Chapter 2

Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition

2.1 Introduction

“No genre” writes Eric Sundquist, editor of a recent collection of essays on American realism, “is more difficult to define than realism.” Realism is the creation of the effect of the representation of the concrete and historical nature of human life. Lillian Furst comments in her book Realism that “as an artistic movement realism is the product and expression of the dominant mood of its time (the mid-to late nineteenth century): a pervasive rationalist epistemology that turned its back on the fantasies of romanticism and was shaped instead by the impact of the political and social changes as well as the scientific and industrial advances of its day.” Broadly defined as “the faithful representation of reality” or “verisimilitude,” realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing. In realism the details of environment, motivation, circumstance and temporality with its cause and effect become the context for the exploration of human values and fate.

Realism in art and literature is an attempt to portray life as it is. It shows life with camera fidelity, omitting nothing that is ugly or painful and idealizing nothing. To the realists, the artist’s main function is to describe as accurately as possible what is observed through the senses. Realism began as a recognizable movement in art in the 1700s. By the mid 1800s it was a dominant art form. Realism has been a revolt against classicism and romanticism – artistic movements characterized by works that
idealize life. Classicism shows life as being more rational and orderly than it really is while romanticism shows life as being more emotionally exciting and satisfying than it normally is.

"Realism" in literature is an approach that attempts to describe life without idealization or romantic subjectivity. Although realism is not limited to any one century or group of writers, it is most often associated with the literary movement in nineteenth century France, specifically with the French novelists Flaubert and Balzac. George Eliot introduced realism into England, and William Dean Howells introduced it into the United States. Realism has been chiefly concerned with the commonplaces of everyday life among the middle and lower classes, where character is a product of social factors and, social environment is the integral element in the dramatic complications. In drama, realism is most closely associated with Ibsen's social plays. Later writers felt that realism laid too much emphasis on external reality. Many, notably Henry James, turned to psychological realism that "closely examined the complex workings of the mind."

Although strictly speaking, realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life. A reaction against romanticism, an interest in scientific method, the systematizing of the study of documentary history and the influence of rational philosophy all affected the rise of realism. According to William Harmon and Hugh Holman, "where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence."
Realism emerged as a literary movement in Europe in the 1850s. In reaction to romanticism, it emphasized the everyday, mundane reality and through detailed description re-created specific locations, incidents and social classes. Like regionalism, it reveled in the particular. It is a unique literary phenomenon which never endeavors to distort life. True realism depicts man and society as complete entities instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. The central category and criterion of realist's literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in character and situations.

Naturalism in literature is the theory that argues that literary composition should be based on an objective, empirical presentation of human beings. It differs from realism in adding an amoral attitude to the objective presentation of life. Naturalistic writers regard human behaviour as controlled by instinct, emotion, or social and economic conditions, and reject free will adopting instead, in large measure, the biological determinism of Charles Darwin and the economic determinism of Karl Marx. Naturalism was first prominently exhibited in the writings of the nineteenth century French authors especially Edmond Louis Antoine de Goncourt, his brother Jules Alfred Huot de Goncourt and Emile Zola. Emile Zola, inspired by his readings in history and medicine, attempted to apply methods of scientific observation to the depiction of pathological human character notably in his series of novels devoted to several generations of one French family. His essay “The Experimental Novel” (1880; trans. 1893) explains his theory of literary naturalism. 4

Realism as a critical concept has been dealt with by Rene Welleck in his essay “The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship.” The essay shows the origin of the word 'realism' and discusses its philosophical implications also. The realist's
encompassing motto is succinctly summarized in Balzac’s claim at the beginning of Le Pere Goriot: ‘all is true.’ Such a view echoes the definition given in the Mescere de France of 1826: ‘the literature of the true.’ George Lewes too, in his review of contemporary German fiction makes truth a cornerstone of his principles when he asserts that ‘art always aims at the representation of Reality’ i.e. of truth. Truth to life denotes for Lewes, as for Balzac and Durant comprehensiveness, a willingness on the artist’s part to extend his vision to include the commonplace the everyday essentially the ordinary lives of humble people.

**Literature and Reality**

Literature’s relationship with ‘reality’ or ‘the real world’ has long been a topic of major interest to the theorists of literature. By their nature literary works seem to have an essential and unavoidable reference to and concern with reality. The relationship has been characterized in a variety of ways.

