various contexts. As the United States grew rapidly after the Civil War, the increasing rates of democracy and literacy, the rapid growth in industrialism and urbanization, an expanding population base due to immigration, and a relative rise in middle-class affluence provided a fertile literary environment for readers interested in understanding these rapid shifts in culture. In drawing attention to this connection, Amy Kaplan has called realism a "strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change" (*Social Construction of American Realism* ix).

Realism was a movement that encompassed the entire country, or at least the Midwest and South, although many of the writers and critics associated with realism (notably W. D. Howells) were based in New England. Among the Midwestern writers considered realists would be Joseph Kirkland, E. W. Howe, and Hamlin Garland; the Southern writer John W. DeForest's *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* is often considered a realist novel, too.

Characteristics

(from Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*)

- Renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. Selective presentation of reality with an emphasis on verisimilitude, even at the expense of a well-made plot
- Character is more important than action and plot; complex ethical choices are often the subject.
- Characters appear in their real complexity of temperament and motive; they are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past.
- Class is important; the novel has traditionally served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class. (See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*)
- Events will usually be plausible. Realistic novels avoid the sensational, dramatic elements of naturalistic novels and romances.
- Diction is natural vernacular, not heightened or poetic; tone may be comic, satiric, or matter-of-fact.
- Objectivity in presentation becomes increasingly important: overt authorial comments or intrusions diminish as the century progresses.
- Interior or psychological realism a variant form.
- In *Black and White Strangers*, Kenneth Warren suggests that a basic difference between realism and [sentimentalism](#) is that in realism, "the redemption of the individual lay within the social world," but in sentimental fiction, "the redemption of the social world lay with the individual" (75-76).

The realism of James and Twain was critically acclaimed in twentieth century; Howellsian realism fell into disfavor as part of early twentieth century rebellion against the "genteel tradition."

"The basic axiom of the realistic view of morality was that there could be no moralizing in the novel [. . .] The morality of the realists, then, was built upon what appears a paradox--morality with an abhorrence of moralizing. Their ethical beliefs called, first of all, for a rejection of scheme of moral behavior imposed, from without, upon the characters of fiction and their actions. Yet Howells always claimed for his works a deep moral purpose. What was it? It was based upon three propositions: that life, social life as lived in the world Howells knew, was valuable, and was permeated with morality; that its continued health depended upon the use of human reason to overcome the anarchic selfishness of human passions; that an objective portrayal of human life, by art, will illustrate the superior value of social, civilized man, of human reason over animal passion and primitive ignorance" (157). Everett Carter, *Howells and the Age of Realism* (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1954). **Other Views of Realism**

"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."

-- George Parsons Lathrop, 'The Novel and its Future,' *Atlantic Monthly* 34 (September 1874):313 24.

"Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material." --William Dean

Howells, ["Editor's Study," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* \(November 1889\)](#), p. 966.

"Realism, n. The art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads. The charm suffusing a landscape painted by a mole, or a story written by a measuring-worm." --Ambrose Bierce *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911)

Campbell, Donna M. "Realism in American Literature, 1860-1890." *Literary Movements*. Dept. of English, Washington State University. Web. July 8, 2014

Progress Indicators for Reading Literature

LA.RL.11-12.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence and make relevant connections to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
LA.RL.11-12.3	Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
LA.RL.11-12.5	Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
LA.RL.11-12.6	Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).
LA.RL.11-12.9	Demonstrate knowledge of and reflect on (e.g., practical knowledge, historical/cultural context, and background knowledge) eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century foundational works of literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.
LA.RL.11-12.10a	By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems at grade level text-complexity or above with scaffolding as needed.

Progress Indicators for Reading Informational Text

LA.RI.11-12.3	Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
LA.RI.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).
LA.RI.11-12.6	Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.
LA.RI.11-12.9	Analyze and reflect on (e.g., practical knowledge, historical/cultural context, and background knowledge) documents of historical and literary significance for their themes, purposes and rhetorical features, including primary source documents relevant to U.S. and/or global history.

Progress Indicators for Writing

LA.W.11-12.2.C	Use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.
LA.W.11-12.2.D	Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.
LA.W.11-12.3.A	Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.
LA.W.11-12.3.B	Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
LA.W.11-12.3.D	Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
LA.W.11-12.3.E	Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.
LA.W.11-12.5	Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, trying a new approach, or consulting a style manual (such as MLA or APA Style), focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

Progress Indicators for Speaking and Listening

LA.SL.11-12.1.B	Collaborate with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and assessments (e.g., student developed rubrics), and establish individual roles as needed.
LA.SL.11-12.1.C	Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
LA.SL.11-12.1.D	Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.
LA.SL.11-12.3	Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.
LA.SL.11-12.5	Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

Progress Indicators for Language

LA.L.11-12.3.A	Vary syntax for effect, apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts.
LA.L.11-12.4.B	Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech (e.g., conceive, conception, conceivable).
LA.L.11-12.4.D	Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase (e.g., by checking the inferred meaning in context or in a dictionary).
LA.L.11-12.5.B	Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.

Essential Questions

- 1: How does the writing reflect social changes and concerns?
- 2: What are the features of realism in literature?
- 3: How has modern literature been influenced by these trends?

Content/Skills

The Literature Selections include, but are not limited to:

1. Ambrose Bierce- "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" Page 287
2. Mark Twain-"The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" Page 381
3. Mark Twain-"Baker's Blue Jay Yarn"
4. Mark Twain-"How to Tell a Story" Page 387
5. Mark Twain-The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
6. Mark Twain- Life on the Mississippi Page 393
7. Bret Harte-"The Outcasts of Poker Flat" Page 403
8. Edwin Arlington Robinson-"Richard Cory" Page 415
9. Edwin Arlington Robinson-"Miniver Cheevy" Page 416
10. W.E.B. DuBois-The Souls of Black Folk Page 497
11. Booker T. Washington-Up From Slavery Page 495
12. Paul Laurence Dunbar- "We Wear the Mask" Page 493
13. Kate Chopin-"The Story of an Hour" Page 481
14. Kate Chopin-The Awakening
15. W.E.B. DuBois-"Song of the Smoke"
16. Jack London-"To Build A Fire" Page 419
17. Jack London-The Call of the Wild
18. Bret Harte-"The Luck of Roaring Camp"
19. Mark Twain-The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

20. Ambrose Bierce-"The Devil's Dictionary"

21. Ambrose Bierce-"Chickamauga"

Supplementary Materials include, but are not limited to:

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn DVD (1993) Directed by Stephen Sommers

"A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" Mark Twain

The Prince and the Pauper Mark Twain

Vocabulary Applications include, but are not limited to:

Honors/Accelerated:

Mirror and Windows: Connecting with Literature, American Tradition UNIT 4 words in context

Literary terms and related words in context to reading selections

College Prep:

Advanced Vocabulary Skills, Fourth Edition

Literary terms and related words in context to reading selections

Independent Reading Selections tied to Themes or Time Period:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanovel/timeline/naturalism.html>

<http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/realbib.htm>

<http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/regbib.htm>

