

Realism: (Nearly Real) – Sophie Ratcliffe



1

Gloom everywhere. Gloom up the Potomac; where it rolls among meadows no longer green, and by splendid country seats. Gloom down the Potomac where it washes the sides of huge warships. Gloom on the marshes, the fields, and heights. Gloom settling steadily down over the sumptuous habitations of the rich, and creeping through the cellars of the poor. Gloom arresting the steps of chance office-seekers, and bewildering the heads of grave and reverend Senators; for with fog, and drizzle, and a sleety driving mist the night has come at least two hours before its time.

Hannah Crafts [?], *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (? 1860)

2. My mistress was very kind, and unknown to Master she indulged me in reading whenever I desired. The next morning I descended to the parlor, and seated myself with a book behind the heavy damask curtains that shaded the window

from Hannah Crafts [?], *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (? 1860)

3. My heart beat audibly....There might be a robber in the house...before I had time to decide old Jo ... who loved above all things to indulge in strong potations of brandy, bust into my apartment in the most ludicrous state of terror conceivable. His eyes, large and glaring, seemed actually starting from their sockets.....he cried out

....

'I can't 'scribe it, but orful, so orful, that I jumped up quicker dan dese old bones hab moved...'

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Oh: Missus, de ghost, de ghost, sabe me from de ghost'

Hannah Crafts [?], *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (? 1860)

4. 'She had never been satisfied with the portraits which professional photographers made for her. She felt sure that her sweetest expression had not been caught by the camera, as she often saw it in her mirror. Having a camera with the usual attachment for taking instantaneous views, she has spent her leisure hours for a week or two in making negatives of her own visage. A string hitched to the trigger of the instrument enables her to be both operator and subject; and thus, in the privacy of her chamber . . . she transfers her smiles or frowns to the plates to be subsequently developed into photographs, in case she deems them worth it. She has thus far made one hundred and sixty-seven different pictures of herself.'

The Amateur Photographer, July 24 1885, 242.

<https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=amateurphoto>

4b [*The Editor will be glad to receive communications for these columns which must be authenticated by the name and address of the sender.*] *ibid.*

5. 'Realism is a notoriously difficult aesthetic to pin down, in part because the concept of reality itself is constantly changing and being recontested'

Matthew Beaumont and Anna Despotopoulou, 'Realism', *Oxford Bibliographies Online*.

5b. 'Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material'

William D. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* [first pub. 1891] (New York: New York University Press, 1959), p.38.

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Empiricism – OED 2: ‘A conclusion or piece of evidence derived from observation, investigation, or experiment; an empirical result or generalization.’

Epistemology – OED: ‘The theory of knowledge and understanding, esp. with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion.’

9. ‘a defining feature of the nineteenth-century realist novel is its effort to generate an almost physical sense of presence within the fictional world – a sense of locatedness and embodiment – that depends on a strategic positioning of the reader’

Alison Byerly, *Are We There Yet?: Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2012), p.5.

10. ‘Victorian novelists understood realistic representation to be, like virtuality, an effort at similitude that is ultimately unrealizable...an imaginative experience that is not fully realized, but aspirational’

Byerly, p. 7



6. ‘In so far as realism pretends to offer an unproblematic representation, it is in fact the most deceptive form of representation, reproducing its assumptions through the audience’s unexamined response to an apparently natural image or text.’

Nigel Wheale, *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.51.

6b. ‘Both Levine and Bersani viewed the realist novel ... as struggling at an imaginative level to repair fractures’

Frances O’Gorman, *The Victorian Novel: A Guide to Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.120.

7. ‘Realism was in the spirit of the democratizing movements of the nineteenth-century, bringing into literary or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen or out of bounds. The extension of the constituencies of political representation went along with an extension of the field of artistic representation’

Rachel Bowlby, ‘Foreword’ to *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p.xiii.

7b. ‘The truth of infinite value that [Ruskin] teaches is *realism* – the doctrine that all truth and beauty are attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by the imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality’

George Eliot, review of Ruskin’s *Modern Painters III*, ‘Art and Belles Lettres’, *The Westminster Review* 65 (April, 1856). Quoted in Luc Herman, *Concepts of Realism* (Columbia: Camden House, 1996), p.20.

8. Some words

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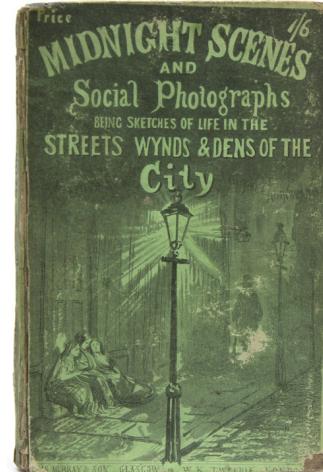


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Jacob Riis, 'Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters (areaway, Mulberry Street)',
How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York
(1890) p. 159



Henry Flather, Construction of the London Metropolitan line...



George Cruikshank, *Midnight Scenes and Social Photographs* (1858)

11. 'With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.

The afternoon sun was warm on the five workmen there, busy upon doors and window-frames and wainscoting. A scent of pine-wood from a tentlike pile of planks outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder-bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window opposite

George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859), Chapter 1.

