

Historical Development of Realism in American Literature

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Abstract: The article discusses social and economic changes in North America; it further studies literary realism which showed the harsh reality of daily life. Moreover, the article determines discrepancies between realism and naturalism; it also examines major realist writers such as Henry James, Mark Twain, and William Dean Howells. These authors wanted to show life as it was using their portrayal of social concerns, emphasizing the challenges and complexity of individuals in an industrial society.

Keywords: realism, daily lives, real-life experiences, artistic intentions.



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INTRODUCTION.

It is known that the method sets out the general principles for creating a literary work. There were significant changes after the Civil War in North America. The improvement of industry, the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, the invention of the first telegraph, and the emergence of new communication technologies helped the United States to establish itself as a unified nation.

Due to the immigration process intensifying in Europe and Asia, immigrants began to work as cheap labor force in the northern, eastern, and western urban centers in the second half of the XIXth century. As a result of the economic development in North America, the position of the middle class began to rise for the first time. Moreover, the social, political, and cultural life of the country started to improve. African immigrants demanded their political rights and social equality from the government. Workers in factories and plants formed trade unions to defend their rights and freedoms. The Industrial Revolution in North America began in the mid-XIXth century, and after the Civil War (1861–1865), the peak of the Industrial Revolution helped the United States transform from a rural country made up of separate "small islands" into an urbanized one.

METHODOLOGY.

The literary analysis approach consists of the following:

Historical Contextualization: The article examines historical events, such as the Civil War, industrialization, and the rise of large corporations, to show how they influenced literature and the depiction of real-life experiences in the works of American authors.

Literary Analysis: The article analyzes previous events including the Civil War, Industrial Revolution, and corporate expansion. It demonstrates how these events influenced literature and how American writers dealt with real-life events.

Comparative Study: The research also explores how realistic writing differs from different techniques of writing, romanticism and naturalism among them. It shows how authors wished to be realistic writers who drifted away from the emotional and imaginary world to focus on "real life" issues.

Theoretical Framework: This study emphasizes realism as described by Michael Anesko using literary theory. The article explores the philosophical theories of naturalism and realism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

The development of technology influenced the formation of transportation and communication systems and contributed to economic growth; large business monopolies, companies, and corporations were established in the USA. The mass production of goods that were previously difficult to obtain, along with the creation of new supply chains, began to have a great impact on the daily lives of the American people. As the economy developed, new jobs were created for people; even middle-class women started working in large cities for the first time. In the industrial sector, workers fought to secure their rights and they demanded higher wages, while businesses focused on profit-making were also established during this period. In the second half of the XIXth century, significant changes occurred in the social life of North America.

The country of North America joined the ranks of developed capitalist states, and the United States became an industrialized nation. As a result of the Civil War in North America from 1861 to 1865, the U.S. industry began to develop. By the 1870s and 1880s, large monopolies were established, and these monopolies began making profits at the expense of workers. By the beginning of the XXth century, the capitalist system in North America reached an advanced stage, and uprisings against the existing system began among workers. Monopolistic corporations emerged in the world, and the financial capital of capitalist countries such as England, France, Germany, and the U.S. increased. The intense competition among capitalist states led to the outbreak of world wars.

In North America, a large bourgeois society formed, and it began exerting its pressure on the lower class. The United States expanded its territory at the expense of colonial countries (such as Spain's Puerto Rico and the Philippine Islands) in a very short period. During this period writers highlighted how wealthy capitalists were exploiting the working class as slaves. Large monopolies also extended their influence over the arts and culture. They took control of the media, establishing massive newspaper trusts. Newspapers, magazines, and books were all under the control of these trusts.

Writers who appreciated "big business" were under the control of large monopolies and they were allowed to publish their artistic works. A literary group known as the "Boston School" was formed, and its members preferred to depict a dreamlike, imaginative world, full of fantasy rather than describe real life. American writers of the XIXth and XXth centuries considered depicting the profound changes in the country as one of the key tasks in their artistic works. One of the realist writers, Henry James, began creating literary works that expressed the "pathos of truth." The authors of this period depicted the increasingly complex and unstable social system in their literary works, which seemed unstable to many people.

