

## Realism and Henry James

Realism finds its subjects in everyday life. Writers of realistic fiction tend to use simple, direct prose to depict ordinary men and women in everyday situations. They value the individual above plot, creating stories that explore the psychology of their characters.

As a literary term, realism has two meanings—one general, the other historical. In a general sense, realism refers to the representation of characters, events, and settings in ways that the spectator will consider plausible, based on consistency and likeness to type. This sort of realism does not necessarily depend on elaborate factual description or documentation but more on the author's ability to draft plots and characters within a conventional framework of social, economic, and psychological reality. In a historic sense, Realism (usually capitalized) refers to a movement in nineteenth-century European literature and theater that rejected the idealism, elitism, and romanticism of earlier drama and prose fiction. Realism began in France with Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Guy de Maupassant and then moved internationally.

Henry James is considered the father of the realistic psychological novel. His characters are defined by the world in which they live and the social requirements of their society. James's brand of realism explores the psyches of characters grappling with complex social and ethical situations. While many early realists avoided tragic situations, James placed his characters in circumstances that did not always end happily.

James's portrayal of characters and situations departed from the romantic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which had centered on characters whose difficult lives were corrected through perseverance, hard work, and love. James reacted against the predictable plotlines in which virtue was rewarded and evil punished by novel's end. As one of the pioneers of literary realism, he believed characters should be created without idealization and that settings and situations must be portrayed as faithfully to real life as possible.

James found inspiration in the complex manners and obligations of the elite. While he did not write about poverty or the plight of the working class, his characters often face challenges that result from the opportunities money and leisure provide. Many of James's stories and novels can be read as cautionary tales warning of the excesses of wealth and independence.

Jamesian characters act according to their true natures, which remain consistent throughout the story. Physical description underscores a character's essential personality and provides the reader with clues about his or her temperament. The reader can always expect actions and responses that are understandable in terms of that character's unique perspective.