11 LC Name:

***Disenchantment with Romanticism***

In the mid 19th century, the United States found itself deeply embroiled in **a war amongst its states**. This war refocused a nation that had come of age in the literary era of Romanticism, a movement which had little in common with the **real atrocities** that soldiers now faced. In the wake of the war, the United States found itself a now **wiser, more somber nation**.

Many had witnessed war’s grim nature firsthand, and it shaped their view of life. **Gallant heroism and adventure** no longer suited America’s tastes; nor did meditations on the beauty of nature or the worth of the individual. Writing became more **honest, unsentimental, and ironic**. A new style, realism, would predominate in the years to come.

***The Rise of Realism***

Most modern readers expect stories to be **like real life**. In the mid-19th century, however, a “realistic” story was considered radical and was even criticized. Despite this outcry, several famous American writers persevered, and in doing so, they initiated one of the **most enduring movements** in literary history.

Realism in literature refers to **writing that offers an accurate and detailed portrayal** of actual life. It also refers to a literary movement that first developed in France in the mid-19th century and then spread to England, Russia, and the United States. Realism was **born as a reaction to romanticism**, (which glorified the emotions and the imagination). The realists did **not want to glorify anything**. They simply wanted to depict reality, no matter how ordinary the characters or their circumstances. In basing their literature on careful observations of commonplace events and people, the realists believed they could shed light on **greater social issues and concerns**.

In the United States, realism was also the product of a **rapidly changing society**. By the end of the Civil War in 1865, America was changing from a predominantly rural society to an urban one and was experiencing the effects of the Industrial Revolution. Many writers were inspired to depict the effects of these **dramatic social changes on the average citizen**. The first American writers to experiment with realism – in the 1870s and 1880s – were Mark Twain, William Dean Howells and Henry James.

**Characteristics of Realism**

COMPLEX CHARACTERS IN ORDINARY PLACES

In realist fiction, **character exploration and development** became more important that plot. Often the characters were laborers, businessmen, or housewives from the lower and middle classes. Exploring details of a personality or a relationship could reveal important complexities, contradictions, and ironies, especially those related to social or economic issues. The realist writer might write long, **involved descriptions of a character’s inner thoughts**, usually focused on personal concerns or the mundane events of his or her everyday life.

Realist fiction would typically:

* Focus on complex characters who are ordinary people, not heroes or villains.
* Portray ordinary settings, especially those that allow for accurate **depictions of society and culture**
* Depict true-to-life dialogue that **captures the dialects** and idioms of conversation.

DETACHED NARRATION

Realist writers adopted the scientific method of detached observation. This allows the narrator of a story to sound **unbiased and distant**, as if simply recording the complete facts of the story. The reader is then allowed to draw his or her own conclusions.

SOCIAL THEMES  
The literature of realism sought to explore the key issues of the time: What are the implications of modern technology? What are the effects of urbanization? Realist themes are typically concerned with **class conflicts, urbanization, marriage, and family life**.

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