The first manifestations of realism can be observed in ancient literature in Homer's *Iliad*. As the source of Greek literature, the collective life of the people was chosen, with the epic reflecting the lifestyle of the people, and it is clear that one of the ancient Greek writers' tasks was to highlight the important aspects of people's lives. Realistic works give the reader the opportunity to enter the

"real" social and natural world. One of the realist writers who stands out with his thoughtful reflections, Henry James, emphasizes that "literary realism allows the reader to enter into the real world directly and without mediation." James said that the main purpose of literary realism is to teach the reader the truth of life in his essay *The Art of Fiction*.

Realistic writers must create a "world of imagination in life" and a "realistic environment." Literary realism stands out from other literary movements due to its unique characteristics. Realistic works differ from other movements in terms of the author's worldview, style, and technique. In realism, it is observed that the reader should forget the artificial elements of the artistic work for a long time and feel as if they are perceiving the truth itself. Frank Norris acknowledged: "Realistic fantasy does not resemble the reality, but rather something that looks real."¹

For realist writers, "direct discourse" is important, and the speech of the characters is presented directly. Realistic writers used dialect and colloquial language when presenting the speech of characters in their works. Realism in American literature developed on the basis of romanticism; realistic prose was created with a distinctive, complex style. E. Sinclair, B. Brecht, and T. Dreiser created their literary characters according to their artistic intentions. They preferred to reveal the negative sides of the main characters rather than their positive traits. For example, in Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*, the protagonist Clyde, in order to achieve a higher social status, drowns his beloved in the river, thus turning the main character into a complex figure.

One of the writers who created the realistic direction of North America is Mark Twain. In his novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the main character, Huckleberry Finn, uses colloquial speech words such as "warn't" instead of "wasn't" and "laying around" instead of "lying around." The writer used two forms of the negative, such as "couldn't make" and "nothing else out," which are typical of the speech of a young teenager. As Philip J. Barrish emphasized, realist writers preferred to narrate the events of their literary works from the first-person perspective. The author strived to express his point of view through character speech. Although Mark Twain never admitted it, he was considered to be the main hero of his realistic works. In his opinion, romantic works have a negative impact not only on readers but also on society as a whole. Another American writer who worked in the realistic direction is Dean Howells. In American literature, Dean Howells succeeded in introducing the concept of "democracy" into science. The author acknowledged that realism helps people get to know each other and form bonds of friendship.²

Writers who create realistic works not only choose people from the upper and middle classes but also negroes as main characters for their literary works. Dean Howells emphasized, "Realist writers prefer to depict the mundane and familiar moments of life rather than the heroic deeds found in human life."³

Michael Anesko studied the main characteristics of the literary Realism movement in America during the 1970s. In his essay *Recent Critical Approaches*, he succeeded in investigating the distinctive features of Realism in literature of the late XIXth and early XXth centuries. Writers were active during this period and they focused on depicting the events of the Civil War and World War I in their literary works. Michael Anesko emphasized that realism and naturalism have distinct philosophical meanings. Specifically, realism revealed the true and natural reality of life, while naturalism focused on the physical aspects of human nature and experience.

¹ Phillip J. Barrish. *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism*. – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. – P.42.

² Phillip J. Barrish. *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism*. – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. – P.42.

³ The same source.

