

# 19<sup>th</sup> Century Realism in American Literature

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Realism, as a literary movement sought to portray everyday life, and basic daily life complexities faced by ordinary people with a focus on authenticity and detail. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a pivotal period in American literature, marked by a transition from romantic to realism. The impact of Civil war, industrialization, urbanization, along with the expansion of American frontiers, all led to shift in societal changes. The stories written portrayed a significant evolution in writing skills, the credit to shaping the literary landscape of their time along with laying the groundwork for the upcoming generation of writers was done by writers like Mark Twain, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Kate Chopin, and Theodore Dreiser through their works.

### **Emergence of Realism**

It had emerged as a reaction against the idealism and emotional excess of romanticism. While the romantic writers celebrated individualism, nature, and the sublime, the realists wrote about mundane, pain, suffering, and cruel reality of existence. The rise of journalism, which focused on factual reporting, the enlightenment, which emphasized on the reason and observation can be assumed to be the roots of realism. The significant changes the United States underwent during the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as, Industrial Revolution, the Civil War, and the Western expansion, served as the base to the writings as they sort of started exploring the intricacies social dynamics and moral ambiguity of life. Few of the well known works are "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" by Mark Twain, "The Portrait of a Lady" by Henry James. "The Rise of Silas Lapham" by William Dean Howells, "The Awakening" by Kate Chopin, and "Sister Carrie" by Theodore Dreiser.

### **Impact of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism**

The groundwork for future literary developments was laid by the realist movements of 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature. Its emphasis on authenticity, social critique, and complex characters influenced subsequent movements, including modernism and naturalism. Realism continues to resonate in contemporary literature, as writers strive to capture the nuance of human existence. The way for later movements such as feminist literature and social realism was paved by the exploration of social issues and the portrayal of marginalized voices in realist literature. The counter narrative to the romantic ideals of the previous era was provided by the realist authors through their work. The detailing of the characters and the society illustrated the complexities, and moral dilemma faced by people on daily bases. The themes and concerns addressed still remains relevant along with reminding us the power of literature to mould our understanding of the world around us.

The legacy extends much beyond the immediate impact on literature, it also has influenced various forms of arts, such as theatre, film, visual arts, etc. in cinema, it has inspired film makers to showcase the struggles and triumphs of common man. Directors such as John Ford and Martin Scorsese in their films have authentically portrayed the American life by drawing on principles of realism. The enduring influence of realist literature was seen through the character development and social critique in the films. Moreover, the authors even nowadays continue to find intricacies of human experience therefore, it is quite evident that the the theme of realism have found its place even in the contemporary literature.

JhumpaLahiri, Colson Whitehead, and Marilynne Robinson still somewhere or the other continue on realist tradition as they are often found to be addressing about identity crisis, belonging, and the human condition at their workplace. The hallmark of modern literature still remains 'the emphasis on character driven narratives and social commentary', which demonstrate the lasting impact of realist movement.

The rise of naturalism, a subgenre to realism, applies scientific principles to literature, emphasizing on the role of environment and heredity in shaping human behavior. Authors like Frank Norris, and Jack London took initiative to explore themes of survival and determinism, getting influenced by witnessing the harsh reality of the rapid changing world.

### **Realism and the American Dream**

The concept of American Dream emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is intricately linked to the themes explored in realist literature. The disillusionment that accompanied the quest for the American Dream was the idea of success, the pursuit of happiness and these were the two things that the realist authors grappled about. Theodore Dreiser's "Sister Carrie" as it

follows the life of a young woman who seeks a better life in the bustling city of Chicago, serves as the poignant example of this theme. Dreiser's portrayal of the struggles and societal forces faced by Carrie which eventually seems to shape her fate and underscores the complexities of ambition and the harsh realities of the life in America. Similarly, the character designed by Mark Twain often confronts the limitations of their dreams, which reveals the gap between lived experiences of individuals and the idealized notion of success. By examining the American Dream through realist lens, we could observe the illumination of systemic barriers and social inequalities that often hindered individuals from achieving their aspirations. The authors fearlessly challenging of the notion that hard work and determination would eventually lead you to success encouraged more and more readers to reconsider the validity of the American Dream.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we continue to engage with literature, the themes and concerns raised by 19<sup>th</sup> century realism remains relevant, it also keeps reminding us of the power of storytelling which reflected the hard human experiences of the era in America. The movement's legacy endures legacy endures the works of contemporary authors and artists and the intricacies of life will continue to resonate for years to come ensuring the exploration of authenticity, social critique. The evolution of various literary movements were the impact of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism. Modernism, which emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was built on realist tradition by exploring further the difficulties of human consciousness and the fragmented nature of reality. Techniques such as stream-of-consciousness were used which delve into the inner lives of their characters, reflecting the psychological complexities, and the influence of realism's focus on character depth. So it is quite evident that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Realism in American literature has left the hallmark and is still serving as the key factors for many of the writings written in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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