

American Realistic Writing

A grand economic process known as industrialization advanced during the 19th century in the Western part of Europe as well as in the USA and produced modifications in the form of society. From the beginning of time, the life of man had been the land, the rhythm of planting, growth, and harvest, the cycle of the seasons. With few exceptions, men lived on farms or in small towns. But industrialization changed this ancient environment of man. Factories and cities now surrounded him.

New social attitudes and cultural values were introduced by this process. During the early half of the 19th century, it was Romanticism which had been the dominant cultural movement of the United States. However, a new cultural movement appeared in the United States coming from Europe and as a result of the overwhelming growth of industrialization after the Civil War - This movement came to be regarded as Realism.

Realism was a reaction to Romanticism as well as a development out of the accelerated social trends of the last half 19th century. Romanticism re-

garded the world with emotion and intuition and eventually appeared sentimental and arbitrary. It concentrated on incidents that were often ideal and thus came to seem naive. The new movement responded to these shortcomings of Romanticism by producing a literature which studied the human-being objectively and concentrated on normal, every-day, human activity.

The objectivity preached by Realism referred to observation of character and setting and using a style that was precise, direct, and thorough. By concentrating on ordinary, normal human relations, Realism moved literature away from the far-fetched tales of heroines fainting in passion, to which Romanticism had declined. Instead, it portrayed the daily problems of common people, the courage of a doctor helplessly seeing his son die, the resignation of a wife to a marriage that had grown dull. Among American writers the most distinguished Realistic novelist was Henry James, one of the most profound literary artists the United States has ever produced.

Henry James (1843~1916)

Henry James was born in New York into a wealthy, distinguished, and highly cultivated family. He spent his early years and most of his adult life living in Europe. Due to the financial situation of the family, young James was early able to resolve that he would completely dedicate his life to literature. He resolved also that he would so distinguish himself as a writer that he would become a model to Americans of the professional, literary artist.

To a very great extent James succeeded in carrying out these youthful resolutions. As a writer he concentrated upon themes of the relationship between innocence and experience, especially in the confrontation of the young American and older European cultures, and of the achievement of self-knowledge through psychological and moral perception. To describe the nuances and subtleties of these cultural and psychological distinctions he developed a masterful style, objective, precise, and elegant.

The Portrait of a Lady is one of his most successful novels, it brilliantly portrays themes of American innocence and European experience, emerging psychological and moral awareness. The protagonist of the story is a young, beautiful American, Isabel Archer, on her first visit to Europe. She is resolved that she will acquire wide experience so as to choose her life as freely as possible.

She is loved by several men: a young aristocrat whom she meets in England, a perceptive but invalid cousin who lives in England, and a vigorous young American who pursues her to Europe. But she rejects all of these suitors, desiring more time and experience in order freely to choose her life.

While in this dilemma, Isabel inherits a substantial fortune and at the same time meets a lady who soon becomes her close friend, Madame Merle. Sympathetic to Isabel's dilemma, she tells her of an extraordinary man she knows, Gilbert Osmond, who lives in Italy. Isabel travels there and is introduced to Osmond whom she grows to admire as mature, intel-

lectual, and suave. Despite criticism of him as superficial and selfish by others, she marries him a few months after their first meeting.

But Isabel gradually discovers that she has had a false image of Osmond. She discovers to her horror that he and Madame Merle have been lovers, that they have had a child, and that it has been for the sake of this child's economic security that Madame Merle persuaded the wealthy Isabel to marry Osmond.

Isabel leaves Osmond temporarily to go to the bedside of her dying cousin. There she is encouraged by him and others not to return to the odious couple who lured Isabel into marriage. But Isabel returns; for, as she said in the beginning, she is determined to choose her life freely and to endure the consequences of that choice, responsible to the end for her actions.

The following selection is James' introductory description of Isabel Archer.



The Portrait of a Lady

"Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories; her imagination was remarkably active. It had been her fortune to possess a finer mind than most of the persons among whom her lot was cast¹; to have a larger perception of surrounding facts, and to care for knowledge that was tinged with the unfamiliar. It is true that among her contemporaries she passed for a young woman of extraordinary profundity; for these excellent people never withheld their admiration from a reach² of intellect of which they themselves were not conscious, and spoke of Isabel as a prodigy of learning, a young lady reputed to have read the classic authors - in translation. She had no talent for expression, and had none of the consciousness of genius; she only had a general idea that people were right when they treated her as if she were rather superior. Whether or not she were superior, people were right in admiring her if they thought her so; for it seemed to her often that her mind moved more quickly than theirs, and this encouraged an im-

patience that might easily be confounded with superiority. It may be affirmed without delay that Isabel was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem; she often surveyed with complacency the field of her own nature; she was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right; impulsively, she often admired herself. Meanwhile her errors and delusions were frequently such as a biographer interested in preserving the dignity of his heroine must shrink from specifying. Her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines, which had never been corrected by the judgment of people who seemed to her to speak with authority. In matters of opinion she had had her own way, and it had led her into a thousand ridiculous zigzags. Every now and then she found out she was wrong, and then she treated herself to a week of passionate humility. After this she held her head higher than ever again; for it was no use, she had an unquenchable desire to think well of herself."

There now follows a later description of Isabel as she discovers the true character of her husband, Osmond.

"Mistrust was the clearest result of their short married life; a gulf had opened between them over which they looked at each other with eyes that were on either side a declaration of the deception suffered. It was a strange opposition, of the life of which she had never dreamed - opposition in which the vital principle of the one was a thing of contempt to the other. It was not her fault - she had practised no deception; she had only admired and believed. She had taken all the first steps in the purest confidence, and then she had suddenly found the infinite vista of multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley, with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading

to the high places of happiness from which the world would seem to lie below one, so that one could look down with a sense of exaltation and advantage, and judge and choose and pity, it led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression, where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard as from above, and served to deepen the feeling of failure. It was her deep distrust of her husband - this was what darkened the world. Suffering, with Isabel, was now an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure."

DISCUSSION

1. Describe how Realism can be seen as a reaction to Romanticism.
2. List the special themes Henry James developed as a novelist.
3. What makes Henry James a Realist writer?
4. In what ways does Isabel Archer pretend to be innocent regarding the European environment in which she was living, as well as in relation to the plans of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond?
5. Describe the development in the personality of Isabel that emerges from the above descriptions of her.

¹ she was born

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