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12. ‘He pressed the youth's hand with a smile, went forward, and looked through the hole into the interior of the gymnasium. Dare withdrew to some little distance, and watched Captain De Stancy's face, which presently began to assume an expression of interest.

What was the captain seeing? A sort of optical poem.

Paula, in a pink flannel costume, was bending, wheeling and undulating in the air like a gold-fish in its globe, sometimes ascending by her arms nearly to the lantern, then lowering herself till she swung level with the floor. Her aunt Mrs. Goodman, and Charlotte De Stancy, were sitting on camp-stools at one end, watching her gyrations, Paula occasionally addressing them with such an expression as—‘Now, Aunt, look at me—and you, Charlotte—is not that shocking to your weak nerves,’ when some adroit feat would be repeated, which, however, seemed to give much more pleasure to Paula herself in performing it than to Mrs. Goodman in looking on, the latter sometimes saying, ‘O, it is terrific—do not run such a risk again!’

It would have demanded the poetic passion of some joyous Elizabethan lyrst like Lodge, Nash, or Constable, to fitly phrase Paula's presentation of herself at this moment of absolute abandonment to every muscular whim that could take possession of such a supple form. The white manilla ropes clung about the performer like snakes as she took her exercise, and the colour in her face deepened as she went on. Captain De Stancy felt that, much as he had seen in early life of beauty in woman, he had never seen beauty of such a real and living sort as this.

Thomas Hardy, *A Laodicean* (1881), Book 2: Dare and Havill, Chapter 7.

13. ‘[P]hotography dealt a mortal blow’ to old modes of expression

Andre Breton (1924) quoted in Marsha Bryant, *Photo-Textualities: Reading Photographs and Literature*, (University of Delaware Press, 1996), p.43.

14. ‘The camera, [one critic] explains, can give you only one version of a sitter: the painter can give you a hundred. Here the gentleman hits on the strongest point in photography, and the weakest point in draughtsmanship, under the impression that he is doing just the reverse. It is the draughtsman that can give you only one version of a sitter … Even when the photographer aims at reproducing a favourite aspect of a favourite sitter, as all artist-photographers are apt to do, each photograph differs more subtly from the other than Velasquez's Philip in his prime differs from his Philip in his age.’

Bernard Shaw, ‘The Unmechanicalness of Photography – an Introduction to the London Photographic Exhibition, 1902’, in *Bernard Shaw on Photography: Essays and Photographs*, ed. Bill Jay and Margaret Moore (Equation, 1989), p.77.

15. ‘[I]n life the seer should watch that pattern among general things … and describe that alone. This is, quite accurately, a going to Nature; yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind.’

Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p.153.

16. ‘Art is a disproportioning - (i.e. distorting, a throwing out of proportion) - of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorily, might be possibly observed, but more probably would be overlooked. Hence 'realism' is not art.’

The Life of Thomas Hardy, 229.

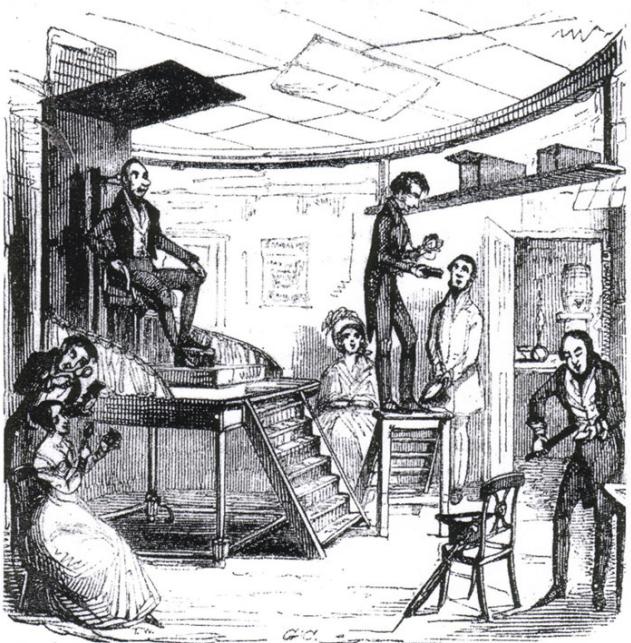
17. ‘fashionable cooking and stippling of sitters’ faces until the texture of the skin is nothing but that of white kid gloves.’

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George Bernard Shaw, ‘Photographic Impostures, What the Worlds Says,’
1887, *The World*, 12 October, 1887.



‘PHOTOGRAPHIC PHENOMENA, OR THE NEW SCHOOL OF PORTRAIT-PAINTING’, in George Cruikshank’s *Omnibus*, published in 1842.

18. An oblong box painted reddish brown lay on the seat beside her. A woman of seven or eight and thirty, stout and strongly built, short arms and hard-worked hands, dressed in dingy black skirt and a threadbare jacket too thin for the dampness of a November day. Her face was a blunt outline, and the grey eyes reflected all the natural prose of the Saxon.

