

# The Rise of Realism

## The Civil War to 1914

by Gary Q. Arpin

### PREVIEW

#### Think About . . .

Americans have fought only one civil war, but that tragedy cut deep into the heart of the nation. Reactions to the grim casualties of the war, as well as to the rapid urban expansion, inspired writers and artists to abandon their Romantic ideals. A new movement was created, called realism.

As you read about this time period, look for answers to these questions:

- How and when did American writers and poets respond to the Civil War?
- What are the basic characteristics of realism?
- What did the naturalist writers believe?

On the evening of April 12, 1861, Walt Whitman attended the opera at the Academy of Music in Manhattan. After the opera he was walking down Broadway toward Brooklyn when, as he later wrote, "I heard in the distance the loud cries of the newsboys, who came presently tearing and yelling up the street, rushing from side to side even more furiously than usual. I bought an extra and crossed to the Metropolitan Hotel . . . where the great lamps were still brightly blazing, and, with a crowd of others, who gathered impromptu, read the news, which was evidently authentic."

The news that Whitman and the others read so avidly was of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, the opening shots of the Civil War. Thus solemnly began, for one of the few American poets or novelists who would witness it firsthand, the greatest cataclysm in U.S. history.

### Slavery Divides the Country

What had brought the country to the point of the Civil War? It had but "a single cause," asserted the historian James Ford Rhodes in 1913, and that cause was slavery. Today historians acknowledge additional causes of the war, such as the economic differences between the South and the North, but slavery lay at the heart of this conflict.

#### SKILLS FOCUS

Collection  
introduction  
(pages 382–395)  
covers

#### Literary Skills

Evaluate the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social influences of a historical period.



The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia. Photograph by Katherine Wetzel.

Evening: Gun Fort Sumter (detail) (1864) by John Gadsby Chapman. Painted in Rome after a sketch made by Chapman's son Conrad Wise Chapman. Oil on board.

*War is at best  
barbarism. . . .  
Its glory is all  
moonshine. . . .  
War is hell.*

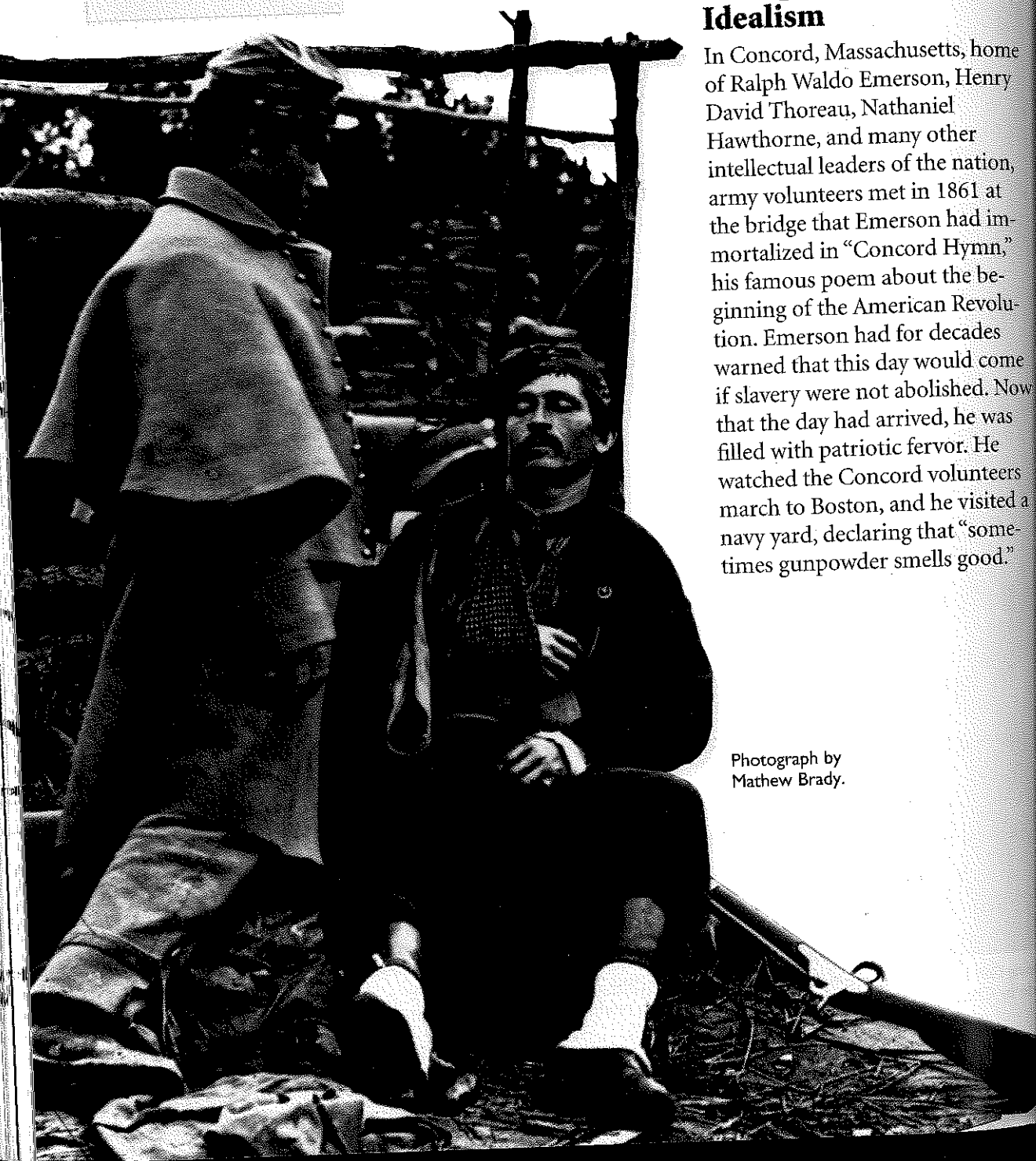
—Union Gen.  
William Tecumseh  
Sherman

