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Phillip J. Barrish
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Introduction: American literary realism

Heated debates about realism and art often take place outside of university classrooms. After watching a movie, for example, we may find ourselves questioning – perhaps even arguing over – how "realistic" the movie seemed. We praise certain films for how closely they appear to reflect actual, off-screen life, even if the "real life" they depict is quite distant from our own experiences. Other movies we reject for their implausible plot twists, over-the-top acting, contrived dialogue, or clumsy special effects. Sometimes we don't mind admitting that a movie isn't realistic and defend it on other grounds, perhaps for its beauty, romance, suspense, or humor. Regardless, evaluating a work's realism (or lack of realism) has become close to second nature for most movie viewers today, maybe because the only expertise it seems to require is something we all possess: the ability to observe the world around us.

Has it always been second nature for people to comment on how close to actual experience a work of narrative art seems? Aspects of realism as a literary mode, of course, can be traced at least as far back in Western literature as Homer's epic poem, *The Iliad*, where Olympian gods with supernatural powers coexist with graphic depictions of battlefield mayhem that still ring true. *The Iliad* also includes notably detailed accounts of rituals, weaponry, and some aspects of daily life among the Greek army. Similarly, many of Shakespeare's characterizations have long been praised for their likeness to life. *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism* focuses on the surprisingly recent moment in American literary history, however, when realism – as opposed, for example, to universal Truth – came to be regarded as a paramount value in fictional narratives: something to be striven for by fiction writers, celebrated or criticized by reviewers, and judged by readers. Over the course of this book we will explore the historical causes underlying literary realism's rise to prominence in the United States. We will also examine the different, and often contradictory, forms realism took in literary works by different authors; technical and stylistic questions involving how fiction writers actually go about creating what theorist Roland Barthes has called "the reality effect" (*Rustle of Language* 141); the philosophical issue of what relationship, if any, exists between realism produced on the

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page and reality outside the book; and, finally, literary realism's relationship with powerful, often violent conflicts in late-nineteenth-century America involving race, gender, social class, national origin, and geographic region, among other factors. As we will see, American realism's intense engagement with its social and cultural context has always been integral to its power as literature.

Literary realism became a salient feature of the US literary scene in the decades following the Civil War (1861–65), a period scholar Stanley Corkin has identified with "the birth of the modern United States." Although the United States was born as a formal nation on July 4, 1776, what Corkin means is that a great many of the economic structures, cultural forms, and social and political conflicts, as well as modes of everyday life, that we think of as characteristic of contemporary America first took shape in the1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. America's Industrial Revolution was well under way by the middle of the nineteenth century, but its acceleration after the Civil War changed the United States from a rural country composed largely of distinct "island communities" (Wiebe, *Search for Order* xiii) to, by the start of the twentieth century, a primarily urban nation, one whose cities included extremes of wealth and poverty and featured large, densely populated slums. Ongoing technological advances – above all in transportation (the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869) and in communications (the telegraph came into widespread use, followed by the telephone) – spurred the growth of a genuinely national economy in which large business monopolies and corporations played an increasingly significant role. The mass production of previously hard-to-come-by goods, along with new networks for national distribution, allowed for consumerism on an heretofore unmatched scale, constantly stimulated by mass advertising, which itself began to affect the texture of American experience. Many individuals' work lives changed as well, as new jobs and professions developed along with the new economy. For the first time even middle-class women worked outside the home in significant numbers, particularly in the bigger cities. A labor movement arose as workers strove to protect their wages and dignity at the same time that businesses sought to maximize profits.

Social conflicts also followed in the wake of unprecedented levels of immigration, particularly from areas of the world that hadn't previously sent many people to the United States, including eastern and southern Europe and Asia. Millions of new citizens dramatically expanded the nation's multicultural resources at the same time as they encountered xenophobia, hostility, and widespread anxiety about how to define American identity (foreshadowing today's contentious debates about immigration and its effects on the nation). In the Southwest, the forcible incorporation of portions of Mexico into the United States after the United States–Mexico War (1846–48), as well as continuing

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immigration from Mexico, brought into the nation tens of thousands of new Americans whose first language was Spanish and whose skin was brown. These Mexican Americans faced discrimination, economic exploitation, and often violence from white Americans hungry for land and resources. So did weakened but still powerfully determined Native American tribes, who fought violent removal from their lands in the often forgotten "Indian Wars" of the late nineteenth century. Also toward the end of the nineteenth century, the United States emerged as a notably larger player on the world's imperial stage, using military means to assert control over faraway areas from Hawaii to Puerto Rico to the Philippines (where local insurgents battled against a US military occupation from 1899 to 1902). Finally, the Civil War may have brought formal slavery to an end, but the nation's failure to follow through on Southern Reconstruction meant that racial injustices and conflicts would continue as a shaping – and often explosive – force in American life.

