4. The Period of Realism and Naturalism (1870–1910)
4.1 Background

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4.5 Robinson, Dreiser, Crane, Dunbar and Cather
4.1 Background
Here we are back to an objective view of reality:

• Seeing life how it is and not how one single person thinks it should be
• Looking at the group and not the individual
• Portraying and not creating
• The mundane and not the superlative
• An interest in social reform not individual improvement
• Disillusionment with the Civil War
• Reaction to Romanticism

• Many writers were regionalists, those who wrote about a specific geographical area (Mark Twain, for example)

• Attention to detail

• Slow plot development
• There is an intrinsic sense of morality, albeit relative

• Language is not poetic but rather natural, and sometimes regionalist.

• Characters are more important than plot
A branch of realism is **Naturalism**:

- Scientific observation
- Objective standpoint of narrator
- A focus on the “lower passions” of the lower classes in society.
• Widely deterministic – characters are controlled by an environment they don’t fully understand

• Cause and effect are realistic and natural and there is rarely serendipity, miracles or exceptional twists in the narrative.
4.2 Kirkland, Davis, Alger, Twain and Howells
Joseph Kirkland (1830-1894)

- Literary editor of *The Chicago Tribune*
- Fought in the Civil War
- Worked as a lawyer and a businessman
His most famous work is *Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County* (1887), a novel about pioneer life in the West. The name pretty much describes it: life in the West. About a tough man married to a strong, respected woman. Written in Hoosier dialect.
Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910)

- Work inspired by the Industrial Revolution
- Considered one of the country’s first social historians
- Brought to light the degrading conditions of industrial labor
• Published some 500 works. Forgotten at her death. Rediscovered in 1972

• Now considered a feminist writer because of the women protagonists in her works
Life in the Iron-Mills

- A novella about factory labor and women’s issues
- Initially published in *The Atlantic Monthly*
- One of the first realist works of literature
A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of iron-works? The sky sank down before dawn, muddy, flat, immovable. The air is thick, clammy with the breath of crowded human beings. It stifles me. I open the window, and, looking out, can scarcely see through the rain the grocer’s shop opposite, where a crowd of drunken Irishmen are puffing Lyneburg tobacco in their pipes. I can detect the scent through all the foul smells ranging loose in the air.

The idiosyncrasy of this town is smoke. It rolls sultry in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron-foundries, and settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets. Smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river,—clinging in a coating of greasy soot to the house-front, the two faded poplars, the faces of the passers-by. The long train of mates, dragging masses of pig-iron through the narrow street, have a foul vapor hanging to their reeking sides. Here, inside, is a little broken figure of an angel pointing upward from the mantel-shelf; but even its wings are covered with smoke, clotted and black. Smoke, everywhere! A dirty, sporty, when from the street-window I look on the slow stream of human life creeping past, night and morning, to the great mills. Masses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all right over boiling caldrons of metal, raised by day in dens of drunkenness and infamy; breathing from infancy to death air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body. What do you make of a case like that, amateur psychologist? You call it an altogether serious thing to be alive: to these men it is a drunken jest, a joke,—horrible to angels perhaps, to them commonplace enough. My fancy about the river was an idle one: it is no type of such a life. What if it be stagnant and slily here? It knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight,—quaint old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses,—air, and fields, and mountains. The future of the Welsh puddler passing just now is not so pleasant. To be stowed away, after his grimy work, in a hole in the world.
• Exposes the avarice of capitalism of the Industrial Revolution

• The naturalistic style portrays gender, ethnic and class struggles, and wage workers unable to move beyond the deplorable circumstances of factory life
*Life in the Iron-Mills*  
(plot)  

- The narrator (unknown) asks readers not to pass judgment on the characters of her story (objectivity in Realism)
• Deborah and Hugh Wolfe. Hugh doesn’t think that he belongs in the iron mill as a worker
• Explicit dialogue of the injustices of working conditions.
• Deborah, tired and hunchbacked, steals a wallet and gives it to Hugh. He thinks they deserve it because they work hard. They land in jail. He takes his own life after losing his mental stability.
• Contrast of classes. Contrast of living conditions. Misery and helplessness as people feel they can’t get out of the confines of their destitution and poverty.