From the personal accounts of people held in slavery—such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet A. Jacobs—we learn firsthand about the horrors and injustices of slavery. Increasing numbers of Northerners viewed slaveholding as a monstrous violation of the basic American principle of equality, but Southerners wanted to preserve the institution of slavery. The conflict reached a fever pitch and erupted at Fort Sumter. As soldiers went off to battle, emotions ran high through a divided country.

## **A Response to the War: Idealism**

In Concord, Massachusetts, home of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and many other intellectual leaders of the nation, army volunteers met in 1861 at the bridge that Emerson had immortalized in “Concord Hymn,” his famous poem about the beginning of the American Revolution. Emerson had for decades warned that this day would come if slavery were not abolished. Now that the day had arrived, he was filled with patriotic fervor. He watched the Concord volunteers march to Boston, and he visited a navy yard, declaring that “sometimes gunpowder smells good.”

Photograph by  
Mathew Brady.





Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution; Gift of Charles Savage Homer, Jr./Courtesy Art Resource, New York

*Wounded Soldier Being Given a Drink from a Canteen* (1864) by Winslow Homer. Charcoal and white chalk on green paper (36.5 cm × 50 cm).

Emerson had great respect for the Southern will to fight, however, and he suspected, quite rightly, that the war would not be over in a few months, as some people had predicted. When the Concord volunteers returned a few months later from the First Battle of Bull Run (July 1861), defeated and disillusioned, many of them unwilling to reenlist, Emerson maintained his conviction that the war must be pursued.

### **A Reality of the War: Appalling Suffering**

Late in 1862, Walt Whitman traveled to Virginia to find his brother George, who had been wounded in battle. After George was nursed back to health, Whitman remained in Washington off and on, working part time and serving as a volunteer hospital visitor, comforting the wounded and writing to their loved ones. The condition of the wounded was appalling. Many of the injured had to remain on the battlefield for two or three days until the camp hospitals had room for them. Antiseptics were primitive, as were operating-room techniques. A major wound meant amputation or even death.

Whitman estimated that in three years as a camp hospital volunteer, he visited tens of thousands of wounded men. "I am the man," he had written in "Song of Myself," "I suffer'd, I was there," and now he *was* there, in the real heart of America. In his poems he had presented a panoramic vision of America; now America passed

*Future years will  
never know the  
seething hell and  
the black infernal  
background of the  
countless minor  
scenes and interiors  
. . . and it is best  
they should not—  
the real war will  
never get in the  
books.*

—Walt Whitman



through the hospital tents in the form of wounded men from every state in the Union and the Confederacy. Nevertheless, out of the horror that he viewed, Whitman was able to derive an optimistic vision of the American character, of “the actual soldier of 1862–65 . . . with all his ways, his incredible dauntlessness, habits, practices, tastes, language, his fierce friendship, his appetite, rankness, his superb strength—and a hundred unnamed lights and shades.”

