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THE DEVELOPMENT OF REALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Abstract: American literature developed rapidly, with Benjamin Franklin being the first widely read American author. It transitioned from romanticism to realism, with Washington Irving and Mark Twain making significant contributions. Realism in literature aimed to portray life as it truly is, focusing on ordinary people and events instead of romanticized versions. In America, realism emerged in the early 20th century across various art forms, depicting the impact of economic forces and emphasizing the present moment. Different scholars have defined realism based on criteria such as verisimilitude and objectivity, with a focus on capturing the essence of American reality. Women writers like Josephine Donovan have also contributed to the tradition of realism, offering a unique perspective on everyday life. In this movement, realism was seen as more suitable than romanticism for American literature, reflecting a shift towards modernism and a deep exploration of the present moment.

Keywords: Romanticism, women's realism, criteria, verisimilitude, objectivity, representativeness, literature, realism, prairie realism, reality, development, author, reflection, movement, tradition, American.

Introduction

American literature has a brief yet vibrant past. Benjamin Franklin was among the first popular American authors, with his clever sayings in “Poor Richard’s Almanack” shaping American identity. Washington Irving gained international renown with “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”, while James Fenimore Cooper depicted the nation's beauty in his “Leatherstocking Tales”. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson introduced individuality to poetry, and Mark Twain remains beloved for his distinct American humor and wisdom.

Realism, stemming from the Latin word for "material" or "actual," is a form of philosophical belief that reality exists independently of observers. It represents a departure from Romanticism and aims to depict life as it really is, focusing on ordinary people and events rather than fantastical elements. Literary realism, particularly evident in nineteenth-century French literature and later works, emphasizes contemporary life and society in a straightforward and unembellished manner. According to Jorge Luis Borges, the earliest example of realism in literature is found in the Icelandic Sagas, although this approach was later abandoned.

Realism in American literature also found expression through the works of William Dean Howells, known for his novel "The Rise of Silas Lapham," and Stephen Crane, whose "The Red Badge of Courage" depicted the psychological turmoil of a young soldier during the Civil War. These writers, among others, contributed to the movement by employing realism as a tool to expose societal truths and provide insightful commentary on the human condition. While realism

in American literature eventually gave way to new literary movements, its impact and legacy continued to reverberate through subsequent generations of writers. The emphasis on presenting an authentic representation of society, exploring the complexities of human experience, and addressing social issues remains a lasting contribution of realism to the American literary tradition.

In this exploration of the development of realism in American literature, we will delve into the historical context, examine the key writers and their notable works, analyze the thematic concerns that emerged during this period, and assess the enduring influence of realism on the literary landscape of the United States.

Literature review

Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. It would apprehend in all particulars the connection between the familiar and the extraordinary, and the seen and unseen of human nature. Beneath the deceptive cloak of outwardly uneventful days, it detects and endeavors to trace the outlines of the spirits that are hidden there; to measure the changes in their growth, to watch the symptoms of moral decay or regeneration, to fathom their histories of passionate or intellectual problems. In short, realism reveals. Where we thought nothing worth of notice, it shows everything to be rife with significance.

In America realism was an early 20th century idea in art, music and literature that showed through these different types of work, reflections of the time period. Whether it was a cultural portrayal, or a scenic view of downtown New York City, these images and works of literature, music and painting depicted a contemporary view of what was happening; an attempt at defining what was real. In America at the beginning of the 20th century a new generation of painters, writers and journalists were coming of age. Many of the painters felt the influence of older American artists such as Thomas Eakins, Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, James McNeill Whistler, Winslow Homer, Childe Hassam, J. Alden Weir, Thomas Pollock Anshutz, and William Merritt Chase. However they were interested in creating new and more urbane works that reflected city life and a population that was more urban than rural in America as it entered the new century.

Methodology

In the second half of the 19th century, the United States was transformed into a modern, industrial nation. As industrialization grew, so did alienation. Characteristic American novels of the period, for example by Stephen Crane and Jack London, depict the damage of economic forces and alienation on the weak or vulnerable individual. Survivors, like Mark Twain's Huck Finn, endure through inner strength involving kindness, flexibility, and, above all, individuality.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States underwent significant industrial, economic, social, and cultural transformations. These changes were fueled by a continuous influx of European immigrants and the expanding opportunities for international trade, which brought about prosperity and growth in America. American Realism in various forms of art aimed to capture the exhaustion and vibrancy of American life and landscape, focusing on ordinary people and everyday scenes. Artists drew inspiration from the sights, sounds, and emotions of urban life to create their works. In response to the fast-paced nature of the era, musicians introduced new tempos in their compositions, while writers shared stories that resonated with real American experiences. Departing from fantasy, American Realism paved the way for modernism, emphasizing living in the present moment.

Result and discussion

American Realism in literature emerged in the late 19th century as a response to romanticism and sentimentality often associated with female writers. Prominent authors in this movement included William Dean Howells, Henry James, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Jack London, Kate Chopin, and Stephen Crane. While American Realism influenced both European and American literature, it had distinct conventions and emerged later in the century compared to its European counterpart. This literary style was mainly seen in narrative fiction but was also occasionally applied to poetry and drama. The debate over the definition and significance of realism led to many essays being written by the same authors who were creating realistic works in the literary journals of the time.

Major authors and critics, including those involved in the contemporary debate, have asserted that realist literature must fulfill a social function or a moral purpose in an age and in a country where no official religion or state church existed to guide citizens on moral and ethical issues.

The era's increasing levels of class division and labor unrest prompted some authors, such as Edward Bellamy in *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, to offer possibilities for change in the form of “utopian realism.” David E. Shi (1995) has explained the apparent contradiction: “Although usually considered pure fantasies, most of the era's utopian novels reflected the impact of literary realism and the reform impulse. In their efforts to use an ideal future to shed light on the evils and excesses of the present, utopian authors, most of whom were practicing journalists, included meticulously detailed descriptions of current social conditions.” Other journalists, popularly known as “muckrakers,” reported on the human cost of industrialization and urbanization in fact-based non-fictional works. The most famous of these was Jacob Riis, whose 1890 collection of stories and photographs, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, became one of the most influential books of the late nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Narrators have generally maintained that William Dean Howells and Henry James were the foremost practitioners of American Realism, although many have included Mark Twain as part of the “great authorial triumvirate” of the realist movement, as Benardete has put it. An advocate for realism in his fictional works and as editor-in-chief of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Howells equated romanticism with the Old World aristocracy and therefore considered realism to be the convenient aesthetic for the emerging institution of American literature. Further, he believed that American Realism should concentrate on common life experiences which could instruct and inform readers rather than on the gross, immoral subject matter and pessimistic tone of European Realist literature. Howells's works include “A Modern Instance” (1882), “The Rise of Silas Lapham” (1885), and “A Hazard of New Fortunes” (1890). James was perhaps the most technically refined novelist and short story writer of the American Realist movement. He has been admired by many scholars as a true student of the craft, creating highly sophisticated narratives and inventing psychologically complex characters. For James, an artist did not need to gather information and employ factual events and situations to produce realistic literature; rather, an artist only needed to rely on the limitless imagination to recreate realistic characters, scenes, and circumstances. Some of James's most significant contributions to realism were “The Portrait of a Lady” (1881) and “What Maisie Knew” (1897). Twain had been widely regarded as the most celebrated late nineteenth-century American author to contribute to the realist movement.

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