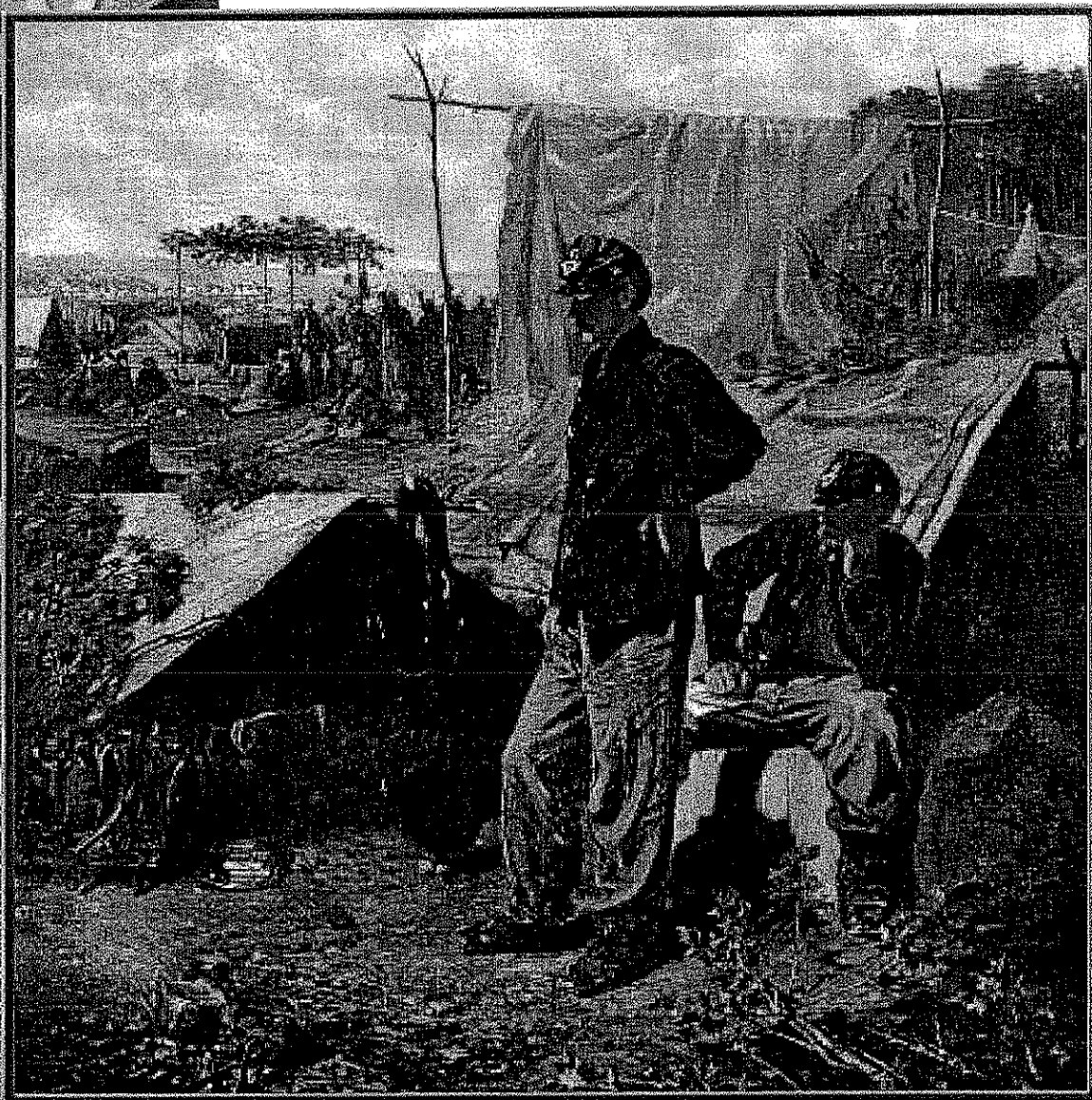


Chapter

4

The Rise of Realism

The Civil War to 1914



Home, Sweet Home (detail) (1863) by Winslow Homer (1836–1910).
Oil on canvas (21½" × 16½").

National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund, Photograph © 2001
Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

The Rise of Realism

The Civil War to 1914

Gary Q. Arpin

The following essay provides highlights of the historical period.
For a more detailed version of this essay, see *Holt Literature and Language Arts*, pages 382–395.