## A Result of the War: Disillusionment

The war that strengthened Whitman’s optimism served at the same time to justify Herman Melville’s pessimism. Melville’s poems about the war, collected in *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), were often dark and foreboding. Of the elation following the firing on Fort Sumter, Melville wrote:

O, the rising of the People  
 Came with the springing of the grass,  
 They rebounded from dejection  
 After Easter came to pass.  
 And the young were all elation  
 Hearing Sumter’s cannon roar. . . .  
 But the elders with foreboding  
 Mourned the days forever o’er,  
 And recalled the forest proverb,  
 The Iroquois’ old saw:  
*Grief to every graybeard  
 When young Indians lead the war.*

Melville was fascinated by the war, but he never wrote a novel about it. The poems in *Battle-Pieces*, based on newspaper accounts of the battles as well as visits to battlefields, record the heroism and futility of the fighting on both sides and demonstrate respect for Southern soldiers as well as Northern troops. In some of Melville’s best poems, though, there is a sense of human nature being stripped bare, revealing not the heroism and strength that Whitman found but rather humanity’s basic evil.



Civil War ambulance.



*Young Soldier: Separate Study of a Soldier Giving Water to a Wounded Companion* (1861) by Winslow Homer. Oil, gouache, and black crayon on canvas (36 cm × 17.5 cm).

Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution; Gift of Charles Savage Homer, Jr./Courtesy Art Resource, New York.

## Eyes of an Era

Television's close-up coverage of modern warfare has made the thick of battle a common sight on the nightly news, but during the American Civil War, photographs were the closest thing to newscasts. By the latter part of the 1800s, technical advances began to allow for truly mobile photographers. As a result, the Civil War became the first war to be fully documented in pictures. Cameras went on the march, up in observation balloons, and to sea on battleships.

Cameras of the time could not capture motion; charging troops and thrusting bayonets came out as hazy blurs. However, cameras richly recorded the preparations and the aftermath of war. After battles, photographers roamed the killing fields, shooting pictures while wearing handkerchiefs across their faces to block the stench of death. They captured the war's still lifes—fields and forests filled with dead soldiers; blasted cities and landscapes; and scenes inside prisons, hospitals, and camps.

The most famous of these war photographers was Mathew Brady (1823?–1896). Brady was among the first photographers to bring portable darkrooms to combat zones. Though Brady helped to inspire Civil War photography, he often employed courageous photographers, such as Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan, to take their cameras onto the battlefields.

Gardner came closer than anyone else to capturing an actual battle scene when he set his camera on a ridge overlooking the Battle of Antietam in Maryland in 1862. He recognized that "verbal representations" of the war "may or may not have the merit of accuracy; but photographic presentments of them will be accepted by posterity with an undoubting faith."

### INFORMATIONAL TEXT



Alexander Gardner (seated) and his portable darkroom.

O'Sullivan was one of the most fearless and brilliant of Brady's assistants. When bridge builders whom O'Sullivan was photographing were targeted by enemy sharpshooters, he calmly continued taking pictures while men screamed and fell.

Photographers struggled with heavy equipment, stray bullets, rain, mud, insects, foliage, wandering livestock, and frozen hands. Processing photographs in the field was complicated and messy: Many pictures were ruined when they were washed in streams, where debris could stick to the gummy image.

Sadly, most Civil War photographers and their work fell into obscurity after the war. Hundreds of glass negatives were sold for use as greenhouse windows, and decades later many of the glass plates ended up in gas masks worn by soldiers in World War I.



*The Harriet Tubman Series*  
(1939–1940), No. 9, by Jacob  
Lawrence. Hardboard (12" ×  
17<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>").

*Harriet Tubman dreamt of  
freedom ("Arise! Flee for  
your life!") and in the  
visions of the night she saw  
the horsemen coming.  
Beckoning hands were ever  
motioning her to come,  
and she seemed to see a  
line from the land of  
slavery to the land of  
freedom.*

## The War in Literature

Although many works of historical interest—soldiers' letters and diaries, as well as journalistic writings—came out of the war, works of literary significance were rare, prompting the question, Why did an event of such magnitude result in such a scanty literary output?

Modern readers think that one byproduct of a war is literary accounts, largely in the form of novels and poems by participants in the war. Modern writers like Ernest Hemingway went to war intending to return with the material for novels. This was not the case with the Civil War. Few major American writers saw the Civil War firsthand. Emerson was in Concord during most of the war, "knitting socks and mittens for soldiers," as he wrote to his son, and "writing patriotic lectures." Thoreau, who had been a fervent abolitionist, died in 1862, and Hawthorne died two years later. Emily Dickinson remained in Amherst, Massachusetts, and the country's grief over the war seems not to have informed her poetry. Of the younger generation of writers, William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Henry Adams were abroad.

Perhaps most important, the traditional literary forms of the time were inadequate to express the horrifying details of the Civil War. The literary form most appropriate for handling such strong material—the **realistic novel**—had not yet been fully developed in the United States. Thus, the great novel of the war, *The Red Badge of Courage*, had to wait to be written by a man who was not born until six years after the war had ended: Stephen Crane.

