

American Realism, Naturalism and Regionalism 1865-1914

Historical Context

The industrial revolution that took place at the end of the 19th century changed our country in remarkable ways. People left rural homes for opportunities in urban cities. With the development of new machinery and equipment, the U.S. economy became more focused on factory production; Americans did not have to chiefly rely on farming and agriculture to support their families. At the same time, immigrants from all over the world crowded into tenements to take advantage of new urban opportunities. In the end, the sweeping economic, social, and political changes that took place in post-war life allowed American Realism to prevail.

- roots of American realism lie in the experiences of the Civil War, the frontier, and in cities
- rapid industrial growth in America (post-Civil War) and expansion (transportation improvements); change from agrarian (farming, rural) way of life to urban (cities) existence
- changes brought problems: urban slums, farm issues, labor unrest
- increased diversity in the nation: farmers, Native Americans, freed slaves, Chinese and European immigrants--all faced problems
- the reality of the Civil War impacted people's views; led to uncertainty about the future

Romanticism, Realism and Naturalism

American realists believed that humanity's freedom of choice was limited by the power of outside forces. At another extreme were naturalists Stephen Crane and Jack London who supported the ideas of the determinism movement. Both Mark Twain and Stephen Crane wrote in the **Realist** tradition. Realist literature, developed in the late nineteenth century, differs from **Romantic** literature because it attempts to depict life accurately. Romantic literature is based on the conviction that intuition, emotion and imagination are superior to reason. On the other hand, Realism, as the name implies, is rooted in reality. Realist literature generally takes one of two directions—the direction of Mark Twain, who satirizes human behavior and social ills, and the **Naturalist** direction which considers the interrelationship between man and nature, seeing humanity as relatively insignificant within the universe. Characters act due to internal forces (heredity) and environment and they are subject to laws of nature beyond their control. Naturalists argued that individuals have little or no choice/free will because a person's life is dictated by heredity and the external environment. In summary, here's how the genres portrayed their characters:

ROMANTICISM	REALISM	NATURALISM
Subjective Free Will Optimistic—Emotional Exotic Settings Extraordinary Events/Supernatural Unusual Protagonists	Objective Free Will Sometimes Optimistic Everyday Settings Ordinary Events Common Man Characters	Objective Deterministic Pessimistic—Emotional Coldness Everyday Settings Ordinary Events Common Man Characters
Genre	American Authors	Perceived the individual as...
Romantics	Ralph Waldo Emerson Nathaniel Hawthorne Herman Melville	a god; idealistic figure
Realists	Henry James Mark Twain	person with depth, ability to make ethical choices & act on environment
Naturalists	Stephen Crane Jack London	a helpless object who is nevertheless heroic

REALISM:

*“Realism is a manner and method of composition by which the author describes **normal, average life, in an accurate, truthful way**” -Lars Ahnebrink*

- **Realism:** portrayed ordinary life and characters and events in an objective, almost factual way, free from subjective prejudice, idealism, or romantic color
 - Spurred by scientific and technological changes (the need for empirical evidence)
 - The camera captured reality with and unprecedented objectivity (i.e. Matthew Brady’s Civil War photographs)
 - American writers eventually felt the need to observe and describe their settings and characters with as much accuracy as possible
 - The intuitive (subjective) leap of the romantics was replaced by accurate depictions of setting, customs, manners and speech (objective)

NATURALISM:

*“In contrast to a realist, a **naturalist** believes that a character is fundamentally an animal, without free will.” - Lars Ahnebrink*

Naturalism was an offshoot of Charles Darwin's and Herbert Spencer's theories on evolution. In his monumental 1859 work *Origin of the Species*, Darwin theorized that environments alter the biology and behavior of organisms; the organisms whose traits promote survival reproduce more successfully and adapt new, more efficient traits. Spencer applied Darwin's ideas to the human environment, and Social Darwinism became one of the dominant philosophies in the late 19th century.

Naturalists saw evolution as proof that the world is deterministic and that humans do not have free will. Since the evolutionary world is based on a series of links (each of which causes the next), any action humans make is not, as we might otherwise believe, a "first" step. Rather, the action has been caused by prior environmental, social, and biological factors beyond our individual control.

- **Naturalism:** suggests that lives and events are decided by forces beyond our control; forces such as environment, heredity, and chance determine one's destiny; **Determinism**— position that human life is determined by environmental forces, not by human free will
 - Survival (often survival in brutal nature), determinism, violence—man against nature, man against himself
 - Law of the Jungle or “survival of the fittest”
 - The "brute within" each individual, composed of strong and often warring emotions: passions, such as lust, greed, or the desire for dominance or pleasure; and the fight for survival in an amoral, unpredictable, and indifferent universe.
 - Nature is an indifferent force acting on the lives of human beings.
 - Naturalistic texts often describe the futile attempts of human beings to exercise free will in this deterministic universe that reveals free will as an illusion.
 - Characters are often poorly educated, lower class; controlled by forces of heredity, animalistic instinct, raw passion; no free will or choice—determinism; cannot control “the brute within”

REGIONALISM/LOCAL COLOR:

- **sought to capture the essence of life in the various regions of our growing country; regional dialect/speech, landscape, customs, beliefs**

The writing during this period was also very regional. The industrial revolution called for standardization, mass production of goods and streamlined channels of distribution. America was leaping into a new modern age and people feared that local folkways and traditions would be soon forgotten. Responding to these sentiments, realistic writers **set their stories in specific American regions**, rushing to capture the "local color" before it was lost.

They drew upon the sometimes grim realities of everyday life, showing the breakdown of traditional values and the growing plight of the new urban poor. American realists built their plots and characters around people's ordinary, everyday lives. Additionally, their works contained **regional dialects** and extensive dialogue which connected well with the public. As a result, readers were attracted to the realists because they saw their own struggles in print. Conversely, the public had little patience for the slow paced narratives, allegory and symbolism of the romantic writers. America was shifting into higher gear and readers wanted writers who clearly communicated the complexities of their human experiences.