Reading Standard 3.5a–c
Analyze recognized works of American literature representing a variety of genres and traditions.

On the evening of April 12, 1861, Walt Whitman attended the opera at the Academy of Music in Manhattan. After the opera he was walking down Broadway toward Brooklyn when, as he later wrote, “I heard in the distance the loud cries of the newsboys, who came presently tearing and yelling up the street, rushing from side to side even more furiously than usual. I bought an extra and crossed to the Metropolitan Hotel . . . and, with a crowd of others, who gathered impromptu, read the news, which was evidently authentic.”

10

The news that Whitman and the others read was of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, the opening shots of the Civil War. Thus began one of the greatest cataclysms in U.S. history.

Slavery Divides the Country

What had brought the country to the point of the Civil War? It had but a “single cause,” asserted the historian James Ford

Rhodes in 1913, and that cause was slavery. Today historians acknowledge additional causes of the war, but slavery lay at the heart of this conflict.

From the personal accounts of people held in slavery—such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet A. Jacobs—we learn firsthand about the horrors and injustices of slavery. Increasing numbers of Northerners viewed slaveholding as a monstrous violation of the basic American principle of equality, but Southerners wanted to preserve the institution of slavery. The conflict reached a fever pitch and erupted at Fort Sumter.

WORD STUDY

The word *extra* (line 7), in this context, means “a special edition of a newspaper.” Extras used to be put out between regular newspaper editions in order to cover important breaking news.

WORD STUDY

Cataclysms (kat'ə · kliz'əmz), in line 12, refers to great upheavals, such as earthquakes or war, that result in violent destruction. *Cataclysm* comes from the Greek *kata-*, meaning “down,” and *klyzein*, meaning “to wash.” As you might infer from its origin, *cataclysm* literally means “flood.”

IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

What was the main cause of the Civil War (lines 14–18)? Circle the answer.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

What opposing views on slavery did Northerners and Southerners hold (lines 19–25)? Underline the details that give you this information.

ANALYZE

Re-read lines 30–38. How did Emerson respond to the war?

30 A Response to the War: Idealism

In Concord, Massachusetts, army volunteers met in 1861 at the bridge that Ralph Waldo Emerson had immortalized in “Concord Hymn,” his famous poem about the beginning of the American Revolution. Emerson had for decades warned that this day would come if slavery were not abolished. Now that the day had arrived, he was filled with patriotic fervor. He had great respect for the Southern will to fight, however, and he suspected that the war would not be over in a few months, as some people had predicted. When the Concord volunteers returned a few months later from the First Battle of Bull Run (July 1861), defeated and disillusioned, Emerson maintained his conviction that the war must be pursued.

40 A Reality of the War: Appalling Suffering

Late in 1862, Walt Whitman traveled to Virginia to find his brother George, who had been wounded in battle. After George was nursed back to health, Whitman served as a hospital volunteer. The condition of the wounded was appalling. Many of the injured had to remain on the battlefield for two or three days until the camp hospitals had room for them. Antiseptics were primitive, as were operating-room techniques. A major wound meant