## The Rise of Realism

One of the most enduring subjects of prose fiction has been the exploits of larger-than-life heroes. Born of the chivalric romance, the **Romantic novel** presents readers with lives lived idealistically—beyond the level of everyday life. The heroes and heroines of the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, for example, engage in romantic adventures filled with courageous acts, daring chases, and exciting escapes.

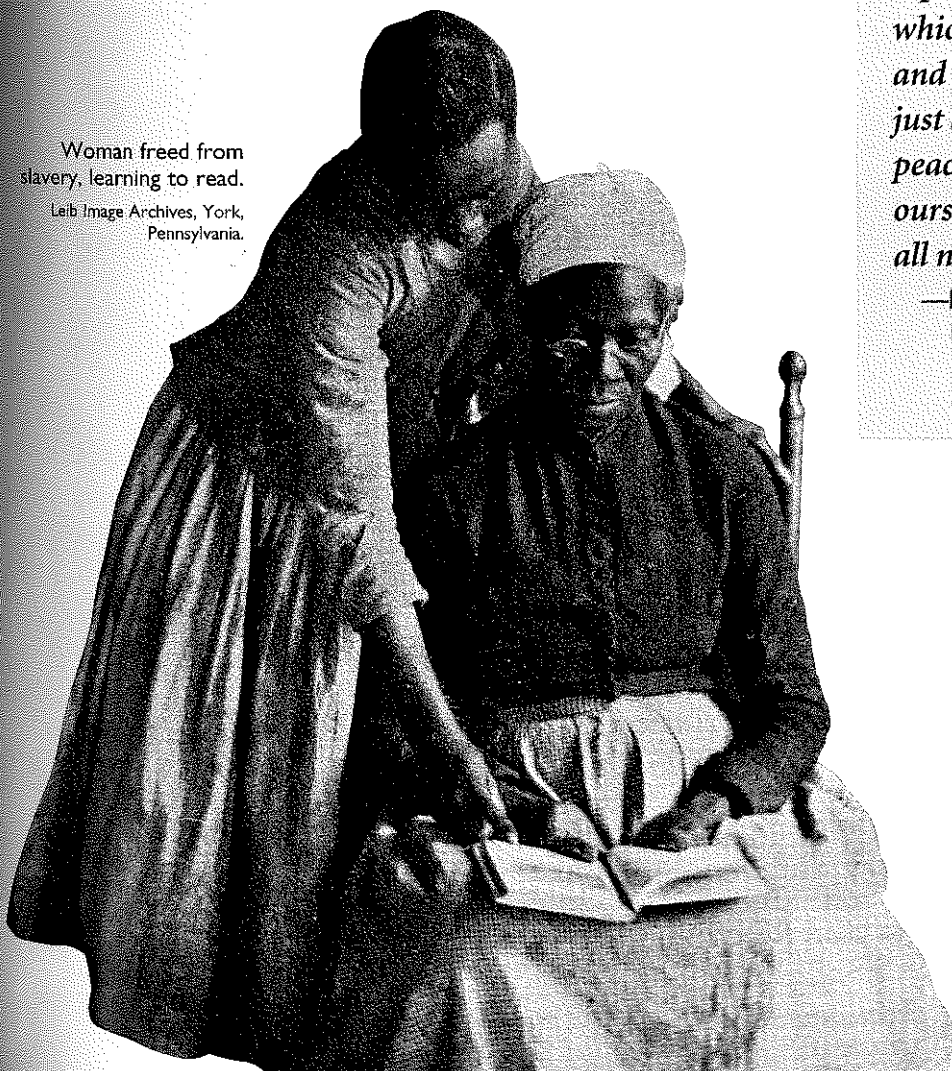
In America the great fiction writers of the mid-nineteenth century, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, shared an aversion to simple realism. These writers used romance