• In the end a Quaker woman intervenes and helps, albeit too late.
Horatio Alger, Jr.  
(1832-1899)

• A writer of many “rags to riches” novels with the same stock characters in them

• *Ragged Dick* (1867-1868) was his most popular novel.
• Subgenre of Bildungsroman (German for a “coming of age novel” in which a young character undergoes moral and social education through a series of often serendipitous events)
• Some of his later novels were darker, catering to a more sensationalist market.

• He wrote about 100 novels in his life.

• The prototype is a young lad who falls upon the chance to help a rich gentleman who in turn helps him out.
• Through a series of events and interchanges between the virtues and vices of different characters (virtue and honesty are traits of the young lad), the young man rises in society and becomes successful.
• Different ending from the typical Realist novel. Still deals with class, however.
Mark Twain (1835-1910)

• His real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens. Got his penname from steamboat jargon.

• Most famous works are *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).
• Addresses social ills and class differences and criticizes slavery and social inequalities.
Although seen as a major regionalist writer of the south because of his most known work, he also writes about other topics and geographic areas.
• For example, he wrote *Innocence Abroad* (1869), about his escapades abroad in Europe and beyond, *Roughing It* (1872), about other travels of his in the Wild West, *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), to name a few.
Tom Sawyer

- In this picaresque novel, Tom lives with aunt Polly, who one day tells him to paint her fence.
• With his cunning tactics, he tricks his friends into helping him. Becky is a schoolgirl that Tom likes, but that doesn’t go too far.

• He goes with Huckleberry to a graveyard and they witness Injun Joe murdering someone.
• Because of this, they run away and the town eventually thinks they are no longer alive. Tom sneaks back to witness his own funeral to hear what people say about him.
Back into society (and alive again), Tom takes the fall for something Becky did and this gets her to like him again. He then in court testifies against Injun Joe, who escapes captivity and hides.
• When Tom and Huck are out on one of their adventures, they find Injun Joe who has a treasure he is looking to bury. Tom splits from Huck and goes with Becky to McDougal's Cave, where they get lost.
• When Huck reveals Injun Joe's scheme against Widow Douglas, Injun Joe escapes again to hide in McDougal's Cave, where Tom and Becky see him but are able to escape the cave.
• They in turn report on Injun Joe’s whereabouts and the town takes action. Tom and Huck discover where Joe hid the gold in the caves and get a financial reward for it.
Huckleberry Finn

• This is essentially the sequel to Tom Sawyer.

• Huckleberry Finn now lives with the Widow Douglass to avoid his alcoholic father.

• He gets bored and runs away from home and meets an escaped slave named Jim.
JIM AND THE GHOST.
• The two of them are involved in a number of adventures with people they meet along the way.

• Huck learns about prejudice in society and the evils of racism and slavery.
• Jim teaches him many valuable lessons in their exploits, and in the end Huck returns home, as his father has died.

• With this sense of release, he desires more adventures out West.
• Written with dialogue to imitate the people’s speech at that time

• Themes of racism, identity and morality
• Mixed responses from critics: some like Jim’s characters, others point the overall racist tones in the book.

• Many different types of people characterized in the novel: cons (The Duke and the Dauphin), families in unrest, robbers, bounty hunters, etc.
William Dean Howells
(1837-1920)

- **Wrote “Editha” (1905), a story about a woman who romanticizes war and pushes her anti-war fiancé to enlist, which he does, and for which he is killed in battle.**

  Realist depiction.
• He also wrote novels, such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894).
• He was a prolific writer but is best known for his literary acquaintances (Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Wharton, Crane, etc.) and for being the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

• Lincoln appointed him as consul to Italy
4.3 Bierce, James, Jewett, Chopin and Washington
Ambrose Bierce  
(1842-1914)

- Journalist and newspaper editor
- Part of the San Francisco Circle (a small group of writers)
- Known for his satire and bitter criticism
• War stories were inspired by his own time as a soldier in the Civil War

• Took off to Mexico to support the Mexican Revolution and wasn’t heard from again.
Popular works:

• *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911), a dictionary of common words with satirical definitions

• "The Death of Halpin Frayser" (1891), a ghost story
• "The Moonlit Road" (1907), a Gothic horror story
• "Chickamauga" (1891) and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890), stories about the Civil War
The Devil’s Dictionary

• Considered an important work of American literature. 30 years of compiling entries he put in magazines and newspapers. Some example entries:
• *Egotist* (n.) A person of low taste, more interested in himself than in me.