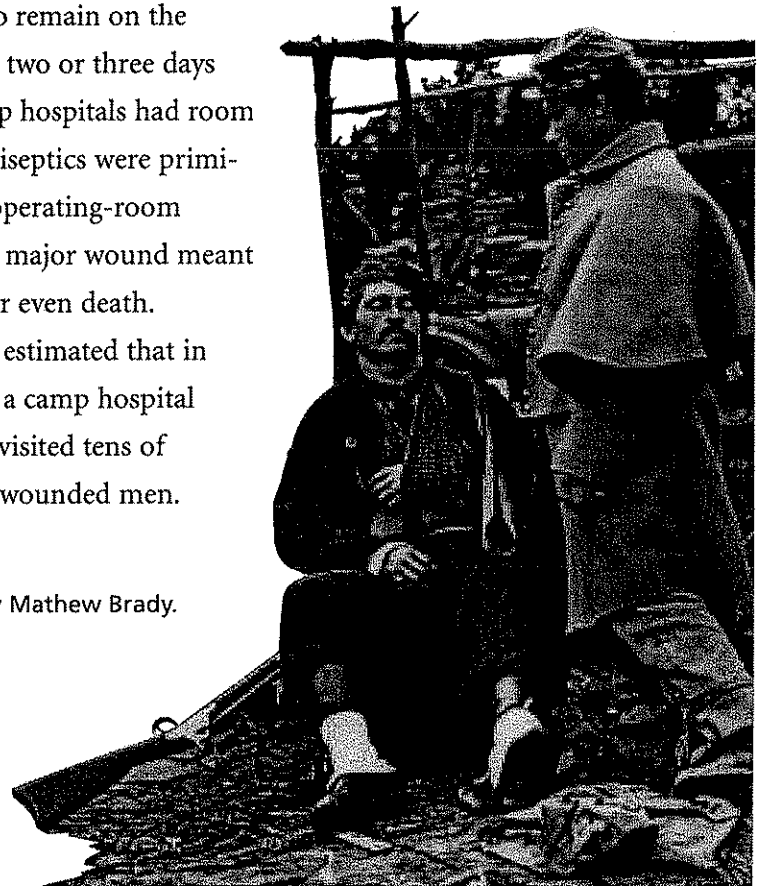
50 amputation or even death.

Whitman estimated that in three years as a camp hospital volunteer, he visited tens of thousands of wounded men.

Photograph by Mathew Brady.

IDENTIFY

Why was the condition of the wounded soldiers so bad (lines 43–50)? Underline the details that describe their hardships.





Wounded Soldier Being Given a Drink from a Canteen (1864)
by Winslow Homer. Charcoal and white chalk on green paper
(36.5 cm x 50 cm).

Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution;
Gift of Charles Savage Homer, Jr./Courtesy Art Resource, New York.

A Result of the War: Disillusionment

Herman Melville's poems about the war, collected in *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), were often dark and foreboding. Of the elation following the firing on Fort Sumter, Melville wrote:

60

O, the rising of the People
 Came with the springing of the grass,
 They rebounded from dejection
 After Easter came to pass.
 And the young were all elation
 Hearing Sumter's cannon roar. . . .
 But the elders with foreboding
 Mourned the days forever o'er,
 And recalled the forest proverb,
 The Iroquois' old saw:
*Grief to every graybeard
 When young Indians lead the war.*

70

Notes

FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud two times. During your first reading, watch for punctuation marks that indicate when you should pause and when you should read on. As you read the second time, try to capture the **mood**, or general atmosphere, of Melville's poem.

WORD STUDY

In this context, a saw (line 69) is an old, wise saying. How would you put the Iroquois' saying in your own words?

Notes

Why did so few writers respond to the war in their literary works (lines 82–102)? Underline the details that tell you.

CLARIFY

The poems in *Battle-Pieces*, based on newspaper accounts of the battles as well as visits to battlefields, record the heroism and futility of the fighting on both sides and demonstrate respect for Southern soldiers as well as Northern troops.

