FOCUS: BASIC 19TH CENTURY LITERARY TRENDS: *REALISM* AND *NATURALISM*

**REALISM**

* **Realism** as a literary doctrine originated in France. It called for “reality and truth” in the depiction of ordinary life.
* A reaction against Romanticism or a move away from romance and self-creating fictions;
* A great interest in the realities of life, everyday existence, what was brutal or sordid and class struggle;
* The background and training of the new authors was middle-class and journalistic rather than genteel and academic;
* Influenced by Zola, Flaubert, Balzac, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy;
* Insisted that the ordinary and the local were just as suitable for artistic portrayal as the magnificent and the remote.

REPRESENTATIVES:

**William Dean Howells** (1837-1920)

* Influential critic and editor of the ‘Atlantic Monthly’.
* He defined the aims of realism as ‘nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material’.
* He was the champion of realism, and his novels carefully interweave social circumstances with the emotions of ordinary middleclass Americans.
* In ***The Rise of Silas Lapham*** (1885), Howells best illustrated his aims, and his call up on writers to deal with the ordinary, average lives of American people.

**Samuel Langhorne Clemens** (1835-1910), or **Mark Twain**

* His stories and novels are famous for their humor, vivid details, and memorable characters.
* His best-known works are ***The Adventures of Tom Sawyer***and ***The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn****.*
* He examined American culture on the edge of the frontier and dealt seriously with such issues as slavery, poverty, and class differences.
* In his sketches, articles, stories, and novels, he captured the flavor and spirit of America during the late nineteenth century.
* Universal themes that affect people of all times.

Samuel Clemens, better known by his pen name of Mark Twain, grew up in the Mississippi River frontier town of Hannibal, Missouri. Ernest Hemingway’s famous statement that all of American literature comes from one great book, Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, indicates this author’s towering place in the tradition. Early 19th-century American writers tended to be too flowery, sentimental, or ostentatious — partially because they were still trying to prove that they could write as elegantly as the English. Twain’s style, based on vigorous, realistic, colloquial American speech, gave American writers a new appreciation of their national voice. Twain was the first major author to come from the interior of the country, and he captured its distinctive, humorous slang and iconoclasm. For Twain and other American writers of the late 19th century, realism was not merely a literary technique: It was a way of speaking truth and exploding worn-out conventions. Thus it was profoundly liberating and potentially at odds with society. The most well-known example is Huck Finn, a poor boy who decides to follow the voice of his conscience and help a Negro slave escape to freedom, even though Huck thinks this means that he will be damned to hell for breaking the law. Twain’s masterpiece, which appeared in 1884, is set in the Mississippi River village of St. Petersburg. The son of an alcoholic bum, Huck has just been adopted by a respectable family when his father, in a drunken stupor, threatens to kill him. Fearing for his life, Huck escapes, feigning his own death. He is joined in his escape by another outcast, the slave Jim, whose owner, Miss Watson, is thinking of selling him down the river to the harsher slavery of the deep South. Huck and Jim float on a raft down the majestic Mississippi, but are sunk by a steamboat, separated, and later reunited. They go through many comical and dangerous shore adventures that show the variety, generosity, and sometimes cruel irrationality of society. In the end, itis discovered that Miss Watson hadalready freed Jim, and a respectable family is taking care of the wild boy Huck. But Huck grows impatient with civilized society and plans to escape to “the territories” — Indian lands. The ending gives the reader the counter-version of the classic American success myth: the open road leading to the pristine wilderness, away from the morally corrupting influences of “civilization.”

**Henry James** (1843-1916)

* American novelist and naturalized English citizen from 1915;
* Influenced by Ivan Turgenev – a novelist need to focus on the character rather than on the story;
* A great social figure, James published simultaneously in English and American newspapers;
* Innovative and finely crafted prose;
* Main subject: the inner, psychological workings of the individual mind and the moral problems facing America in the new age.
* Deals with the clash between the wise – yet corrupt – ways of the Old World, as represented by European civilization, and the innocence and vitality of the New one – America.
* In his earlier ‘international novels’ he explored the relationship and tensions underlying the relationships between Americans and Europeans.
* James also left behind an influential body of literary journalism dealing with the art of fiction.