• *Faith* (n.) Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.
Henry James (1843-1916)

• A Realist with a different focus: more upper class and seemingly “British” style
• Wrote about “naive” Americans abroad and their interactions with the more “sophisticated” old-school Europeans.
• Interchange of classes and social values.

• Most seen in *Daisy Miller: A Study* (1878) and followed up in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and other works.
Daisy Miller

• She is an adventuresome, young American who socially navigates through various cities in Europe.

• She meets Winterbourne, who takes an interest in her individualistic and nonconventional manners.
• She then has an affair with another fellow, Giovanelli, with whom she is caught *in fraganti* in the Coliseum in Rome, and Winterbourne warns she might get sick, which she eventually does, and dies, but before her passing, she writes a note to Winterbourne and tells him of her appreciation of him.
There are different ways of interpreting the outcome of *Daisy Miller*

James also interested in naturalism and the psychological motives of his characters. He explores this in *The Bostonians* (1886) and the ghost novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).
• Also as a literary critic he is known for “The Art of Fiction” (1884).
He said the author should be absent from the work (objectivity), that some critics are misguided, that writing is an art like painting and should be treated as such, with free will and conscious creativity within what is true to life (Realism).
Sarah Orne Jewett
(1849-1909)

• A regionalist writer from Maine

• Another writer connected to other writers (Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example)
• Longtime friend of Annie Adams Field (wife of late James Thomas Fields), with whom she lived for the rest of her life after his passing.

• *A Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and “*A White Heron*” (1886) are two of her most noted works.
“A White Heron”

• Sylvia is a young girl who lives with her grandmother in the woods of Maine.

• She falls in love with the natural beauty around her.
• A hunter she meets offers a reward if she helps him find a white heron.

• She finds one but does not reveal it’s whereabouts because she chooses the preservation of natural beauty over financial gain.
Kate Chopin (1850-1904)

• A regionalist writer with a posthumous recognition of her prominence in American letters
• A single mother if six, she was a writer of women’s issues and fin-de-siècle social norms, and the breaking of them, which made her a “controversial” writer at the time, especially with *The Awakening* (1899).
• Chopin’s regionalism was centered on the Cajuns and Creoles in Louisiana, as seen in the 23 stories *Bayou Folk* (1894), and in *A Night on Acadie* (1897).

• Her characters challenge their social and economic status and challenge the social mores of the times.
• “Désirée’s Baby” is from this collection. Of foster parents, she marries a plantation owner and has a baby with darker skin, which lays question to her own heritage.
The Awakening

• Her most controversial work

• It damaged her reputation at the time as a writer
• Recognized into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century as important work on women’s issues

• Considered an early feminist work because of how the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, rebelled against traditional attitudes of motherhood, marriage and fidelity.
• Edna Pontellier, on a vacation with her family, meets Adele Ratignolle, and a young swinger, Robert Lebrun, who help “awaken” her artistic and sexual sensibility.
• She leaves her husband, Robert, and has an affair with Alcee Arobin, but still has an epistolary relationship with Robert.
• As Adele reminds Edna of her responsibilities to her children and family, Edna is torn between desire and duty, and walks into the sea. Was she a victim or was she selfish?
Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

- Autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901), the most important work on the African American experience at the time
• He also wrote towards the end of his life *Tuskegee and Its People* (1905) and *The Story of the Negro* (1909).

• He is known as an educator and a voice for African Americans.
• He received honorary doctorates from Harvard and Dartmouth

• He was the first African American to be received at the White House with honors.
• He believed in the fruits of hard work and how recognition can come about with individual effort

• He didn’t think African Americans should radically advocate for great institutional or governmental changes, but that they should work alongside whites
• He supported education for self-fulfillment.

• He was the first leader of the Tuskegee Institute of Alabama.
4.4 Chesnutt, Gilman, Garland, Wharton and Du Bois
Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932)

• An African-American writer, son of interracial parents.

• Became the principal of the State Colored Normal School (which later became Fayetteville State University)
• Novels and short stories examined the post–Civil War South’s social and racial relations.

• As a lawyer he was active in the NAACP, writing articles on education and challenging racial inequality in the law.
• He wrote about people dealing with complex issues of race, “passing”, and identity.

