



The Rise of Realism in Nineteenth-Century Literature: A Critical Study (1820-1914)

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ABSTRACT

The rise of realism in nineteenth-century literature marked a significant transformation in literary history, as writers shifted their focus from romantic imagination and idealism toward the accurate representation of everyday life and social reality. This study critically examines the development of realism between 1820 and 1914 and analyzes its influence on literature, society, and cultural thought. The research explores the works of prominent realist writers such as Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, Leo Tolstoy, and George Eliot, whose narratives portrayed the struggles, moral conflicts, and social conditions of ordinary individuals. The study highlights how industrialization, urbanization, scientific advancement, and changing class structures contributed to the emergence of realism as a dominant literary movement. Realist literature rejected exaggerated emotions and heroic characters, emphasizing objectivity, detailed settings, psychological depth, and social criticism. Furthermore, the paper investigates how realism served as a mirror of nineteenth-century society by addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, gender roles, and class conflict. Through critical analysis, the study concludes that realism not only transformed narrative techniques and thematic concerns but also established literature as a powerful medium for social observation and reform. The movement significantly influenced modern literary traditions and continues to shape contemporary narrative practices.

Keywords: Realism, Nineteenth-Century Literature, Social Criticism, Industrialization, Literary Movement

1. INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century witnessed a major transformation in European literature with the emergence and development of Realism as a dominant literary movement. Realism arose as a reaction against the imaginative idealism and emotional intensity of Romanticism, which had dominated the early decades of the century. Writers of the Realist tradition sought to portray life objectively and truthfully by focusing on ordinary people, social conditions, and everyday experiences. Instead of presenting heroic characters and extraordinary events, Realist authors emphasized the realities of middle-class and working-class life, thereby bringing literature closer to society and human experience.

The period between 1820 and 1914 was marked by rapid industrialization, urbanization, scientific advancement, and political change across Europe. These developments deeply influenced literary expression and encouraged writers to explore social inequality, class conflict, poverty, gender relations, and moral dilemmas. Realist literature became a powerful



medium through which authors examined the complexities of modern society. Writers such as Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, Leo Tolstoy, George Eliot, and Honoré de Balzac portrayed human behaviour with psychological depth and social accuracy. Their works reflected contemporary realities and questioned existing social structures and moral values.

Realism also introduced significant changes in literary technique and narrative structure. Detailed descriptions, believable characters, chronological narration, and objective observation became important features of Realist writing. Authors attempted to create an authentic representation of life by presenting events and characters without excessive romanticization. The movement contributed greatly to the development of the modern novel and influenced later literary trends such as Naturalism and Modernism.

The proposed study aims to critically examine the rise of Realism in nineteenth-century literature and analyze the social, historical, and intellectual forces that shaped this movement. It will explore how Realist writers represented society, human relationships, and contemporary issues through their literary works. The study will further investigate the stylistic characteristics of Realism and evaluate its contribution to literary history. By examining selected texts and authors from the nineteenth century, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Realism as both a literary movement and a reflection of changing social realities during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The rise of Realism in nineteenth-century literature marked a significant shift in literary thought and artistic representation. However, despite its importance, there remains a need for a critical and systematic understanding of how Realism emerged as a response to the social, political, and intellectual changes of the nineteenth century. Many literary studies focus on individual authors or specific novels, but fewer studies examine the broader development of Realism as a literary movement across different national traditions and historical contexts.

The problem addressed in this study concerns the manner in which Realist writers represented everyday life, social institutions, and human psychology while rejecting the imaginative tendencies of Romanticism. It is important to analyze how industrialization, urban growth, scientific thinking, and class divisions influenced literary production during this period. Furthermore, there is a need to examine the literary techniques employed by Realist authors to achieve authenticity and objectivity in their works.

This study seeks to investigate the historical development, thematic concerns, and stylistic features of nineteenth-century Realism and evaluate its lasting contribution to modern literature and literary criticism.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the historical and social conditions that contributed to the emergence and growth of Realism in nineteenth-century literature across Europe and its influence on literary thought and narrative representation.