According to V. D. Howells, literature aims to reflect the social and political development of 19th-century life and the ideas directed towards the unification of the country. The concept of scientific inquiry and democracy served as the primary means for all American citizens to live well. In literature, the main task of the literary movement of realism was to renew past values. That is, the writer was expected to reject the emotions and imaginary concepts found in earlier romantic works, as realistic works were based on real-life events.⁴

Although realism in XIXth-century literature may appear "meaningless," it had to provide an impartial depiction of social life. In 1882, Garland acknowledged, "Nothing is permanent, and everything changes; everything in the world is relative. In particular, trends in artistic literature, painting, and drama evolve over time."⁵ The history of American literature, unlike that of other countries, is relatively short, yet American literature has continuously captured the attention of readers worldwide. The literary works of XIXth and XXth-century have been highly appreciated by critics around the world with their various artistic forms and genres, prose and poetry, drama, and diverse artistic methods.

The first American novelist, Henry James, became world-renowned through his 20 novels, 112 stories, and 12 plays. Throughout his career, the author created works reflecting the clash between the Old World — the intellectuality and cleverness of Europeans — and the sincerity and simplicity of the representatives of the New World —in America. In 1880-1881, Henry James wrote novels such as *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, which represented the peak of American psychological realism. In these works, James portrayed the complex situations of women's love as a result of the collision between American and European cultures. During his scientific research, Henry James helped form the principles of modern novel writing. He referred to the events and phenomena that were known to him as "reality." For this reason, through the art of words, he depicted the inner world of humans, forming the genre of the subjective novel. In his works such as *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew*, James portrayed the truth of life through the perceptions of his characters. In these works, subjectivity played a large role, and the inner world of the characters was revealed in their behaviors.

Three main issues can be observed in the literary works of the skilled writer Henry James: 1. The artistic American sense of sincerity is portrayed with European politeness; 2. The conflict between art and reality; 3. The replacement of ethical criteria with spiritual criteria when defining goodness and evil. Another American realist writer is Mark Twain who deeply had been learning life events for his twenty years' literary career. Mark Twain chose various genres and he expressed his ideas about humanism and democracy in his literary works. In his novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the writer described the adventures of a young boy from an ordinary family. As a realist writer, Mark Twain recalled his childhood memories and portrayed his friends in this novel. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the protagonist's desire symbolizes the ideas of freedom and liberty.

Ernest Hemingway stated that "the Era of American Realism began with Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." William Faulkner acknowledged, "Mark Twain was truly one of the first realist American writers, and we all consider ourselves his successors." Henry Blake Fuller, the author of *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893), which depicted real-life events in the state of Chicago in North America, became well-known for his amazing realistic works. He portrays Chicago's skyscrapers, narrow streets, and nature. American realist writers wrote many works about how the cities of the country expanded, and transformed into new, modern ones, and how cities not only grew in size but also developed economically.

⁴ Phillip J. Barrish. The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism. – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. – P.18.

⁵ Donald Pizer. Introduction: The Problem of Definition – P.6.

In the second half of the XIXth century and the early XXth century, population of Chicago increased dramatically: it was 110,000 in 1860, and it had reached 1,700,000 by 1900. Henry Blake Fuller provided information about how the population growth contributed to changes in the city's view in his novel *The Cliff-Dwellers*. By the 1900s, two-thirds of the population of the United States began to live in cities. Throughout North America, public schools were opened, and the government started to pay attention to children's education and upbringing. This transformation in the United States is reflected in the literary works of the country's writers, who depicted contemporary society and social issues in their artistic works. Jack London, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Henry James, and John Steinbeck showed the complex facets of real life and they created masterpieces in the realistic tradition.⁶

CONCLUSION.

Finally, the works of realist authors showed the harsh realities of their time, recording the intricate nature of real life. The works of authors like Henry James, Mark Twain, and Jack London highlighted the conflicting problems within the classes of society. These authors opted for more realistic, less adorning presentations of life, relying upon straight dialogue, colloquialisms, and characterizations. In Realism, it is observed that the reader should forget the artificial elements of the artistic work for a long time and feel as if they are perceiving the truth of life. These works provide some of the best examples of realism as evidence of its lasting influence on the depiction of America's society and culture in a pivotal Era of change.

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⁶ H.B.Fuller. *The Cliff-Dwellers*. Ebook.