Originating in different parts of the country, but centering in the literary capitals of Boston and New York, a number of authors began attempting to write fiction more closely and more self-consciously responsive to the rapidly shifting world around them. Realist writers sought to understand and explain their changing society, as well as to resist it, celebrate it, influence it, and profit from it – but above all to depict it with what Henry James called "the air of reality." Fiction writers were not alone in their endeavor to get a handle on an increasingly complex – and, to many, seemingly unstable – social order. The post-Civil War decades saw the rise of a new class of "experts," including those who ambitiously expanded the purviews and sought to refine the methodologies of such emerging academic disciplines as anthropology and sociology. The latter, announcing itself as the "science" of society, developed models and laws explaining social change, as well as how societies regulate themselves while undergoing change. Sociologists studied race relations, the organization of urban life, and the question of how immigrants assimilate in new cultural contexts. Psychologists, meanwhile, sought to understand the differences among individuals as well as general principles underlying the workings of the human mind. Managers, engineers, and scientists constituted additional groups of experts with increasingly important roles in society. While scientists sought to understand underlying "laws" of the physical universe, and engineers worked on transportation systems, energy generation, and farm mechanization, managers developed systems for motivating and controlling employees and sought greater rationality and efficiency in the organization of large-scale enterprises, including the expanding federal government.

Literary realists claimed forms of expertise and professional authority that were in certain ways similar to these other figures on the late-nineteenth-century

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scene. Like scientists, literary realists prided themselves on their objectivity. Like ethnographers, anthropologists, and linguists, they saw themselves as students of those aspects of society soon to be referred to under the umbrella term "culture" – manners and customs, beliefs and values, family and kinship arrangements, varieties of speech. Like psychologists, literary realists probed the inner workings of individual minds and the human mind's relationship to the outside world. With sociologists, they looked for patterns in how American society changes and adjusts to change. Indeed, literary realism helped middle-class Americans in particular adjust to social change in the sense that realist works sought to make even wrenching changes legible, comprehensible, almost literally containable between two book covers. Some realists also shared an interest with sociologists in categorizing individuals into social "types" (the ruthless businessman, the "street tough," the newly self-confident "American girl"). To the extent that literary realism was invested in categorizing people, understanding their motivations, and charting their daily activities, it also overlapped with the new "scientific" managerial practices that were starting to become fashionable in the business world.

Like other late-nineteenth-century "experts" and professionals, most literary realist authors belonged primarily to the middle and upper-middle classes. However, as literary artists they also lay claim to their own distinct professional status – an ability to offer persuasively accurate, uniquely intimate delineations of what various social changes feel like from the inside. A realist text could use the device of shifting narrative perspectives to place us imaginatively within, for example, a conflicted capitalist, an unhappy wife, an ambitious doctor, and an angry laborer, potentially all in the course of a single book. If sociologists could call on the emerging science of statistics to study "the slum" (itself a newly defined concept), and professional engineers and architects could design structures utilizing newly mass-producible steel, literary realists honed their own techniques for approaching their material and creating the effects they desired. Among their tools was free-indirect discourse, a style that allows a text's narrative voice to maintain third-person objectivity while also, often in the same paragraph, speaking from the point of view and in the tone of a specific character. Free-indirect discourse encourages a reader to feel both inside of a character and, at the same time, distant enough to evaluate that character's emotions and thoughts. As we will see in the next chapter, the ability to enter into a character's feelings while also maintaining enough detachment not to be overly swayed by them was of critical importance in realism's attempt to differentiate itself from the most popular form of fiction writing in the period before the Civil War: literary sentimentalism.

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Another technique important to literary realists was their very close attention to the surfaces of everyday life, which often led to incorporating into a text objects or small daily activities seemingly irrelevant to a story, but which added to the composite effect of actual reality. Here realists were also inspired by one of the nineteenth century's most exciting new technologies, photography, with its apparent ability to capture all the visible details of a city street, natural scene, or human face, and to do so with an aura of what William Dean Howells called "impartial fidelity" (quoted in Orvell, *The Real Thing* 124–25). Yet even as realists sought to produce that same effect of impartial fidelity in their writing, they insisted that their status as literary artists gave their work a significance beyond that of the "merely photographic" (Fluck, "Morality" 92). They would bring the disciplined imagination of professional artists to bear in re-creating the complexity and variety of individuals' inner experiences of a social world that was itself becoming more complex and various with every passing year.