George Moore, *Esther Waters* (1894)

19. Cabs whisked about, with the 'fare' as carefully boxed up behind two glazed calico curtains as any mysterious picture in any one of Mrs. Radcliffe's castles; omnibus horses smoked like steam-engines; nobody thought of 'standing up' under doorways or arches; they were painfully convinced it was a hopeless case; and so everybody went hastily along, jumbling and jostling, and swearing and perspiring, and slipping about, like amateur skaters behind wooden chairs on the Serpentine on a frosty Sunday.

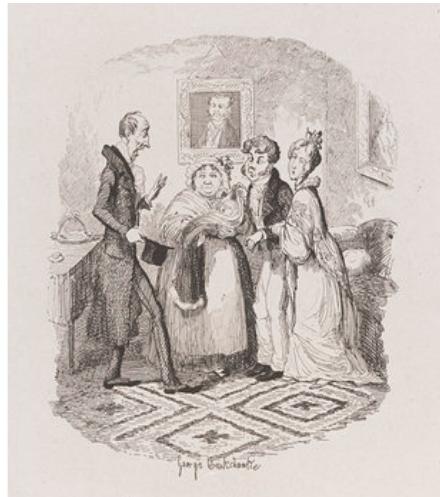
20. 'Did you ever!--said a little coquette with a large bustle, who looked like a French lithograph, appealing to a gentleman in three waistcoats-- 'Did you ever!"

Charles Dickens, ‘The Bloomsbury Christening’, in *The Monthly Magazine*, April 1834.

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21. George Cruikshank, Illustration to 'The Bloomsbury Christening'

22. 'These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions'

Adam Bede, Chapter 18.

23. 'He looked like a faded giant, with the head and face partially restored; and he had a cast in his eye which rendered it quite impossible for any one with whom he conversed to know where he was looking. His eyes appeared fixed on the wall, and he was staring you out of countenance; in short, there was no catching his eye, and perhaps it is a merciful dispensation of Providence that such eyes are not catching'

Charles Dickens, 'The Bloomsbury Christening'.

23a. 'Persons have been known to sleep on the rack...'
Hannah Crafts, *The Bondswoman's Narrative*

23. The Gothic is an apt form in which to express the feelings of the powerless. It is apt where the workings of cause and effect are veiled, as they are from the slaves; it is no use for them to reason about their situation, because they are the victims of caprice, and rationality cannot save them. Gothic convention can survive, and diversify, because of its emotional and situational truth. It is always vastly exaggerated, and at the same time, there is always some culture, some spot on the map, where it is all literally true

Hilary Mantel, 'The Shape of Absence', a review of *The Bondswoman's Narrative* in *London Review of Books*, 8 August 2002
http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n15/mant01_.html

Further Reading



For an excellent realism bibliography for the period - see *Oxford Bibliographies*.

On *The Bondswoman's Narrative*

See "The Bondwoman's Narrative": Text, Paratext, Intertext and Hypertext Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman, *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Nineteenth-Century Literature (Aug., 2005), pp. 147-165 - which critiques the edition produced by Gates (Atlantic books) – frustratingly out of print...but also discusses the collection of critical writing surrounding the book

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Peep shows aside...

Bill Jay, *Cyanide and Spirits: An Inside-Out View of Early Photography* (Munich, Nazraeli Press, 1991).

Mark Durden, 'Ritual and Deception: Photography and Thomas Hardy', *Journal of European Studies* (Sage Publications, March 2000), pp.57-69.

Emily Jenkins, 'Trilby: Fads, Photographers, and "Over-Perfect Feet"', *Book History* 1.1 (1998), 221-267.

J. R. Harvey, *Victorian Novelists and Their Illustrators* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

Joan Stevens, "Thackeray's Pictorial Capitals," *Costerus: Essays in English and American Language and Literature*, n.s. 2 (1974): pp. 113-40.

'Hidden Mothers' <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/dec/02/hidden-mothers-victorian-photography>

The eclectic list which follows focuses on photography and illustration:
For hidden histories/missing chapters you could start with

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/sep/15/black-chronicles-ii-victorians-photography-exhibition-rivington-place>

or look at the photography of Henry Flather

or highly recommended Kate Flint, *Flash: Photography, Writing and Surprising Illumination* [Shows how flash photography has been used to reveal social deprivation and poverty, the representation of race, and ordinary everyday life]

Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Daniel A. Novak, *Realism, Photography and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Noonday, 1977), 15-31.

John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980); *On Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1968).

Kathleen Collins, *Shadow and Substance: Essays on the History of Photography* (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Amorphous Institute Press, 1990).

Green, Jennifer M. "'The Right Thing in the Right Place': P. H. Emerson and the Picturesque Photograph," in Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan, eds., *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 88-110.

Arlene Jackson, "Dickens and 'Photography' in 'Household Words,'" *History of Photography* 7.2 (1983), 147-149.

George Moore, 'The Camera in Art', in *Modern Painting* (London: Walter Scott, 1893), 183-189.

Jane M. Rabb, ed. *Literature and Photography: Interactions 1840-1990: A Critical Anthology*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

George Bernard Shaw (ed. Bill Jan, Margaret Moore), *Bernard Shaw on Photography* (Salt Lake City: P. Smith Books, 1989).