

## Essay on Realism in Literature

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The modern American Realism has the historical background of the Nineteenth Century U.S. Civil War (1861- 1865). This Civil War, which was fought between the industrial North and the agricultural, slave-owning South, had tremendous effects on the psyche of the nation. In fact, the War had its toll upon the innocent optimism of the young democratic nation. It led to the streamlining the concept of idealism which Americans had cherished before the War. The study of the evolution of America as a democratic nation shows that there was a group of thinkers and activists who strongly advocated human rights in the country that was marred by the presence of inhuman practice of slavery. The idealists strongly opposed slavery and voted in favour of its abolition. However, this purpose was defeated by the advent of Civil War. It resulted in increased emphasis on individuality and material progress.

The American Civil War led to the unprecedented progress of the industrial sector. American land, which was rich in natural resources like oil, iron, coal and gold, gave momentum to the development of the industry. American economy prospered leading to the rise of new millionaires' class of industrialists who got prominence in political affairs of the country. This was the era of Darwin and his theory of the survival of the fittest. Such an emphasis on evolution theory gave rise to certain unethical practices in all walks of life including industry and politics.

The rapid industrialization led to its own problems. As most of the industries were located in the urban area, a large number of people migrated from villages to the cities. By 1920s, almost half of the American population was living in the twelve big industrial cities giving birth to the problems of poverty, housing, sanitation, poor working conditions and low salary. The governmental policy of promoting the industry had given free-hand to the industrialists. The laws were passed which were favourable to the industry. It resulted in the over-all dissatisfaction and displeasure among the working classes. The workers got united under the banner of Labour unions. The number of strikes increased attracting the attention of the nation towards the problems of the workers.

These social aspects are reflected in the literary works of the time. For example; The novels like Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and Jack London's *Martin Eden* realistically depict the severe effects of industrialization on the poor sections of the society. There is a marked difference in the treatment of the characters of these novels from the characters depicted in traditional novels. These writers have given distinct individuality to their characters which is the effect of industrialization as it has broken the familial and social ties.

Even the World War I had its effects on the American society and the literature created in it. It is observed that the sensitive authors were greatly shocked by the material and psychological damages of the War on the common people. The drab realities of the war-infected society made these writers come out of the Romantic and illusionary vision of literature, thereby forcing them towards modernism. The literature of the post-war period has true reflection of the 19th Century realism and naturalism. Modernism with its emphasis on the depiction of the aftermaths of the War is effectively penned down by these writers in their works. The writers of this period have depicted all the problems and issues of the modern society through their works. All the social classes of the American society and their manners are minutely described in realistic style by the authors of this period. It seems that presenting the colourful panorama of American life without any distortion has been the motto of the authors. And they followed it without fail thereby making their works the true mirror of the society in which it was created.

The rapid industrialization of the nation had made the writers of the time to think that such a pace of industrialization will destroy the traditional American culture. Due to the industrialization, there had been certain changes and transitions in American culture. It was feared that the modernisation of the country will damage the regional cultural beauty and variety of the nation. Naturally, there came a vogue of writing about the regional aspects like the folklore, social and religious traditions and

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various local beliefs and disbeliefs. The writers set their stories against the local background. The characters depicted in these stories clearly exhibited the local traditions of the region from which they were taken. Even these works sometimes depicted the conflict between the traditional values and the values that were being propagated by the modern industrialized social structure. The depiction of the 'poor' and his plight had become one of the most recurrent themes in the literary works created during this period. The truthful description of the lives of the common American people required the use of the dialectical variety of the language. American writers used these dialects effectively which further added to the authenticity of their works. Such kind of literature certainly attracted the readers towards it as they felt it closer to their actual lives.

In brief, it can be said that realism in American literature was a movement that faithfully chronicled the minute details of every possible aspect of ordinary American life. Such kind of faithfulness on the part of the writers made their works immensely popular among the readers whose lives they depicted. The readers of this period are seen believing in the realistic representation of the actual lives. They seemed to think that whatever imaginary was in fact illusory and had no value whatsoever. Consequently, the authors of the time considered the realism to be "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material".

Such kind of the attitude of both the readers and the writers gave impetus to the realistic movement. It further moved to the investigative journalism as it brought to the people the so-called truth which only they believed. This transition was followed by the camera and its realistic capturing the events as they actually happened leading to the rising fascination of the people for the cinema.

In brief, the main characteristic features of this movement are as follows:

1. In this literature character is given more importance than the action and plot.
2. The characters are shown to be in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, and also to their own past.
3. The characters are usually seen controlling their destinies
4. There is a minute description of reality.
5. It is observed that the events described in realistic novels are usually plausible. There is no scope for the sensational, dramatic elements of naturalistic novels and romances in realistic novels.
6. The middle class has been the main interest of these novels.
7. The realistic novel is seen exploring the relations between people and the society in which they lived.
8. The reading of the realistic novel shows that there is definite purpose behind writing such a novel. It tends to instruct and to entertain the readers.
9. The choice of language for these works is as per the social standing of the characters depicted in them. They are written in the natural vernacular of the people.
10. The images are greater in number than the symbols as the realists believed in telling their stories in straightforward manner than disguising them behind the symbols.
11. These novels follow the principle of objectivity as they wanted to make the readers believe in their stories.