

Definitions of Realism and Naturalism

From Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th Edition. San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1988. 152-154.

Realism and Naturalism. **Realism** is used by literary critics in two chief ways: (1) to identify a literary movement of the nineteenth century, especially in prose fiction (beginning with Balzac in France, George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America); and (2) to designate a recurrent mode, in various eras, of representing human life and experience in literature, which was especially exemplified by the writers of this historical movement.

Realistic fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction: the *romance* is said to present life as we would have it be, more picturesque, more adventurous, more heroic than the actual; realism, to present an accurate imitation of life as it is. This distinction is not invalid, but it is inadequate. Casanova, T. E. Lawrence, and Winston Churchill were people in real life, but their histories, as related by themselves or others, demonstrate that truth can be stranger than literary realism. The typical realist sets out to write a fiction which will give the illusion that it reflects life and the social world as it seems to the common reader. To achieve this effect the author prefers as protagonist an ordinary citizen of Middletown, living on Main Street, perhaps, and engaged in the real estate business. The realist, in other words, is deliberately selective in material and prefers the average, the commonplace, and the everyday over the rarer aspects of the social

p. 153

scene. The characters, therefore, are usually of the middle class or (less frequently) the working class—people without highly exceptional endowments, who live through ordinary experiences of childhood, adolescence, love, marriage, parenthood, infidelity, and death; who find life rather dull and often unhappy, though it may be brightened by touches of beauty and joy; but who may, under special circumstances, display something akin to heroism.

A thoroughgoing realism involves not only a selection of subject matter but, more important, a special literary manner as well: the subject is represented, or "rendered," in such a way as to give the reader the illusion of actual and ordinary experience. (*Structuralist critics* claim that the techniques used by a realistic author are in fact purely literary *conventions* and codes which the reader interprets, or *naturalizes*, so as to make the work seem a reflection of everyday reality.) Daniel Defoe, the first novelistic realist in the early eighteenth century, dealt with the extraordinary adventures of a shipwrecked mariner named Robinson Crusoe and with the extraordinary misadventures of Moll Flanders; but these novels are made to seem to the reader a mirror held up to real life by Defoe's reportorial manner of rendering the events, whether trivial or extraordinary, in a circumstantial, matter-of-fact, and seemingly unselective way.

In the broad sense of the term, authors of highly wrought prose fiction such as Fielding, Jane Austen, Balzac, George Eliot, and Tolstoy are realists, for they often render ordinary people and settings so richly and persuasively that they convince us that men and women really lived, talked, and acted in the way that they depict. Some critics, however, use the term "realist" more narrowly for writers who render a subject so as to make it seem a reflection of the casual order of experience, without too patently shaping it into a tightly wrought comic or ironic or tragic pattern (see *plot*). In this narrower sense, "realism" is applied more exclusively to works such as William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), Arnold Bennet's novels about the "Five Towns" (1902 and following), and Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* (1920). See also *magic realism*.

Naturalism is sometimes claimed to be an even more accurate picture of life than is realism. But naturalism is not only, like realism, a special selection of subject matter and a special literary manner; it is a mode of fiction that was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a particular philosophical thesis.

This thesis, a product of post-Darwinian biology in the mid-nineteenth century, held that a human being belongs entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul or any other mode of participation in a religious or spiritual world beyond nature; that such a being is therefore merely a higher-order animal whose character and fortunes are determined by two kinds of forces, heredity and environment. A person inherits personal traits and compulsive instincts, especially hunger, the accumulative drive, and sex, and is then subject to the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which that person is born. The French novelist Emile Zola, beginning in the 1870s, did much to develop this theory in what he called "le roman experimental (that is, the novel organized in the mode of a scientific experiment). Zola and later naturalistic writers, such as the Americans Frank Norris, Stephen Crane,

p. 154

Theodore Dreiser, and James Farrell, try to present their subjects with an objective scientific attitude and with elaborate documentation, sometimes including an almost medical frankness about activities and bodily functions usually unmentioned in earlier literature. They tend to choose characters who exhibit strong animal drives such as greed and sexual desire, and who are victims both of their glandular secretions within and of sociological pressures without. The end of the naturalistic novel is usually "tragic," but not, as in classical and Elizabethan *tragedy*, because of a heroic but losing struggle of the individual mind and will against gods, enemies, and circumstance. Instead the protagonist of the naturalistic plot, a pawn to multiple compulsions, usually disintegrates, or is wiped out.

Aspects of the naturalistic selection and management of materials and its austere or harsh frankness of manner are apparent in many modern novels and dramas, such as Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, 1895 (although Hardy largely substituted a cosmic determinism for biological and environmental determinism), various plays of Eugene O'Neill in the 1920s, and Norman Mailer's novel of World War 11, *The Naked and the Dead*. An enlightening exercise is to distinguish how the relation between the sexes is represented in a romance (Richard Blackmore's *Lorna Doone*, 1869), an ironic comedy of manners (Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813), a realistic novel (William Dean Howells' *A Modern Instance*, 1882), and a naturalistic novel (Emile Zola's *Nana*, 1880, or Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, 1925). Movements originally opposed both to realism and naturalism (though some modern works, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, 1922, combine aspects of all these novelistic modes) are *expressionism* and *symbolism* (see *Symbolist Movement*).

On realism: Walter L. Myers, *The Later Realism* (1927); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953); Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (1960); Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (1963); Rene Wellek, "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship," in *Concepts of Criticism* (1963); Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (1971).