The Rise of Realism
The Civil War to 1914
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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.

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.”

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.
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.

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 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.
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:

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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.
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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, 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 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.
Thus, the great novel of the war, *The Red Badge of Courage*, had to wait to be written by a man who was not born until six years after the war had ended: Stephen Crane.

**The Rise of Realism**

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 Takes Root in Europe**

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.

Realism sought to explain why ordinary people behave the way they do. Realistic novelists often relied on the emerging sciences of human and animal behavior—biology, psychology, and sociology—as well as on their own insights and observations.

**American Regionalism: Brush Strokes of Local Color**

In America, realism had its roots in *regionalism*, literature that emphasizes a specific geographic setting and that makes use of the speech and manners of the people who live in that region. While regionalists tried to be realistic in depicting speech patterns and manners, they were often unrealistic in their depiction of character and social environment. Realism went far beyond regionalism in its concern for accuracy in portraying social conditions and human motivations.
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.

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
the lives of ordinary people, be faithful to the development of character even at the expense of action, and discuss social questions perplexing Americans. Howells's "smiling realism" portrayed an America where people may act foolishly but where their good qualities eventually win out.

Other realistic novelists viewed life as a much rougher clash of contrary forces. The Californian Frank Norris, for example,
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: 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 cruelly, by instinct, unable to control their own destinies.

**Psychological Realism:**

**Inside the Human Mind**

**Exploring Motivation**

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.

**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 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.

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.