Over the past few decades, literary scholarship has both expanded and diversified the group of writers we recognize as having played a meaningful part in realism's development during the period considered its heyday, roughly 1865–1914. Until very recently, such important writers as Sui Sin Far, Zitkala-Ša, and Pauline Hopkins would most likely not have been mentioned in an introductory volume such as this one. Only slightly longer ago, Kate Chopin and Charles Chesnutt, now widely recognized as major realist authors, would probably also have been ignored. The project of recovering from undeserved obscurity the many richly compelling works by white women and minority authors of both genders, works previously left out of the literary canon due to racial, ethnic, and gender biases, has been ongoing since the 1970s, and is still far from complete. Carried on by scholars, teachers, and editors, among others, the recovery process for a given work or author can involve three elements, including a work's rediscovery (for instance in old magazines and rare book archives), its reinterpretation under new critical frameworks, and its republication in new anthologies or other formats, so that the text becomes available to current readers, critics, and students. Such scholarly efforts have both enriched and productively complicated the entire field of American literary realism. At the same time as the canon has expanded, stimulating new readings developed from a variety of critical perspectives have supplemented previous interpretations of traditionally recognized realist authors such as Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain.

The evolving richness of the field presents exciting opportunities for a book that aspires both to introduce new readers to American literary realism and, at the same time, to offer research and analysis that more advanced scholars will

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likely find of interest as well. Rather than attempting some sort of comprehensive "survey" of significant authors, which I feared might result in little more than a series of encyclopedia-style entries given the extent of the field and the space limitations of a single volume, *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism* is primarily organized around concepts, trends, and problems. For instance, one central problem the book explores, from different but related perspectives across several chapters, derives from the claim by William Dean Howells (an important practitioner and public promoter of American realism) that literary realism would help America more fully to achieve its democratic principles of equality, unity, and the toleration of difference. For Howells, American literary realism had the potential to represent "democracy in literature." "Men are more like than unlike one another," Howells proclaimed. The task of realism would be to "make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity" (*Criticism and Fiction* 188).

American realist writers attempted to depict a wide range of Americans more accurately than prior literary modes had, including not only middle- and upper-class white citizens but also such politically disempowered and socially marginalized people as recent immigrants, Americans of color, and the urban and rural poor. What were the aesthetic, cultural, and political implications of these efforts, especially given that the preponderance of realism's reading audience was white and middle or upper class? Members of these classes often assumed themselves to be superior to lower-class and minority Americans. Did realist representations challenge or reinforce such assumptions of superiority? Might some works have done both at the same time? Constructions of gender identity in and by realist writing constitute another recurring theme, as does realist literature's exploration of different linguistic registers. Such questions reappear throughout the book, in different contexts and in relation to different authors and works.

As for its temporal scope, *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism* begins by discussing precursors to US realism in the decades prior to the Civil War and concludes with a brief consideration of the fate of realism at the time it was displaced, around the time of the First World War, by modernism as the type of literature that critics and readers considered at the forefront of innovation. Within these temporal boundaries, the sequence of chapters does not adhere to a strict chronological order. More than one individual chapter ranges from the 1870s to the first part of the twentieth century because doing so seemed most productive for exploring that chapter's guiding topic or topics. The book is designed to allow multiple entry points for those who wish to pursue a specific interest, whether it be a theme, issue, or

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particular author. In such cases, readers should use the index for guidance. When ideas or information mentioned in one chapter have been (or will be) more fully considered in another chapter, a parenthetic remark will let readers know, in case they wish to flip to that other chapter. Finally, I have tried in some cases to draw readers more deeply into the literature by inviting them to consider current critical controversies in which the arguments involved are especially stimulating to thought and debate.

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Chapter 1

Literary precursors, literary contexts

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As with so many other areas of American life, the publishing world underwent dramatic changes in the years following the US Civil War. These changes affected the ways in which authors understood their audiences and markets, their possibilities for generating income, and their own professional identities. Such wide-ranging shifts in authors' thinking could not help but have an impact on how and what they wrote. Publishing in the decades prior to the Civil War was still in the early stages of its development as a modern industry, at least in the United States; most books in America were either imported from Britain or else were pirated editions of books first published there. Most of those creating what we today think of as classic early American literature – from the Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet to Benjamin Franklin up through the American literary "Renaissance" (as it has become known) of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s – saw themselves not primarily as professional writers but as ministers, statesmen, reformers, lecturers, or simply citizens. Very few of these figures ever imagined supporting themselves by their writing.

