

# AMERICAN REALISM

Lit. 215

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

## The Local Color Movement (1865-1880)

The second half of the 19th c. saw America becoming increasingly self-conscious at the very time regional writers began to write about its various aspects. Americans wanted to know what their country looked like, and how the varied races which made up their growing population lived and talked. It was the age of the first mappings and surveyings of the West; it was the age in which the rails of the first transcontinental railroad had bound East and West.

The **East** asked what kinds of people leading what kinds of life are at the end of those bands of iron?

The **Western** regionalists answered: Men and women like yourselves, but dressed differently, speaking differently, with different social ways: fantastic deserts, mile deep canyons, mountains high enough to bear snow the year round, forests with trees as wide as man can stretch and wider, villages where the only woman was the town whore, camps where the only currency was gold-dust.

Writers of the **South** told of swamps where the cypress grew out the green-scummed water and the moss grew down into it, and of the cities where the obsessive blood-consciousness of its inhabitants testified to the mingling of the races.

**Mid-western** authors narrated the tales of the plains where a man could be lost in the dust or ruined by hailstorm; of cities where fortunes were made or lost in a day's trading on the beef or grain exchanges.

The literary map of America, so long a small corner of light in the east, with a glimmer on the southern coast, began to be totally illuminated.

[Bret Harte](#) and [Mark Twain](#) brought in California, Nevada, and Missouri; Edward Eggleston the hills of Indiana; [George W. Cable](#) and William Harben the Delta county and North Georgia; Mary Noailles Murfree the mountains of

Tennessee; [Sarah O. Jewett](#) and [Mary E. Wilkins](#) freeman the back country of New England; Harold Frederick the upstate valleys of New York; E. W. Howe the village life of Kansas; [Hamlin Garland](#) the towns and plains of the Dakotas and Wisconsin; Henry Blake Fuller the cement cliffs of Chicago; Henry Harland the tenements of Manhattan.

"At its most compelling, American local-color realism points towards an imaginative sociology that is at once objective and visionary. The images it yields up compose the fragments of a book of the people, an essential history of their lives' common conditioning. Paradoxically, at this level of realization, the particular local circumstances begin to appear incidental. The same stories are told, in more or less detail, on all sides." (Berthoff, Warner. *The Ferment of Realism; American Literature, 1884-1919*. NY: Free P 1965. PS214 .B4, page 100)

### **Principles Of Realism**

- 1. Insistence upon and defense of "the experienced commonplace".
- 2. Character more important than plot.
- 3. Attack upon romanticism and romantic writers.
- 4. Emphasis upon morality often self-realized and upon an examination of idealism.
- 5. Concept of realism as a realization of democracy.

### **Identifying Characteristics Of Realistic Writing**

- 1. The philosophy of Realism is known as "descendental" or non-transcendental. The purpose of writing is to instruct and to entertain. Realists were pragmatic, relativistic, democratic, and experimental.
- 2. The subject matter of Realism is drawn from "our experience," - it treated the common, the average, the non-extreme, the representative, the probable.
- 3. The morality of Realism is intrinsic, integral, relativistic - relations between people and society are explored.
- 4. The style of Realism is the vehicle which carries realistic philosophy, subject matter, and morality. Emphasis is placed upon scenic presentation, de-emphasizing authorial comment and evaluation. There is an objection towards the omniscient point of view.

## **Realistic Complexity And Multiplicity**

Complexity refers to the interwoven, entangled density of experience; multiplicity indicates the simultaneous existence of different levels of reality or of many truths, equally "true" from some point of view.

## **Realistic Characterization**

There is the belief among the Realists that humans control their destinies; characters act on their environment rather than simply reacting to it. Character is superior to circumstance.

## **The Use Of Symbolism And Imagery**

The Realists generally reject the kind of symbolism suggested by Emerson when he said "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." Their use of symbolism is controlled and limited; they depend more on the use of images.

## **Realistic Techniques**

- 1. Settings thoroughly familiar to the writer
- 2. Plots emphasizing the norm of daily experience
- 3. Ordinary characters, studied in depth
- 4. Complete authorial objectivity
- 5. Responsible morality; a world truly reported

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 5: Late Nineteenth Century - American Realism - A Brief Introduction." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*, 2011. Web, 12 December 2012.