American Realism and its related movements

1860-1920(ish)
What is Realism?

- A faithful representation of reality in literature
- Emphasis on believable characters and situations
- Style is observational, impersonal, precise
NEW LITERARY MOVEMENTS

The four main movements

- **Realism** (kind of the “overall” category)
- **Regionalism** (also called “Local Color”)
- **Naturalism**
- **“Literature of Discontent”**
Why did Realism develop?

- Immense loss of life from Civil War and development of serious social issues disillusioned Americans.

- Writers turned away from the idealism of 1800’s Romanticism.

- Felt need to portray life realistically, write about people as they were.
SOCIAL FORCES AT WORK

1. Urbanization and industrialization
   - European immigrants flooded cities along East Coast, primarily New York City (9 Million in 20 yrs)
   - Cities unprepared
   - Led to vast overpopulation = crime, slums, other related problems.

2. Frontier expansion
   - 1890 census reported that America’s frontier no longer existed!
   - Steady stream of immigrants, farmers, African-Americans, just to name a few, had filled up frontier with farms and cities.

3. Increasing literacy rates, democratization of literature

4. Emerging middle class = new audience
In 1860, most Americans lived on farms or in villages, but by 1919 half the population was concentrated in about 12 cities. Problems of urbanization and industrialization meant overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, low pay, difficult working conditions, and inadequate restraints on business. Labor unions grew; strikes highlighted the plight of workers. Farmers struggled against the "money interests" of robber barons like J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller. The farmer became an object of ridicule, considered an unsophisticated "hick," and the ideal American became the millionaire. In 1860, there were fewer than 100 millionaires; by 1875, there were more than 1,000. Thus, from 1860 to 1914, we were transformed from a small, agricultural ex-colony to a huge, modern, industrial nation. Writers of the period depicted the negative effects of economic forces and the alienation of the weak or vulnerable individual.
Some Early Realist Writers

- Mark Twain
- William Dean Howells
- Henry James
- Edgar Lee Masters
What is **Regionalism**?

- Often called “local color”

- Focused on characters, dialect, customs, topography specific to a certain region (e.g. the South, Midwest, New England, West)

- Coincided with Realism; shared many of same traits
Why did Regionalism develop?

- Civil War, expansion, and the building of a national identity
- An outgrowth of realism with focus on a particular setting and its influence over characters
Some Regionalist Writers

- Kate Chopin—
  the South

- Mark Twain, Bret Harte--
  the West

- Willa Cather--
  the Midwest
Local color writers painted vivid portraits of specific American regions. Their interest was in depicting a given location, using a factual, realistic technique. Bret Harte (1836-1902) is the author of adventurous stories such as "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," set in the western mining frontier. He was one of the first to introduce “low-life” characters -- cunning gamblers, trashy prostitutes, and uncouth robbers -- into serious literary works. He got away with this (as had Charles Dickens in England, who greatly admired Harte's work) by showing in the end that these seeming derelicts really had hearts of gold.
What is Naturalism?

- Writers applied scientific principles of detached objectivity to the study of human beings.
- Influenced by Darwin and Freud

Stories showed that humans are governed by larger forces including Nature, Fate, heredity and environment.

- Often depicted people in conflict with nature, society, or themselves.
Why did Naturalism develop?

- Influx of immigrants led to larger lower class and increased poverty in cities
- Prominence of psychology and theories of Sigmund Freud
- Pessimism in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction
- Publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*
Naturalist Writers

*Stephen Crane

*Ambrose Bierce

*Jack London

Edwin Arlington Robinson

*Charlotte Perkins Gilman
Naturalists were influenced by Darwinian thought and the related philosophy of **determinism**, which views individuals as helpless pawns of natural, economic, and social forces beyond their control. Naturalism is essentially a literary expression of **determinism**. Associated with bleak, realistic depictions of lower-class life, determinism denies religion as a motivating force and instead perceives the universe as a cold, heartless, godless machine.

A man said to the universe:  
"Sir I exist!"  
"However," replied the universe,  
"The fact has not created in me  
A sense of obligation."

---Stephen Crane
Literature of Discontent

Tackled social problems of this period

Many oppressed groups (women, lower/middle classes, freed slaves, etc.) started expressing dissatisfaction with the way things were
Women made up a significant audience for fiction, and many women writers began to emerge during the Realism period. They produced work that overlaps the various literary movements of realism, naturalism, regionalism, and literature of discontent. Some writings by women included social protest, especially toward the end of the century, when social inequality and economic hardship were particularly pressing issues.
Remember…

Realism, Regionalism, Naturalism, and the Literature of Discontent are intertwined and connected.
A QUICK REVIEW

REALISM

- Details written with great faithfulness to reality.
- Deals with the here and now, instead of the far away and long ago
- Draws from common life: ordinary people, ordinary problems
A QUICK REVIEW:

REGIONALISM

• Focused on characters, dialect, customs, topography specific to a certain region (South, the West, the Midwest, New England)
A QUICK REVIEW:

NATURALISM

• Showed that we are governed by outside forces: Nature, Fate, heredity, environment.

• Influenced by Darwin and Freud

• Applied scientific principles of detached objectivity to study of human beings.

• Often showed man pitted against a harsh, uncaring environment.
A QUICK REVIEW:

LITERATURE OF DISCONTENT

• Dealt with social problems

• Women, oppressed middle/lower classes, freed slaves, etc. started expressing discontent with the way things were
HOORAY, IT’S QUICK-QUIZ TIME!

MATCH THE TERM:

1. Realism  A. expresses **dissatisfaction** with social issues
2. Regionalism  B. says we are governed by **natural** forces outside of our control; pits man against an uncaring universe
3. Naturalism  C. Details written with great faithfulness to **reality**; deals with the here and now, ordinary people, ordinary problems
4. Literature of Discontent  D. focused on characters, dialect, customs, topography, specific to a certain part of the country
5. **T/F** The main reason literary realism developed was that writers wanted to share their excitement, joy, and satisfaction with post-Civil War America.

6. **T/F** Both frontier expansion and urbanization influenced the rise of literary realism.

7. **T/F** American novels of the period depicted the negative effects of economic forces and the alienation of the weak or vulnerable individual.

8. Bret Harte was one of the **local color** writers to create characters that **A.** were fine upstanding citizens **B.** represented “low life” gamblers, prostitutes, and thieves.

9. Naturalism was basically the literary version of the philosophy of **determinism**, which views individuals as **A.** helpless pawns of Nature or of economic/social forces beyond their control or **B.** strong contenders against the forces of Nature, in a friendly universe, where man wins out over Nature.

10. **T/F** It was unheard of in this time period for women to express their dissatisfaction with their roles; they just submitted.