*With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.*

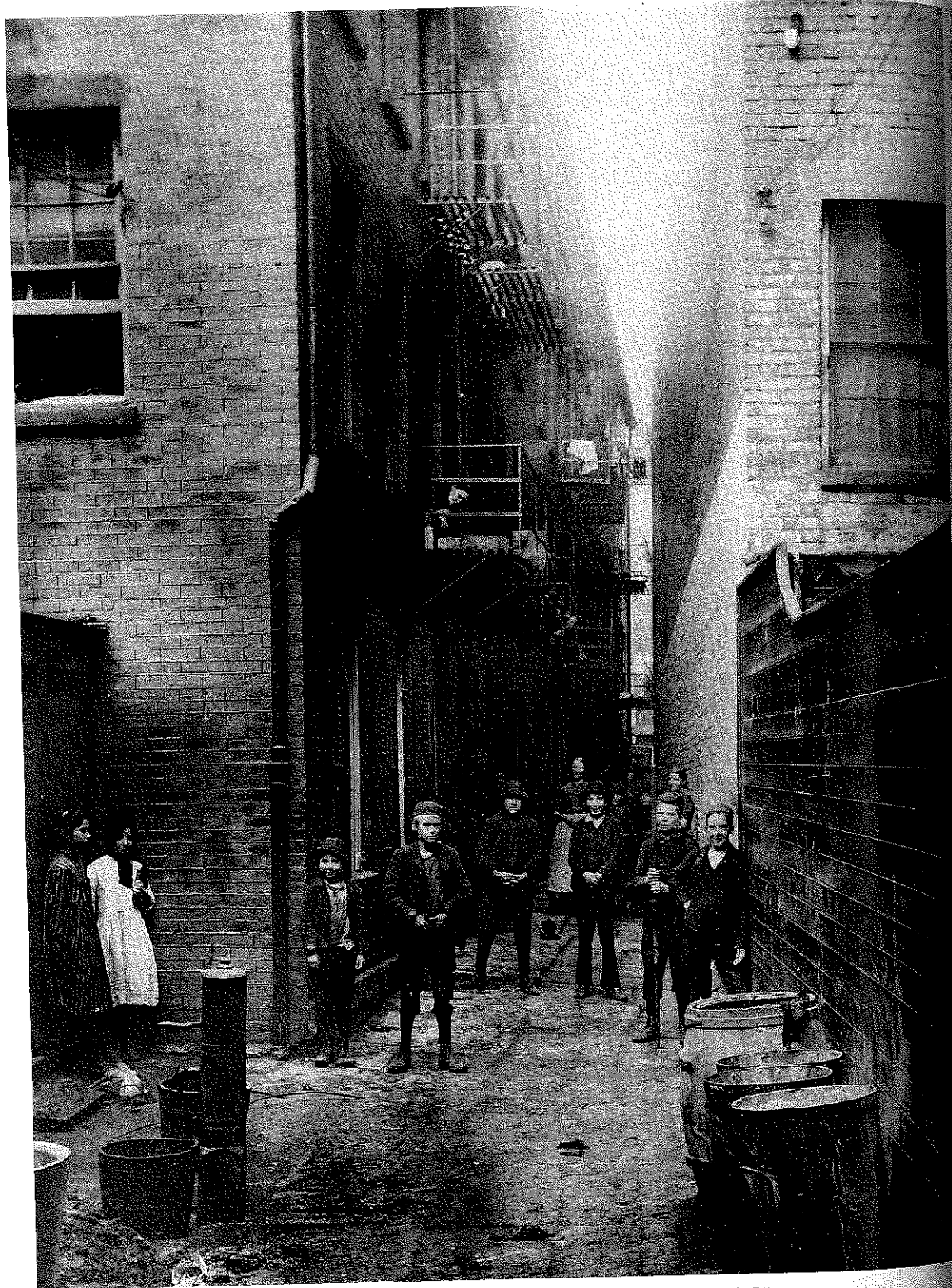
—President Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

Woman freed from slavery, learning to read.

Leib Image Archives, York, Pennsylvania.







Children in Mullen's Alley, off Cherry Street, New York City (c. 1888). Photograph by Jacob Riis.

not simply to entertain readers but to reveal truths that would be hidden in a realistic story that limited itself to what actually could happen.

After the Civil War, however, a new generation of writers came of age. They were known as realists, writers who aimed at a “very minute fidelity” to the common course of ordinary life. Their subjects were drawn from the slums of the rapidly growing cities, from the factories that were rapidly replacing farmlands, and from the lives of far-from-idealized characters—poor factory workers, corrupt politicians, and even prostitutes.

## Realism Takes Root in Europe

Realism was well entrenched in Europe by the time it began to flower in the United States. It developed in the work of such writers as Daniel Defoe, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy. These writers tried to represent faithfully the environment and the manners of everyday life: the way ordinary people lived and dressed and the things they thought and felt and talked about.

Realism was not simply concerned with recording wallpaper patterns, hairstyles, or the subjects of conversations. It sought also to explain *why* ordinary people behave the way they do. Realistic novelists often relied on the emerging sciences of human and animal behavior—biology, psychology, and sociology—as well as on their own insights and observations.

## American Regionalism: Brush Strokes of Local Color

In America, realism had its roots in **regionalism**, literature that emphasizes a specific geographic setting and that makes use of the speech and manners of the people who live in that region. Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Bret Harte, and Charles W. Chesnutt are noted early regionalists who recorded the peculiarities of customs, speech, and temperament in the different parts of a rapidly expanding nation. (Regionalism flourished again in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the South, and is still an important aspect of American literature.)