• He himself could “pass”, but declared himself African American.
• Some of his works include *The Conjure Woman* (1899), *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900).
One of his stories is “The Passing of Grandison” from *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line* (1899). In this story, a southerner, to win the hand of his lover, takes a slave, Grandison, up north and plots his “escape”, but Grandison returns on his own accord to the south and is thus rewarded a slave position in his master’s house, just to later surprise everyone by escaping with his extended family.
Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)

• A social activist and feminist, her unorthodox lifestyle exemplified her cosmovision (she separated, divorced and eventually remarried - uncommon for the times)
• Wrote short stories, poems and nonfiction

• Most popular work is the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”

• A supporter of euthanasia, she took her own life when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.
“The Yellow Wallpaper” -
This short story is about a woman who is committed to bed rest by her doctor after giving birth, and the postpartum psychosis that is exasperated by her unwanted confinement. Staring at the wallpaper for unending hours, she imagines a women trapped in it and she rips the wallpaper from the wall trying to free her, only to discover it is herself that is trapped.
• This story was rediscovered years later by the Feminist Press, where it became a best seller.

• This story is important because it brings to light the conditions women suffered at the time at hands of others who though they knew what was best for women
• It shows how women’s lack of self-determination can be detrimental to their mental health.

• It is semi-autobiographical and reflects the mistreatment by her first husband and by her doctor, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell.
Hamlin Garland  
(1860-1940)

• Pulitzer prizewinning American novelist

• He was also a poet and writer of short stories and essays.
• He is best known for his regionalist fiction about Midwestern farmers (inspired from his own political beliefs and places where he lived)
• He was interested in Henry George’s Single Tax Movement, which influenced his regionalist novels *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) and *Prairie Folks* (1892)
He published his autobiography, *A Son of the Middle Border* in 1917. It was a success, and he wrote a sequel, *A Daughter of the Middle Border*. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography in 1922 for this.
Edith Wharton (1862-1937)

- Novelist, poet and short story writer

- First woman to win the Pulitzer Prize (1921) and nominated a number of times for the Nobel Prize in Literature
• Realist and naturalist perspective in her work: she wrote from her experiences with the American middle and upper classes, which gave her a psychological understanding of her characters
• Her more read works are the novels *House of Mirth* in 1905, *The Age of Innocence* in 1920 (for which she won the Pulitzer Prize), and the naturalist novella *Ethan Frome* (1911)
Edith Wharton divorced her husband. She said in a letter to a friend, “I wonder, among all the tangles of this mortal coil, which one contains tighter knots to undo, and consequently suggests more tugging, and pain, and diversified elements of misery, than the marriage tie.” The dilemma of marriage can be seen in many of her works, *Ethan Frome* and *The Age of Innocence*, for example.
W.E.B. Du Bois  
(1868-1963)  
• First African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard, then taught at various universities  
• One of the co-founders of the NAACP
• Advocated political and social intervention for change to come about, which was opposite from the ideas of Booker T. Washington
The Souls of Black Folk (1903)

- The collection of essays and stories
- An important work in African-American literature.
- African Americans should be agents of change in education, politics and intellectual thought.
• Advocated for suffrage and political representation

• He discusses the *double-consciousness* of African Americans, how they see themselves how others see them and not just as how they see themselves
• He was the editor of the NAACP's journal *The Crisis*, he published many influential pieces
• *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) was written to exculpate African Americans from the belief that they were responsible for failures of the Reconstruction Era.
He wrote three autobiographies, all of which all have essays on history, sociology and politics.
4.5 Robinson, Dreiser, Crane, Dunbar and Cather
Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935)

• A regionalist poet from Maine, much of his subject matter revolves around new England

• Discovered by President Theodore Roosevelt

• Won three Pulitzer Prizes
• Also had an interest in Arthurian literature: *Merlin* (1917) *Tristam* (1927), etc.

• Characteristics of his writing: irony, nostalgia, human affliction and solitude (a pessimism, influenced by his early years)
• Use of traditional poetic forms and versification.

• Some poems of his to read are “Richard Cory”, “The Mill”, “Haunted House” “Mr. Flood's Party”, “Maya”, “Miniver Cheevy”. Let’s take a look at one here:
“Richard Cory”

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.
And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.
Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)

- A novelist and journalist
- Many of his novels take place in Chicago
Mainly a naturalist writer – his characters don’t understand and can’t control the circumstances that surround their existence, morality is not a catalyst for individual improvement, and a tragic outcome is common.
Sister Carrie (1900)

- A country girl moves to Chicago and falls for different men that in turn seduced by her beauty.
Marital infidelity, theft and flight find the final couple in NYC, where he (George) commits suicide and Carrie reaches stardom as an actress but finds celebrity life empty and without merit.
Sister Carrie (1900)

- Inspired by family events
- Contrasts to the Victorian style that advocated morality and social norms
• Focus on human vices and instincts - but without judgment on author’s part

• Objective, realist stance in character portrayals
• Sexual mores of the times were ousted in this book, where the interchange of passion and are vice commonplace.
An American Tragedy (1925)

• The name sets the tone.