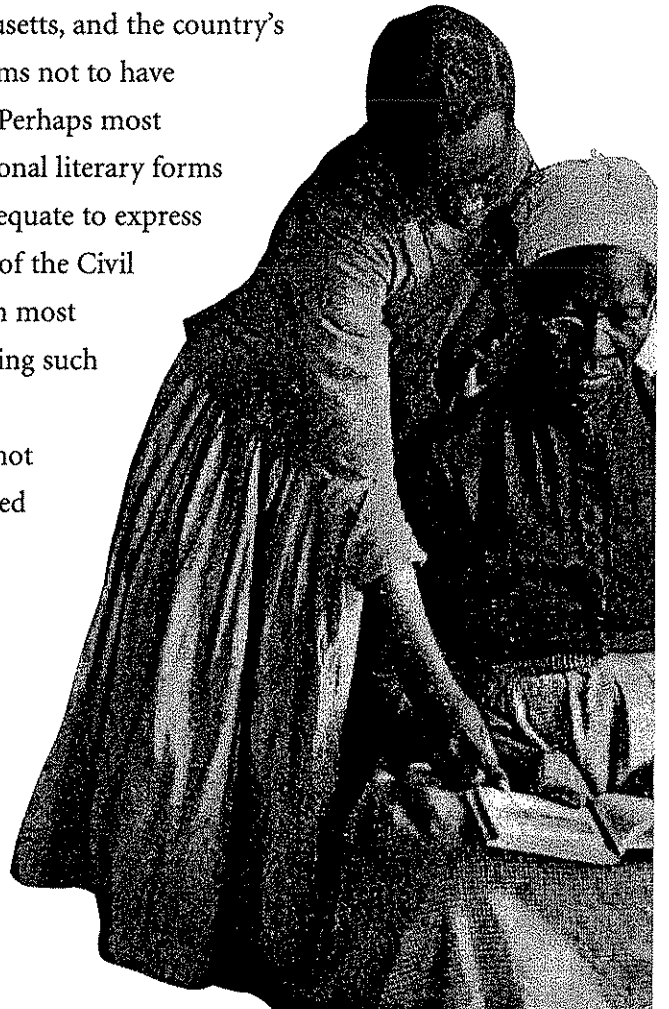
The War in Literature


Although many works of historical interest—soldiers’ letters and diaries, as well as journalistic writings—came out of the war, works of literary significance were rare, prompting the question, 80 Why didn’t an event of such magnitude result in more literary output?

One reason is that few major American writers saw the Civil War firsthand. Emerson was in Concord during most of the war, “knitting socks and mittens for soldiers,” as he wrote to his son, and “writing patriotic lectures.” Thoreau, who had been a fervent abolitionist, died in 1862, and Hawthorne died two years later. Emily Dickinson remained in Amherst, Massachusetts, and the country’s grief over the war seems not to have 90 informed her poetry. Perhaps most important, the traditional literary forms of the time were inadequate to express the horrifying details of the Civil War. The literary form most appropriate for handling such strong material—the **realistic novel**—had not yet been fully developed in the United States.

Woman freed from slavery, learning to read.

Leib Image Archives, York, Pennsylvania.





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130

After the Civil War a new generation of writers came of age. They were known as **realists**. Their subjects were drawn from the slums of the rapidly growing cities, from the factories that were replacing farmlands, and from the lives of far-from-idealized characters—poor factory workers, corrupt politicians, and even prostitutes.

Realism was well entrenched in Europe by the time it began to flower in the United States. It developed in the work of such writers as Daniel Defoe, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy. These writers tried to represent faithfully the environment and the manners of everyday life.

American Regionalism: Brush Strokes of Local Color

Re-read lines 104–109. What kinds of people did realists write about?

[illegible]

Re-read lines 111–120.
What are some of the basic characteristics of realism?
Underline those details.

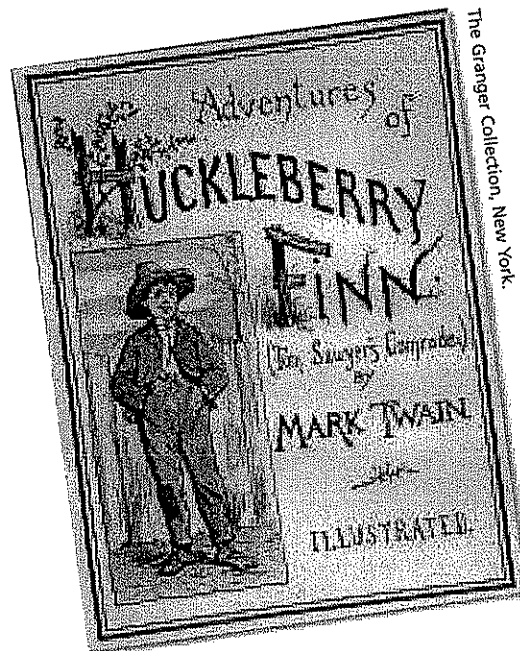
What is **regionalism** (lines 123–130)? Underline the answer.

WORD STUDY

The word *satiric* (line 135) is an adjective referring to a literary work in which vices, follies, or stupidities are exposed and ridiculed.

Mark Twain is the best-known example of a regional writer whose realism far surpassed local bounds. Although he first established his reputation as a regional humorist, Twain evolved into a writer whose comic view of society became increasingly satiric. His most widely read novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), describes the moral growth of a comic character in an environment that is at the same time physically beautiful and morally offensive. *Huckleberry Finn* combines a biting picture of some of the injustices of pre-Civil War life with a lyrical portrait of the American landscape.

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Original edition of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).