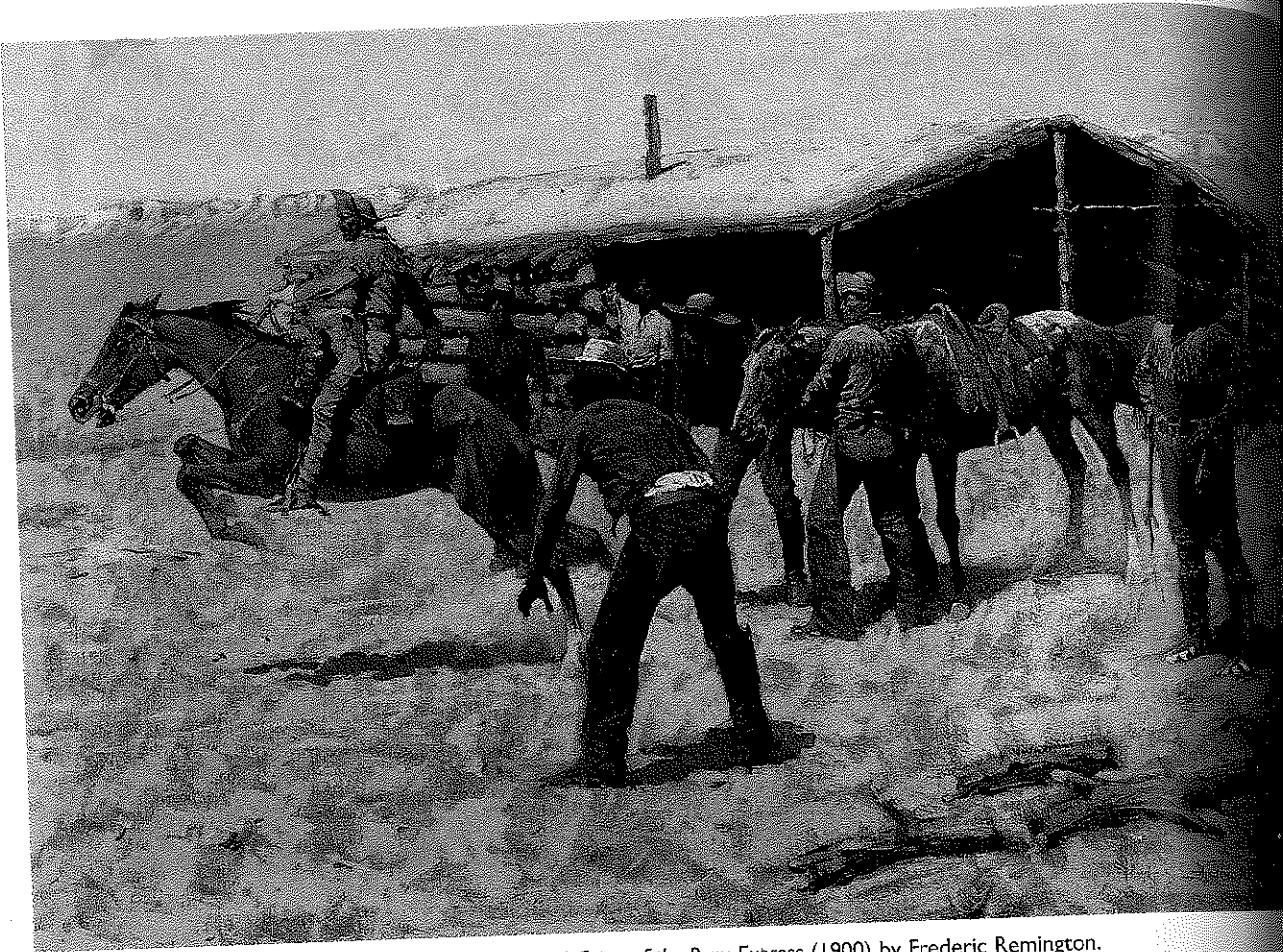
While regional writers strove to be realistic in their depiction of speech patterns and manners, they were often unrealistic—even sentimental—in their depiction of character and social environment. For example, the Southern writer Thomas Nelson Page, who wrote popular post-Civil War novels about the South before the war, stressed the romantic “moonlight and magnolia” environment

### Elements of Realism

- Rejection of the idealized, larger-than-life hero of Romantic literature
- Detailed depiction of ordinary characters and realistic events
- Emphasis on characters from cities and lower classes
- Avoidance of the exotic, sensational, and overly dramatic
- Use of everyday speech patterns to reveal class distinctions
- Focus on the ethical struggles and social issues of real-life situations

*The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.*

—Henry James



*Coming and Going of the Pony Express* (1900) by Frederic Remington.  
Oil on canvas (26" × 39").