• Clyde Griffith wants to pursue his financial and personal dreams but finds his pregnant girlfriend an impediment, so he kills her, but in the end he is caught.
• It’s another novel that explores sexuality and avarice in a naturalist context, ones that run against the institutional and social mores of the times.
Steven Crane (1871-1900)

• Writer of poetry, novels and short stories

• His first novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) is considered the first work of American Naturalism
• He is most known for his Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), even though he was born after the war.
• He has a consistent poetic style across genres with a sense of omission, suggestion, immediacy and intensity.

• Use of everyday speech into dialogue, copying of vernacular/ regional/ colloquial accents of his characters.
The Red Badge of Courage

- Henry Fleming is a Union soldier in the Civil War that is not too sure if he will fight or flee when at war.
- He fights in the first battle but runs away in the second one.
• He runs across some soldiers and, seeing in others what he doesn’t have, he romanticizes their war wounds as red badges of courage (hence the title).
In the turmoil, he is hit over the head and get his own “badge” (in retreat, not battle), but decisively fights in the end, although readers are left to speculate on his true character.
Crane wrote short stories as well; for example, “The Open Boat” about his experiences surviving a shipwreck on his way to Cuba as a reporter in the Spanish American conflict.
• It’s another Naturalist work in a “nature versus man” work, and the “open boat” is a symbol of the vulnerability of human existence when exposed to the telluric superiority of nature.
• Crane’s poetry is also recognized.

• *The Black Riders and Other Lines and War is Kind* (1895) was ahead of its time: free verse – no titles, rhyme or meter.
• There is a mix of stanzas and refrains that contain dramatic narration, allegory, and change in voice. Here is a sample:
“Black Riders Came from the Sea”

Black riders came from the sea.
There was clang and clang of spear and shield,
And clash and clash of hoof and heel,
Wild shouts and the wave of hair
In the rush upon the wind:
Thus the ride of sin.
Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906)

• One of the first African-American writers to have a reputation abroad

• His lyrics for the musical *In Dahomey* (1903) was the first African-American musical on Broadway.
• Known for his ability to write in different dialects: the African American dialect of the antebellum South, the Midwestern dialect, as well as in conventional English

• He died at the age of 33 of tuberculosis
Examples of his different styles of poetry and ability to reproduce authentic dialects can be seen in the two poems, "When Malindy Sings" and "The Debt". Here they are:
"When Malindy Sings"

G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy—
Put dat music book away;
What's de use to keep on tryin'?
Ef you practise twell you're gray...

You ain't got de nachel o'gans
Fu' to make de soun' come right,
You ain't got de tu'ns an' twistin's
Fu' to make it sweet an' light....
Easy 'nough fu' folk to hollah,
Lookin' at de lines an' dots,
When dey ain't no one kin sence it,
An' de chune comes in, in spots.
“The Debt”

This is the debt I pay
Just for one riotous day,
Years of regret and grief,
Sorrow without relief.

Pay it I will to the end —
Until the grave, my friend,
Gives me a true release —

Gives me the clasp of peace.

Slight was the thing I bought,
Small was the debt I thought,
Poor was the loan at best —

God! but the interest!
Willa Cather (1873-1947)

- **Wrote short stories and novels**
- **Worked as a journalist in *McClure’s* and *Home Monthly*.**
Perhaps not coetaneous with most Realists but definitely noted for sharing realist and regionalist tendencies (Nebraska/ the Midwest expansion). She writes about the experience of people (women) in the American frontier.
• Won the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for *One of Ours* (1922) about World War I

• Her masterpiece, according to some critics, is *My Ántonia* (1918), the final book of a trilogy about the American prairie (after *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*).
• Story line: Jim Burden is an orphan from Virginia who contrasts with the daughter of a family of Bohemian immigrants, Ántonia Shimerda. Both these individuals struggle to make it in the prairie. The memories of their experiences leave a lasting impression on both characters.