The Rise of Realism: 
The Civil War and Postwar Period
1850–1900

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 . . . where the great lamps were still brightly blazing, and, with a crowd of others, who gathered impromptu, read the news, which was evidently authentic.”

The news that Whitman and the others read so avidly was of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, the opening shots of the Civil War. Thus solemnly began, for one of the few American poets or novelists who would witness it firsthand, the greatest cataclysm in United States history.

Responses to the War: Idealism

In Concord, Massachusetts, home of Ralph Waldo Emerson, army volunteers met soon after the war’s opening battle. 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. Emerson had great respect for the Southern will to fight, however, and he suspected, quite rightly, that the war would not be over in a few months as people had predicted. When the Concord volunteers returned later that summer from the First Battle of Bull Run (July 1861), defeated and disillusioned, many of them unwilling to reenlist, Emerson maintained his conviction that the war must be pursued.

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 remained in Washington off and on, working part time and serving as a volunteer hospital visitor, comforting the wounded and writing to their loved ones. 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. Anesthesia was virtually unknown. 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. In his poems, he had
presented a panoramic vision of America; now America passed through the hospital tents in the form of wounded men from every state in the Union and the Confederacy. Nevertheless, out of the horror that he viewed, Whitman was able to derive a hopeful vision of the American character, of “the actual soldier of 1862–65 . . . with all his ways, his incredible dauntlessness, habits, practices, tastes, language, his fierce friendship, his appetite, rankness, his superb strength—and a hundred unnamed lights and shades.”

**Disillusionment**

The war that strengthened Whitman’s optimism served at the same time to justify Herman Melville’s pessimism. 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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Melville was fascinated by the war, but he never wrote a novel about it. 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. But in some of the best poems, there is a sense of human nature being stripped bare, revealing not the heroism and strength that Whitman found, but rather humanity’s basic evil.

**The American Civil War (1861–1865)** resulted in terrible bloodshed as the national government sought to preserve the Union. Despite his firsthand experience of the aftermath of battle, Walt Whitman retained an optimistic view of the American character. But the horrors of war merely reinforced the pessimism of Herman Melville.
The War in Literature

There was enough atrocity and heroism in the war to feed the views of both Melville and Whitman. What is odd, though, is that Melville’s *Battle-Pieces* (which was ignored until the twentieth century) and Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* (1865) and *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882) make up the bulk of the war’s immediate legacy of poetry and fiction. Although there were many works of historical interest—soldiers’ letters and diaries, as well as journalistic writings—works of literary significance were rare. Whitman himself wrote, “Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of the countless minor scenes and interiors . . . and it is best they should not—the real war will never get in the books.”

Why did an event of such magnitude result in such a scant literary output? One reason is simply 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, though the country’s grief over the war seems to have informed her poetry. Of the younger generation of writers, William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Henry Adams were abroad.

Perhaps most important, though, 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.

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 (1871–1900).

Very little important poetry and fiction issued directly from the Civil War, largely because few major American writers experienced the war firsthand. Direct accounts of the war found their way into other types of literature, however, including poignant letters and diaries. The “real war” would not find a place in American fiction until the development of the realistic novel.

The Rise of Realism

One of the most enduring subjects for prose has always been the exploits of larger-than-life heroes. Born of epic poetry and the chivalric romance, the romantic novel presents readers with lives lived idealistically—
beyond the level of everyday life. The heroes and heroines of the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, for example, engage in romantic adventures filled with courageous acts, daring chases, and exciting escapes. Such exciting exploits have always been a staple of prose fiction—and today, of action movies featuring James Bond, Indiana Jones, and Luke Skywalker.

In America, the great fiction writers of the mid-nineteenth century, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, shared an aversion to simple realism. These writers used romance not simply to entertain readers, but to reveal truths that would be hidden in a realistic story.

After the Civil War, however, a new generation of writers came of age. They were known as realists, writers who aimed at a “very minute fidelity” to the common course of ordinary life. Their subjects were drawn from the slums of the rapidly growing cities, from the factories that were rapidly covering farmlands, and from the lives of far-from-idealized characters: poor factory workers, corrupt politicians, 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 writers who tried to represent faithfully the environment and the manners of everyday life: the way ordinary people lived and dressed, and what they thought and felt and talked about. But realism was not simply concerned with recording wallpaper patterns, hairstyles, or the subjects of conversations. It sought also 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.

The literary movement known as realism dominated American fiction from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. Realists sought to portray real life accurately, without the filters of romanticism or idealism.

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. Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Bret Harte, and Charles W. Chesnutt are noted early regionalists who recorded the peculiarities of speech and temperament in their parts of a rapidly expanding nation.
The Rise of Realism

While regional writers strove to be realistic in their depiction of speech patterns and manners, though, they were often unrealistic—even sentimental—in their depiction of character and social environment. Realism as a literary movement in the United States went far beyond regionalism in its concern for accuracy in portraying social conditions and human motivation.

Mark Twain (1835–1910) 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 best novel, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), combines a biting picture of some of the injustices inherent in pre–Civil War life with a lyrical portrait of the American landscape.

American realism had its roots in regionalism, literature that focuses on a relatively small geographical area and attempts to accurately reproduce the speech and manners of that region.

Realism and Naturalism: A Lens on Everyday Life

The most active proponent of realism in American fiction was William Dean Howells (1837–1920), editor of the influential magazine The Atlantic Monthly. In both his fiction and his critical writings, 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 the 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 (1870–1902), for example, agreed with Howells that the proper subject for fiction was the ordinary person, but he found Howells’s fiction too strait-laced and narrow—“as respectable as a church and proper as a deacon.” 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. Decades earlier, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s antislavery novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) was credited by President Lincoln (and many historians) with helping to cause the war. But Uncle Tom’s Cabin was more melodrama than realistic fiction.

Norris is generally considered to be a naturalist. Following the lead of the French novelist Emile Zola, naturalists relied heavily on the
growing scientific disciplines of psychology and sociology. In their fiction, they attempted to dissect human behavior with as much objectivity as a scientist would dissect a frog or a cadaver. 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. Their characters often had only limited choices and motivations. In the eyes of some naturalist writers, human beings were totally subject to the natural laws of the universe; like animals, they lived cruelly, by instinct, unable to control or understand their own desires.

**Psychological Fiction: Inside the Human Mind**

On the other hand, the New York–born Henry James (1843–1916), considered America’s greatest writer of the psychological novel, concentrated principally 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 opened the inner mind to the techniques of fiction. He 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, because James considered European society to be both more complex and more sinister than American society. He frequently contrasts innocent, eager Americans with sophisticated, more reserved Europeans.

Stephen Crane was as profound a psychologist as James, but his principal interest was the human character at moments of stress—on 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**; he was the first of many modern American writers—later including Ernest Hemingway and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.—to juxtapose human pretensions with the indifference of the universe. 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” in the books at last.

Realism in American literature branched out in several directions, from the “smiling realism” of William Dean Howells to the gritty naturalism of Frank Norris, and from the psychological realism of Henry James to the ironic stance of Stephen Crane.