Realism and Naturalism: A Lens on Everyday Life

■ "Smiling Realism"

The most active proponent of realism in American fiction was William Dean Howells, editor of the influential magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*. Howells insisted that realism should deal with

1. The first part of the document is a title page. It contains the title of the document, the author's name, and the date of the document.

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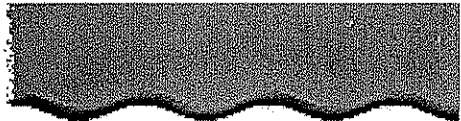
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10. The tenth part of the document is a list of tables. It identifies the tables included in the document.



Children in Mullen's Alley, off Cherry Street, New York City (c. 1888).
Photograph by Jacob Riis.
The Granger Collection, New York.

150

Other realistic novelists viewed life as a much rougher clash of contrary forces. The Californian Frank Norris, for example,

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 162. What two notable novels examined social institutions with a view to reforming them? Circle their titles.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 164–168. Whom are the **naturalists** compared to?

ANALYZE

Re-read lines 168–174. What did the naturalists believe? Underline the details that support your answer.

found Howells's fiction too straitlaced and narrow. Norris was an earthier writer, interested in the impact of large social forces on individuals. His best-known novel, *The Octopus* (1901), is about the struggles between wheat farmers and the railroad monopoly in California. Norris was not the first to use the novel to examine social institutions with the aim of reforming them:

- 160 Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) had been published before the Civil War and, according to Lincoln (and many historians), played a part in bringing about the war.

■ Grim Naturalism

Norris is generally considered a **naturalist**. Following the lead of the French novelist Émile Zola, naturalists relied heavily on the emerging scientific disciplines of psychology and sociology. In their fiction, the naturalists attempted to dissect human behavior with as much objectivity as a scientist would use. For naturalists, human behavior was determined by forces beyond the individual's power, especially by biology and environment. The naturalists tended to look at human life as a grim losing battle. In the eyes of some naturalist writers, human beings are totally subject to the natural laws of the universe; like animals, they live crudely, by instinct, unable to control their own destinies.

Psychological Realism: Inside the Human Mind

■ Exploring Motivation

- 180 On the other hand, the New York-born Henry James concentrated on fine distinctions in character motivation. James was a realist, but no realist could be further from the blunt, naturalistic view that people were driven by animal-like instincts. In his finely tuned studies of human motivation, James was mainly interested in complex social and psychological situations. Many of his novels, including *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), take place in Europe. James frequently contrasts

innocent, eager Americans with sophisticated, more manipulative Europeans. In a typical James novel a straightforward American confronts the complexities of European society and either defeats or is defeated by them.

190 ■ Examining Characters in Crisis

Stephen Crane was as insightful a psychologist as James. Crane's principal interest was the human character at moments of stress. For James the proper setting for an examination of human behavior under pressure was the drawing room; for Crane it was the battlefield, the streets of a slum, or a lifeboat lost at sea. Although Crane is sometimes referred to as a naturalist, he is probably best thought of as an **ironist**. Of all the nineteenth-century realists, only Crane could describe a stabbing death (in his story "The Blue Hotel") in this coolly cynical manner: "[The
200 blade] shot forward, and a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon." It would take this sensibility to get the "real war" into the books at last.

Endings and Beginnings

The period from around the turn of the century up to 1914 saw the continuation of many nineteenth-century trends and, at the same time, the early flowerings of modernism. Still, the currents of realism and naturalism evoked by the Civil War continued to dominate American literature.

210 In the period between the end of the Civil War and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the American nation was transformed from an isolated, rural nation to an industrialized world power. Even these changes would soon be dwarfed, however. World War I would rock the world and shake people's faith in humanity. Idealism would turn to cynicism, and thinkers and writers called modernists would seek new literary forms for exploring the social and spiritual upheavals wrought once again by war.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

Re-read lines 178–189. How did Henry James's literary approach differ from that of the naturalists?

WORD STUDY

An *ironist* (line 197) is someone who uses irony to make a larger comment on life. In general, irony is the difference between what we expect to happen and what actually happens. Underline Crane's ironic description of a stabbing.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 209. What dominated American literature up to 1914? Circle the details that give you this information.

IDENTIFY

This chapter deals with the Civil War. What war breaks out early in the next century?
