



The Literary Realism Movement: A Response to Romanticism

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Lesson Transcript

Ask a Question

In this lesson, we will learn about Realism in American literature, how this new literary movement grew out of Romanticism and what circumstances in our changing nation made that literary shift possible.

Literary Realism

Anyone who thinks they might be able to muster up a decent definition of **Realism** in American literature probably can. Realism is just as it sounds - it was a style and type of writing that emerged during a specific time period in this country's literary history when writers sought to portray life as it really was: real characters in real lives with real jobs and real problems. Why is this significant, you might ask? Well, Realism in American literature, which lasted from **1865-1910**, was a reaction to and a rejection of Romanticism. In order to really understand the weight of this last statement, it's time to look at a little history.

Context: Romanticism

Romanticism in literature in the U.S. took hold from about 1830-1865. While you might guess that Romanticism is a period during which everybody wrote about love, this isn't always the case. Yes, love was very much a popular topic, but so were larger ideas like optimism and opportunity. Basically, this was a time of growth in the United States, and the literature reflected that. Remember the promise of expansion that the frontier adventure brought. Think about changes in industry and that spirit of hope and limitless potential.

As a result, Romantic literature focused on larger themes and topics: the potential of good vs. evil, the idealization of love, the common man as a hero. This literature was formal in the sense that the language and theme elevated the work to a higher purpose: to communicate great lessons or to ask important questions of the reader. The fancy language, some argue, was also just a case of a group of American authors trying to prove they were as elegant and smart as the English. It was plot-focused, imaginative, mostly very positive, emotionally intense and at times - you guessed it - not very realistic. This was purposeful. Ultimately, Romantic literature strove to communicate a message that was very much a reflection of the spirit of the time.



Literary realism reflected 19th-century urbanization and industrialization

Ask a Question

Changes: Emergence of Realism

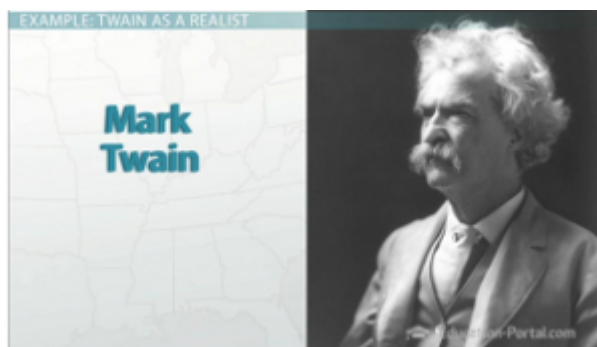
Well, things change. And so did the U.S. As the 19th century churned on, the country's immigrant population and working base grew, while simultaneously, changes in industry became life-altering. Machines were built. Manufacturing became easier as the factory life grew. Urban areas expanded with both business and home life. Cities became the center of the action. Ultimately, this industrialization and urbanization led to major economic and social changes. This part is important. In this new world, there grew a greater divide between the rich and the poor, and for the first time, (pay attention here) there was a larger, literate working-class population. And there was a need for literature that reflected their lives. Their real lives.

Realism: Characteristics and Authors

So, because of this growth of this industrial nation, a social shift really did take place. Life at this point was not about the promise of westward expansion anymore; rather, it was about working a job, feeding a family and dealing with the hand you were dealt. There really wasn't anything romantic about it. Writers like **Mark Twain**, **William Dean Howells**, **Rebecca Harding Davis** and **Henry James** saw this gap in the landscape of literature at the time. So they began to write real stories with real characters who often spoke in a way that reflected their region, class, gender and age. Mark Twain especially is known for the use of dialect. Rather than looking towards an ideal, these authors focused on an accurate representation of the middle class here and now.

You can imagine that the average Joe did not live a life that could drive a fascinating plot - in fact, realism was not driven by fantastical or page-turning plots. It was defined, however, by the author's use of characterization in the way each character behaved, thought, acted, reacted and just lived. No writing tricks, very little reliance on elevated language or literary devices. Just a middle-class Joe whose struggles with family, work, class and time are revealed through a snapshot of his life. A little disclaimer here - while not all stories will have every characteristic of Realism, they are all character-driven, and they all show a cross-section of American life that had not previously been portrayed. A few specific writers even crafted their stories and characters around certain regions and included aspects of local color - or local customs and personality - that made the area unique and the stories themselves authentic and real. This facet of Realism was called **Regionalism**.

Example: Mark Twain as a Realist



Ask a Question

Twain is known for his realist fiction set in the Deep South

Mark Twain is one of the most recognizable Realist writers. His use of the Deep South as a backdrop for his stories, along with his distinctive style and voice, really make him one of the best examples of regionalism (which, again, is a distinct facet of some works of realism - the unique voice and description do make these stories more real). And if you think about *Huck Finn* - his characters, their lot in life, the appearance of class and race in the story, and the way things turn out - the author is clearly one the most distinct examples of Realism. Unique, specific, and iconic in the literary fabric of America.

Lesson Summary

In summary, Realism was a movement that followed Romanticism. In sharp contrast to Romanticism, the writing of this time was characterized by the choice of the everyday - the use of very typical and authentic settings, believable characters and very relatable plotlines. In order to support the goals of these works, authors, for the first time, created dialogue that truly represented class, gender and geographic location. The topics of class and money often appeared in these works. It's important to remember that this had never been done before, so Realism was a real acknowledgement of the working class. To the reader, it felt honest, and it was ultimately easy to sympathize with characters.

Lesson Objectives

After watching this lesson, you should be able to:

- Explain the difference between Romanticism and **Realism** in American literature
- Describe the characteristics of Realism and understand how it formed in response to Romanticism
- Identify **Mark Twain** and explain how his writing exemplifies Realism and **Regionalism**