

Realism in American
Literature
1865-1914

American Literature



The
Puritan
Era

Age of
Reason

Romanticism

Transcendentalism

Realism

Modernism

Contemporary and
Post-Modern Period

1600 - 1750

1750-1800

1800-1840

1840-1855

1865-1915

1916-1946

1946 - Present

The Civil War

- A nation divided
- Interrupts Transcendentalism
- Walt Whitman
 - Transition writer: late Transcendental poet, early Realist
 - *Leaves of Grass*
 - “O Captain, My Captain”



Historical Context

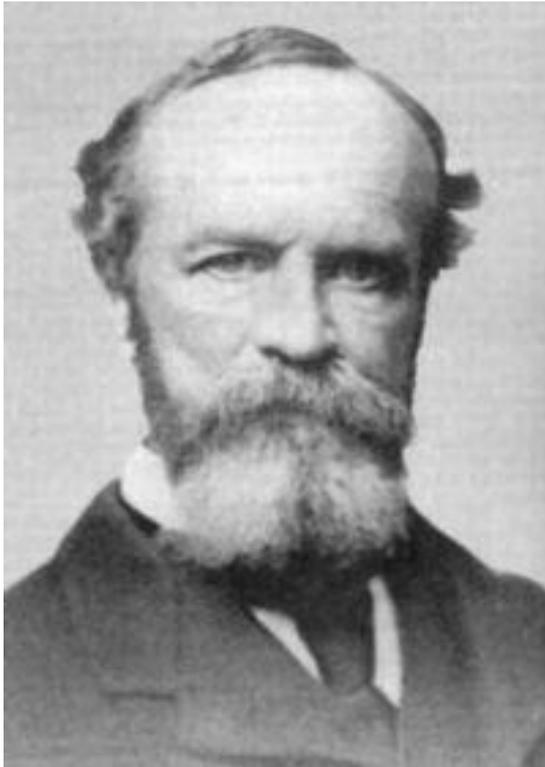
- Population of the United States is growing rapidly.
(1865 -1915)
- Science, industry and transportation are expanding.
- Literature also was growing, but most new writers were not Romantics or Transcendentalists. They are Realists.
- The “Frontier” did not exist as before; its legacy changed and impacted Realists in its new form.
- The aftermath of the Civil War meant that Americans were less certain and optimistic about the future.
- The idealism of the Romantics and philosophy of Transcendentalists seemed out of date and irrelevant to many readers.

Realism vs. Romanticism

“The trapper was placed on a rude seat which had been made with studied care...His body was placed so as to let the light of the setting sun fall full upon the solemn features. His head was bare, the long thin locks of gray fluttering lightly in the evening breeze. ”

He was most fifty and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and you could see his eyes shining through...there warn't no color in his face; it was white...a white to make a body sick...a tree-toad white, a fish belly white. As for his clothes, just rags, that's all.

Philosophy: American Pragmatism



- Truth is tested by its usefulness or practical consequences;
- Truth is a commodity accessible on the surface of things;
- It's perceptible to the senses and verifiable through experience;
- Permanent truths exist apart from the material world—the mind of God, Plato's ideal forms

William James

From these social changes come two literary movements

- Realism,
 - first begun as the local color movement
- Naturalism

Realism

- Begins in France, as *realisme*, a literary doctrine calling for “reality and truth in the depiction of ordinary life.”
 - Grounded in the belief that there is an objective reality which can be portrayed with truth and accuracy as the goal;
 - The writer does not select facts in accord with preconceived ideals, but rather sets down observations impartially and objectively.

A Reaction against Romanticism



- These authors sought to portray life as they saw it, insisting that the ordinary and local were just as suitable for art as the sublime.

“Nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material. “

William Dean Howells

Realism began in America as Local Color

- A synthesis of romantic plots and realistic descriptions of things;
- Definition of Local Color:
 - Literature that focuses on the characters, dialect, customs, topography, and other features particular to a specific region that exploits the speech, dress, mannerisms, and habits of that specific region .

Realism in American Literature

- The purpose of the writing is “to instruct and entertain”
- Character is more important than plot.
- Subject matter is drawn from real life experience.
- The realists reject symbolism and romanticizing of subjects.
- Settings are usually those familiar to the author.
- Plots emphasized “the norm of daily experience”
- Ordinary characters

Some Writers from Realism

- Stephen Crane
 - The Red Badge of Courage
- Willa Cather
 - O Pioneers!
 - My Antonia
- Bret Harte “Outcasts of Poker Flats”
- Jack London
 - The Call of the Wild
- Kate Chopin
 - Story of an Hour
- Mark Twain
 - Life on the Mississippi
 - The Adventures of Tom Sawyer
 - The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Literary Style and Concerns

- Uniformity and diversity
- “The art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads...and a story written by a measuring worm.” ~ Ambrose Bierce
- Capturing the commonplace
- For Twain and other authors, narrative voice is one of division – before and after war; conventions versus personal conviction
- Writing in vernacular and local dialect
- Local stories
- Nature again
 - Yes, its beauty, but also its hardship and how it wears the human spirit down

Other Ideologies

- God
- Government
- Education
- Man's Purpose in Life
- **American Dream**
- Evidence of Influence

Mark Twain

- Born as Samuel Longhorn Clemens, November 30th, 1835 in Missouri.
- Traveled throughout the United States during his adult life, including to California and Europe.
- Much of his writing stemmed from his travel and boyhood experiences.
- Was well known for his sense of humor and his satirical writing style.
- Died in 1910

Some Mark Twain Quotes:

- A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way.
- Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter
- Classic: A book which people praise and don't read.
- Don't let schooling interfere with your education.
- Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.

Mark Twain on slavery and Huckleberry Finn

- **In those old slave-holding days the whole community was agreed as to one thing:...the sacredness of slave property. To help steal a horse or a cow was a low crime, but to help a hunted slave...or hesitate to promptly betray him to the slave-catcher ... was a much baser crime, & carried with it a stain, a moral smirch which nothing could wipe away. That this sentiment should exist among slave-owners is comprehensible--there were good commercial reasons for it--but that it should exist & did exist among the paupers, the loafers the tag-rag & bobtail of the community, & in a passionate & uncompromising form, is not in our remote day realizable. It seemed natural enough to me then; natural enough that Huck & his father the worthless loafer should feel it & approve it, though it seems now absurd.**

It shows that that strange thing, the conscience--the unerring monitor--can be trained to approve any wild thing you want it to approve if you begin its education early & stick to it.

Objectives of Naturalism

- Presentation is objective and detached
- Subject matter—raw and unpleasant experiences which reduce people to degrading circumstances in order to survive;
- Setting commonplace and un-heroic
- Novelist discovers qualities in lower class characters usually associated with heroes
 - Suggestion that life on lowest levels is more complicated

Themes in Naturalism

- Man is fundamentally an animal, without free will;
- Governed by determinism
 - External and internal forces, environment or heredity control behavior;
 - Characters have compensating humanistic values which affirm life;
 - Struggle for life becomes heroic and affirms human dignity
- Pessimistic view of human capabilities—life is a trap

The Ultimate Problem in Realism

- Whose reality is portrayed?
 - Those in power, usually male, white and privileged
- Whose reality is marginalized and ignored?
 - Those without power: women, people of color, people of lower economic means