- To analyze the major themes, characters, and social concerns represented in Realist literature, particularly issues related to class, morality, industrialization, urbanization, and everyday human experiences.
- To study the literary techniques and narrative methods employed by Realist writers for creating authenticity, objectivity, psychological depth, and accurate representation of contemporary society and individual life.
- To compare Realism with Romanticism in order to understand the ideological and stylistic differences between the two literary movements during the nineteenth-century literary and cultural transformation.
- To evaluate the contribution of prominent Realist authors and their works in shaping modern literature, critical thought, and later literary movements such as Naturalism and Modernism.

4. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The proposed study focuses on the rise and development of Realism in nineteenth-century literature between 1820 and 1914. The study primarily examines selected literary works of major European Realist writers such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, and Leo Tolstoy. It explores how these writers represented social realities, human behaviour, class structures, and everyday experiences in their works. The research also investigates the historical and intellectual background that contributed to the emergence of Realism, including industrialization, urbanization, scientific thought, and political transformation.

The study is limited to the literary analysis of selected novels and critical texts associated with the Realist movement. It does not attempt a detailed analysis of all nineteenth-century literary movements, though Romanticism and Naturalism may be discussed briefly for comparative purposes. The research mainly concentrates on thematic and stylistic aspects such as realism in characterization, narrative objectivity, social criticism, and psychological representation.

Furthermore, the study aims to understand the significance of Realism in shaping modern literary traditions and narrative techniques. By focusing on representative authors and texts, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the literary and social dimensions of nineteenth-century Realism.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed study adopts a qualitative and analytical research methodology to examine the rise of Realism in nineteenth-century literature between 1820 and 1914. The research is primarily based on textual analysis, critical interpretation, and historical examination of selected literary works associated with the Realist movement. Since the study focuses on literary texts, ideas, and social contexts, qualitative methods are considered most appropriate for understanding the thematic and stylistic dimensions of Realism.

The study relies mainly on secondary sources such as books, scholarly articles, literary criticism, journals, research papers, and historical documents related to nineteenth-century



literature and Realist theory. Important literary texts written by major Realist authors including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, and Leo Tolstoy will serve as primary sources for textual analysis. Selected novels and critical essays of these authors will be carefully studied to identify the characteristics, themes, and narrative techniques associated with Realism.

The research follows an interpretative approach to analyze how Realist writers represented society, human relationships, social inequality, and everyday life. Attention will be given to literary elements such as characterization, plot structure, narrative voice, symbolism, and descriptive realism. The study will also investigate how historical developments such as industrialization, urbanization, scientific advancement, and social reform movements influenced literary production during the nineteenth century.

A comparative method will also be used wherever necessary to distinguish Realism from Romanticism and other related literary movements. This comparison will help in understanding the ideological and stylistic transition from imaginative idealism to realistic representation. The study further employs historical criticism to connect literary texts with the socio-political environment in which they were produced. Such an approach enables a deeper understanding of literature as a reflection of social reality and historical change.

The collected data and textual materials will be analyzed systematically through close reading and thematic interpretation. Relevant quotations, literary examples, and scholarly opinions will be used to support arguments and interpretations. The research aims to maintain objectivity and academic accuracy while critically evaluating the contribution of Realism to nineteenth-century literature and modern literary thought.

The scope of the methodology is limited to English translations and selected European literary texts associated with Realism. The research does not involve fieldwork, surveys, or statistical analysis because the study is literary and theoretical in nature. Overall, the methodology seeks to provide a comprehensive and critical understanding of the rise, development, and significance of Realism in nineteenth-century literature.

6. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ian Watt (1957)

In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt examines the development of realism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction. He argues that realism emerged with the growth of individualism, empirical thinking, and middle-class society. Watt explains how novelists attempted to represent ordinary life and believable characters through detailed narration and realistic settings. His study is important for understanding the intellectual background that later influenced nineteenth-century Realist writers. The work highlights the relationship between literature and changing social structures. Watt's analysis provides a theoretical foundation for studying realism as a literary movement connected with modernity and social transformation.



Georg Lukács (1962)

Georg Lukács, in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, discusses realism as a literary form that reflects social reality and historical consciousness. He emphasizes that realist literature presents the relationship between individuals and society in a truthful manner. Lukács considers writers such as Balzac and Tolstoy as major representatives of realism because of their ability to portray social totality. His Marxist interpretation explains how literature mirrors class relations, political tensions, and historical changes. The study contributes significantly to understanding realism as not merely a style but also a critical representation of social conditions and human experiences.