MAJOR WORKS

***The American*** (1877),

***The Portrait of a Lady*** (1881)

***The Wings of the Dove*** (1902)

***The Ambassadors*** (1903)

***The Golden Bowl*** (1904)

***…***

**NATURALISM**

* Shortly before and after the turn of the twentieth century;
* Influenced by Darwin’s theory and the 19th century French literature (Emile Zola);
* Subjects from the lower ranks of the society
* Portrayed misery and poverty of the underdogs who were victims of society and nature;
* A major theme – human bestiality, especially as an explanation of sexual desire.

REPRESENTATIVES:

* **Stephen Crane** (*Red Badge of Courage, Maggie, A Girl of the Street…)*
* **Frank Norris** (*McTeague…)*
* **Theodore Dreiser** (*Sister Carrie, An American Tragedy…)*
* **Jack London** (*The Call of the Wild; Martin Eden…)*

**REALISM VS NATURALISM**

While being two separate literary movements, realism and naturalism have been at times used as interchangeable terms, sharing some deep-running similarities:

1) They are both "basic" views of life and humanity, stripping away the layers of romanticism to present a "natural" or "real" outlook of the work. They refuse to idealize or flatter the subject. They avoid artificial, fantasy, or supernatural elements.

2) Both of these pessimistic views emerged in the 19th century, a period known for its trials and turmoil.

3) God is absent from most of the writing in either category, with writers opting for a focus on the real world.

But despite these similarities, these two literary movements are separate for a reason.

1) Realism sought to be a faithful representation of life, while naturalism was more like a "chronicle of despair." In a way, naturalism proceeded from realism, and can be seen as an exaggerated form of realism; it shows humans as being determined by environment, heredity, and social conditions beyond their control, and thus rather helpless to escape their circumstances.

2) While in realism the main focus was on the middle class and its problems, naturalism often focused on poorly educated or lower-class characters, and on themes involving violence and taboo activities.

3) While in realism, faithful representation of reality including the details of nature is important, in Naturalism, nature itself is a force, generally a powerful, indifferent mechanism.

One might say that Naturalism is more limited kind of realism in which individual characters are not so much opened up and explored psychologically by the careful observation of their manners and moods and by the credible development of their circumstances, as they are buffeted and usually ruined by the greater forces of the world around them. Thus, the pure realist might write, “The wind blew in from the desert and dried the city air, stung the nostrils, caused the head to pound,” whereas the naturalist more likely would write, “The wind blew in from the desert, hot, sand-dry, malevolent; it scorched his soul and drove him near to madness.” Naturalism, almost despite its name, is saturated with the symbolic, whereas Realism is only lightly tinged with it.

Naturalists employ pop versions of evolutionary theory: humans retain animal qualities; God is absent, the natural forces (usually negative) prevail; chance and violence are omnipresent as causes. Cities and machines provide negative mass pressures.

If Naturalism often fits the defining phrase “slice of life,” so does Realism, only the former slices vertically, deep into the undersurfaces of life, while Realism slices horizontally, encompassing broadly and in detail the “quiet eventful round of everyday life”.

**The poem below is representative of American Naturalism. Its major theme is the existence of a ‘creature’ within us all. Read it and think about the questions: what might the desert represent? What do you think of the creature eating his heart symbolize?**

**In the Desert**

(Stephen Crane)

In the desert

I saw a creature, naked, bestial,

Who, squatting upon the ground,

Held his heart in his hands,

And ate of it.

I said, “Is it good, friend?”

“It is bitter—bitter,” he answered;

“But I like it

“Because it is bitter,

“And because it is my heart.”