*All modern  
American literature  
comes from one  
book by Mark  
Twain called  
Huckleberry Finn.*

—Ernest Hemingway

at the expense of the realities of a social world that relied on slavery. Realism as a literary movement in the United States went far beyond regionalism in its concern for accuracy in portraying social conditions and human motivation.

Mark Twain is the best-known example of a regional writer whose realism far surpassed local bounds. Although he first established his reputation as a regional humorist, Twain evolved into a writer whose comic view of society became increasingly satiric. His best novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), describes the moral growth of a comic character in an environment that is at the same time physically beautiful and morally repugnant. *Huckleberry Finn* combines a biting picture of some of the injustices inherent in pre-Civil War life with a lyrical portrait of the American landscape.

# Realism and Naturalism: A Lens on Everyday Life

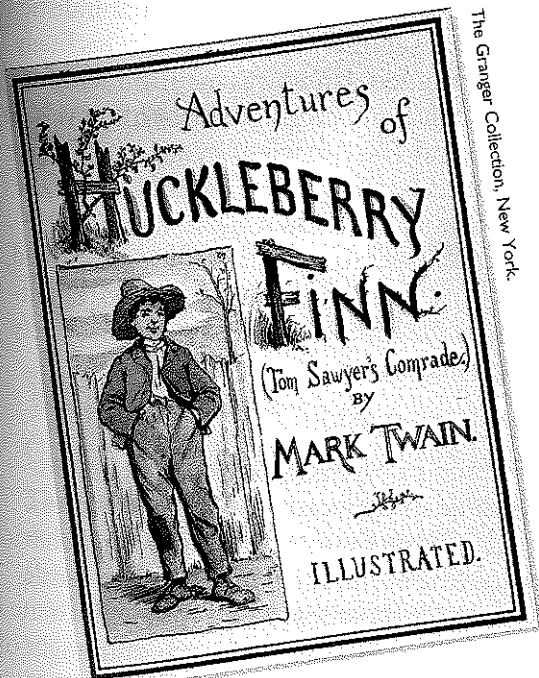
## ■ “Smiling Realism”

The most active proponent of realism in American fiction was William Dean Howells, editor of the influential magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*. In both his fiction and his critical writings, Howells insisted that realism should deal with the lives of ordinary people, be faithful to the development of character even at the expense of action, and discuss the social questions perplexing Americans. Howells’s “smiling realism” portrayed an America where people may act foolishly but where their good qualities eventually win out.

Other realistic novelists viewed life as a much rougher clash of contrary forces. The Californian Frank Norris, for example, agreed with Howells that the proper subject for fiction was the ordinary person, but he found Howells’s fiction too strait-laced and narrow. It was, Norris said, “as respectable as a church and proper as a deacon.” Norris was an earthier writer, interested in the impact of large social forces on individuals. His best-known novel, *The Octopus* (1901), is about the struggles between wheat farmers and the railroad monopoly in California. Norris was not the first to use the novel to examine social institutions with the aim of reforming them; Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) had been published

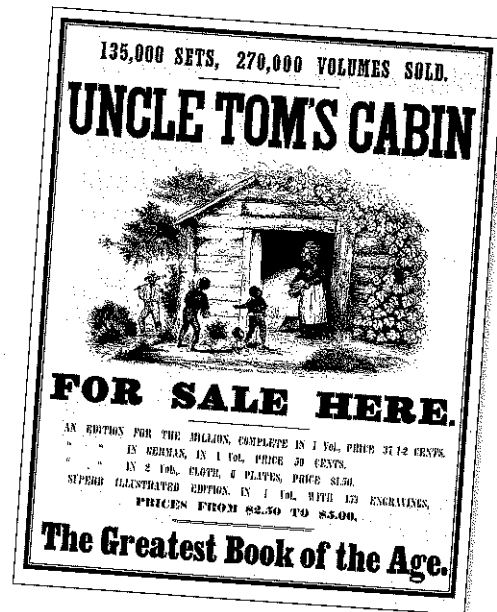
## Elements of Naturalism

- Attempt to analyze human behavior objectively, as a scientist would
- Belief that human behavior is determined by heredity and environment
- Sense that human beings cannot control their own destinies
- Sense of life as a losing battle against an uncaring universe



The Granger Collection, New York.

Original edition of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).



Advertisement for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s antislavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).



## FAST FACTS

### Political Highlights

- Civil War (1861–1865) results in the loss of more than 600,000 men and a reunited but bitter republic.
- Slavery, a leading cause of the Civil War, is abolished in 1865.
- Abraham Lincoln is assassinated in Ford's Theatre, Washington, D.C., on April 14, 1865.