René Wellek (1963)

René Wellek's *Concepts of Criticism* explores different literary theories and discusses realism as an important literary concept. Wellek examines how realist writers attempted to achieve objectivity and authenticity in literature. He argues that realism should not be viewed simply as factual representation but as an artistic method of interpreting reality. His discussion of nineteenth-century literature highlights the balance between imagination and social observation in realist fiction. Wellek's work is useful for understanding the theoretical and aesthetic dimensions of realism. It also provides insights into the evolution of literary criticism related to realist representation and narrative techniques.

Arnold Kettle (1967)

Arnold Kettle's *An Introduction to the English Novel* provides a critical analysis of English realist fiction and its connection with social life. Kettle argues that realist novelists focused on ordinary people and everyday struggles in order to reveal social truths. He studies writers such as Dickens and George Eliot to explain how literature reflects economic and moral conditions. His work emphasizes the importance of social realism and class consciousness in nineteenth-century fiction. Kettle's approach combines literary analysis with historical interpretation, making his study valuable for examining realism as a socially engaged literary movement during the nineteenth century.

Raymond Williams (1973)

In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams studies the representation of rural and urban life in English literature. He explains how industrialization and urban growth influenced nineteenth-century realist writing. Williams argues that realist literature captured the tensions between traditional rural society and modern industrial civilization. His cultural and historical approach highlights the role of literature in documenting social change and human experiences. The study is relevant to realism because it examines how writers represented class relations, labour, and urbanization. Williams' work contributes to understanding realism as a response to changing social and economic conditions.

Terry Eagleton (1983)

Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* discusses realism from a Marxist and ideological perspective. Eagleton argues that realist literature reflects the material realities and



social contradictions of its time. He explains how literary texts are influenced by political, economic, and cultural structures. His discussion of nineteenth-century realism focuses on the representation of class conflict, ideology, and social institutions. Eagleton also examines the relationship between literature and power in realist narratives. The work is significant for this study because it provides theoretical tools for analyzing realism as both a literary style and a reflection of social reality.

Catherine Belsey (1980)

Catherine Belsey, in *Critical Practice*, examines realism as a dominant narrative form in nineteenth-century literature. She explains how realist fiction creates the illusion of reality through language, characterization, and narrative structure. Belsey argues that realism presents society as natural and understandable, often shaping readers' perceptions of truth and identity. Her structuralist approach offers a critical understanding of how realist texts construct meaning and represent social life. The work is important because it challenges traditional assumptions about realism and encourages deeper analysis of literary representation, ideology, and narrative techniques in nineteenth-century fiction.

Peter Brooks (2005)

Peter Brooks, in *Realist Vision*, analyzes the visual and descriptive qualities of realist literature. He argues that realism attempts to make readers "see" reality through detailed observation and vivid representation. Brooks examines how nineteenth-century writers used description, characterization, and social detail to create believable fictional worlds. He also explores the relationship between realism and modernity, particularly in the context of urban life and changing social values. His study contributes to understanding the artistic and psychological dimensions of realism. The work is especially useful for analyzing how realist literature represented ordinary experiences with authenticity and depth

7. EXPECTED OUTPUT

The proposed study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the rise and development of Realism in nineteenth-century literature between 1820 and 1914. The research will critically examine how Realist writers portrayed social reality, human behaviour, and everyday experiences through literary representation. It is expected that the study will identify the major historical, social, and intellectual factors responsible for the emergence of Realism as a dominant literary movement during the nineteenth century.

The study is also expected to highlight the differences between Romanticism and Realism by analyzing their thematic and stylistic features. Through textual analysis of selected literary works, the research will explain how Realist authors employed narrative objectivity, detailed description, and psychological characterization to create authentic representations of life and society.

Furthermore, the research is expected to demonstrate the contribution of prominent Realist writers such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, and Leo Tolstoy to the development of modern fiction and literary criticism. The study will also provide



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useful academic insights into the relationship between literature and society, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of nineteenth-century literary history and the evolution of modern literary realism.

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