It wasn't until the middle decades of the century that technological innovations – printing from metal plates, new processes for casting type and for manufacturing paper – allowed books to be produced quickly and cheaply enough, and in sufficient quantities, that they could begin to be purchased by consumers in large numbers, which allowed for the possibility of meaningful profits both to publishers and (at least in theory) to authors. The reading population was expanding at the same time as public education increased literacy. The producers of fiction who most immediately benefitted from these changes were those who published, and to a lesser extent those who wrote

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for, the period's cheap and immensely popular "story papers" (available for mere pennies) and "dime novels." Although most early dime novels targeted male readers with adventure tales (westerns, high seas, crime), growing numbers of women readers quickly boosted the sales of fiction focused on love and romance (whether in pioneer, urban working-class, or high-society settings). Written as escapist entertainment for the masses, this fiction was unapologetically formulaic and sensationalistic: it made no attempt to present itself either as art or, for that matter, as an accurate portrayal of Americans' real lives.

Authorship in nineteenth-century America

By the 1850s the marketplace for novels of more serious intent was dominated by women authors writing sentimental domestic fiction. Even these best-selling authors, however, tended not to think of themselves as fully professional literary artists in the modern sense. For example, in a burst of inspired outrage at Congress's passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the first American novel to sell one million copies, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly* (1852). Stowe refused to take any personal credit for her achievement, however, asserting that God had written the work through her. Susan Warner, who authored the also enormously popular novel *The Wide, Wide World* in 1850 and went on to publish dozens of books (some of them co-written with her sister Anna), claimed she wrote only in order to promote ideals of Christian piety and self-discipline and to help support her family. Stowe's and Warner's reluctance to identify themselves as professional writers was to some extent due to a cultural prohibition on women entering the male-reserved public sphere, particularly in order to express or develop themselves as individuals. Religious motivations or the need to help care for their families (which was seen as women's proper role) helped make *public*-ation seem more acceptable for mid-nineteenth-century female authors such as Stowe and Warner (see Kelley, *Private Woman*). None of this modesty, however, kept Nathaniel Hawthorne from his infamously misogynistic dismissal of such authors as a "damn'd mob of scribbling women," who should be "forbidden to write, on pain of having their faces deeply scarified with an oyster-shell" (quoted in Reynolds, *Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne* 33). Hawthorne believed that the "mob" of successful women authors was distracting potential readers (and purchasers) from his own more worthy works of fiction, works for which he was in the process of trying to carve a special niche in the literary marketplace.

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Hawthorne, art, and literary romance

Nathaniel Hawthorne ultimately became the first American novelist to be widely identified not only as a creator of "high art," but also as a man who made the production of such art his profession. Working in concert with the visionary publisher and promoter James T. Fields, whose firm issued *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, Hawthorne had come, by the time of his death in 1864, publicly to embody the fiction writer as professional artist (importantly, this does *not* mean that his works approached the sales or broad popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *The Wide, Wide World*). Hawthorne's is an especially impressive achievement given that the novel, ever since its English-language emergence in the previous century, had been considered somewhat below other literary genres (poetry, drama) as a field for genuine art. Most readers thought that the novel might be good for the inspirational or sentimental uses to which writers such as Stowe and Warner put it. Or it might serve, as with books by writers such as Charles Dickens and James Fenimore Cooper, as respectable entertainment. Others worried that novels, with their frequent focus on exciting dramas of love and courtship, might put dangerous ideas into the heads of young women who read too many of them. Virtually nobody, however, thought of the novel as a genre that possessed even the potential to yield literary masterpieces that would last for centuries, as the drama of William Shakespeare and the epic poetry of John Milton had.

The story of how, against these odds, the publisher Fields promoted and marketed the indeed remarkable qualities of Hawthorne's writing to ensure that educated Americans would come to think of his novels as aesthetically comparable to great poems and plays is a fascinating one that we cannot pause over here (see Brodhead, *School* 17–47).The impressive cultural status achieved by Hawthorne's fiction, however, served as a model to be imitated and, if possible, surpassed by late-nineteenth-century literary realists such as Henry James, who dedicated his career to proving that the novel could be as "high" a form of art as any other, including painting and sculpture. Yet Hawthorne was also somewhat problematic as a model for James and other realist writers who rose to prominence in the generation following *The Scarlet Letter* because Hawthorne explicitly defined his own fiction in opposition to the kind of writing that would later be called realism. His famous preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) begins with the assertion that he prefers the label "Romance" rather than "Novel" for his work. "The latter form of composition," Hawthorne writes in reference to the Novel,

> is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former [the romance] – while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to

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