### Philosophical Views

- Romanticism is overtaken by more realistic attitudes toward art and life.
- Advances in sociology and psychology lead to growing interest in analyzing everyday life and the behavior of society as a whole.

### Social Influences

- Reformers and muckraking journalists expose abuses in industries such as mining and meatpacking.
- Large numbers of immigrants from Europe settle in American cities.
- In 1908, Henry Ford introduces the Model T, an invention that will drastically change the landscape and reshape the American way of life.

before the Civil War and, according to Lincoln (and many historians), played a part in bringing about the war. But *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was more melodrama than realistic fiction.

### ■ Grim Naturalism

Norris is generally considered a **naturalist**. Following the lead of the French novelist Émile Zola, naturalists relied heavily on the emerging scientific disciplines of psychology and sociology. In their fiction, the naturalists attempted to dissect human behavior with as much objectivity as a scientist would use. For naturalists, human behavior was determined by forces beyond the individual's power, especially by biology and environment. The naturalists tended to look at human life as a grim losing battle. Their characters usually have few choices. In the eyes of some naturalist writers, human beings are totally subject to the natural laws of the universe; like animals, they live crudely, by instinct, unable to control their own destinies.

## Psychological Realism: Inside the Human Mind

### ■ Exploring Motivation

On the other hand, the New York-born Henry James, considered America's greatest writer of the psychological novel, concentrated principally on fine distinctions in character motivation. James was a realist, but no realist could be further from the blunt, naturalistic view that people were driven by animal-like instincts. In his finely tuned studies of human motivation, James was mainly interested in complex social and psychological situations. Many of his novels, including *Daisy Miller* (1879) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), take place in Europe, because James considered European society to be both more complex and more sinister than American society. He frequently contrasts innocent, eager Americans with sophisticated, more manipulative Europeans. In a typical James novel a straightforward American confronts the complexities of European society and either defeats or is defeated by them.

### ■ Examining Characters in Crisis

Stephen Crane was as profound a psychologist as James, but his principal interest was the human character at moments of stress. For James the proper setting for an examination of human behavior under pressure was the drawing room; for Crane it was the battlefield, the streets of a slum, or a lifeboat lost at sea. Although Crane is sometimes referred to as a naturalist, he is probably best thought of as an **ironist**; he was the first of many modern American writers—later including Ernest Hemingway and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.—to

juxtapose human illusions with the indifference of the universe. Of all the nineteenth-century realists, only Crane could describe a stabbing death (in his story "The Blue Hotel") in this coolly cynical manner: "[The blade] shot forward, and a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon." It would take this sensibility to get the "real war" in the books at last.

## Endings and Beginnings

The period from around the turn of the century up to 1914 saw the continuation of many nineteenth-century trends and, at the same time, the early flowerings of modernism. Some writers worked to sustain earlier visions of America, such as Edwin Arlington Robinson, with his classic New England characters. Others, like Willa Cather, reminded readers of the heroic struggle to settle the vanishing frontier. Still, the currents of realism and naturalism evoked by the Civil War continued to dominate American literature.

In the period between the end of the Civil War and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the American nation was transformed from an isolated, rural nation to an industrialized world power. Even these changes would soon be dwarfed, however. World War I would rock the world and shake people's faith in humanity. Idealism would turn to cynicism, and thinkers and writers called modernists would seek new literary forms for exploring the social and spiritual upheavals wrought once again by war.

*[Crane's] importance lies not only in those few works of his which completely come off, like "The Open Boat," but in his constantly seeking the primitive facts, the forbidden places, the dangerous people.*

—Alfred Kazin

## REVIEW

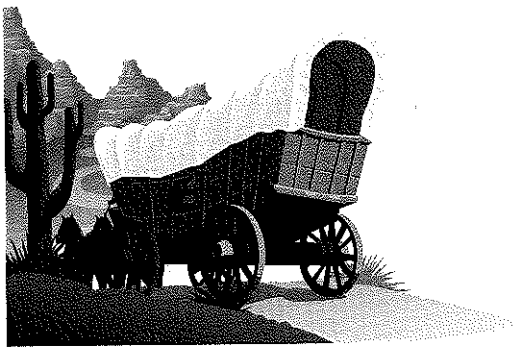
### Talk About . . .

Turn back to the Think About questions at the start of this introduction to the period (page 382), and discuss your views.

### Write About . . .

#### Contrasting Literary Periods

**The Romantics and the realists.** The shift from Romanticism to realism brought about new literary forms, new styles, and, most important, new attitudes in writers and readers. Write a brief essay in which you compare and contrast the basic atti-



tudes and beliefs of the Romantic writers with those of the realist writers. Consider, for example, the writers' subjects, characters, and attitudes toward human nature and their views on the purpose of literature.