One well-known view is that the literary work ‘represents’ or ‘imitates’ reality. The relationship should be seen in terms of ‘expression,’ the literary work providing a means through which the author expresses his or her responses to reality. Literature is not only an important source of knowledge about the real world but in fact provides knowledge that ‘is richer and more varied than that afforded by empirical sciences.’ Contrasting with this is the view of some deconstructionist theorists that although literature might appear to provide knowledge about the real world, its reliance on language stands in its way.

The term reality is in frequent use, often employed and frequently interchanged with phrases such as ‘the real world,’ ‘the realities of everyday life,’
‘human experience,’ or sometimes even ‘human nature.’ Monroe Beardsley refers to reality for the purposes of his argument simply as ‘the rest of the world in which (aesthetic objects) exist.’ David Novitz’s *Knowledge, Fiction and Imagination* provides no specific definition, but alternates the term ‘reality’ with phrases such as the ‘actual world,’ ‘our world,’ ‘our non-fictional world’ and ‘the actual world in which we live.’ Paul De Man places the term in quotation marks, suggesting that he sees it as somehow problematical, but goes on simply to equate it with the somewhat enigmatic notion of the ‘phenomenal world.’ These examples are by no means exceptional. Literature is concerned with the living reality of the individual’s perception and understandings which will also quite properly include his or her misperception and misunderstandings. Literature has its own nature and purpose, and seeks to capture its own quite distinct reality.

Marxist critic George Lukacs on the other hand, argues that through the methodology of realism literature reflects a social reality whose phenomena serve as a model for the work of art. The realist is capable of giving a complete and correct account of observed social reality, and thus is able to uncover the driving forces of history, the principles governing social change.

The revival of interest in realism was sparked by a remarkable book *Mimesis* by Erich Auerbach published in 1946. Auerbach puts forward the hypothesis that the essence of realism lies in its complete emancipation from the classical doctrine of levels of representation. Through his emphasis on the flexibility and mingling of modes Auerbach in effect shifts the criterion for realism from its subject matter to its literary treatment. Auerbach puts forward his theory that realism denotes above all the serious portrayal of everyday occurrences among the lower social strata at a specific
moment in the history of their time. His is humanist and sociological reading of realism.

Realists espouse what is essentially a mimetic theory of art, centering their attention in the thing imitated and asking for something close to a one-to-one correspondence between the representation and the subject. They usually have a powerful interest in the audience to whom their work is addressed, feeling it to be their obligation to deal with it with absolute truthfulness. However, as they attempted to represent the 'real world' in art, that all they could represent was what structuralist theorists call a 'reality effect': that they were using language, that is, a symbol system, and that they were placing humans in complex systems of social relations and of material conditions which could be represented only by signs, and then only briefly and selectively.

In the structuralist (and poststructuralist) understanding, aesthetic effects and representation (mimesis) are created through the use of signs, codes and conventions, and are constituted as well through reference to previous literary representations — that is, through intertextuality. Signs are culturally constructed so, any representation using them will inevitably be imbued with the way of viewing and discussing the world of that particular use of signs. Consequently, 'realism' will inevitably be ideological, although it represents itself as transparent (that is, it claims that it allows 'reality' to appear, fully and completely, through its signs).

The word “realism,” is problematic for several reasons. In the first place, those who use it seek to describe a huge body of literature with one umbrella concept; the concept does not always fit. Secondly when we call a work “realistic,” we impose our own values of the real and our own structures onto the work. These values may not be the ones the author intended us to bring to the work; they may not be the ones the
audience of the time brought to the work; and they may not be the values of our own contemporary readers bring to their reading of the work.

Despite its problematic nature one could summarize realism in these words: the philosophy of realism is known as "descendental" or non-transcendental. The purpose of writing is to instruct and to entertain. Realists are pragmatic, relativistic, democratic and experimental. The subject matter of realism is drawn from "our experience," – it treats the common, the average, the non-extreme, the representative and the probable. Its emphasis is placed upon scenic presentation, de-emphasizing authorial comment and evaluation.

Realistic complexity refers to the interwoven, entangled density of experience. The realists generally reject the kind of symbolism suggested by Emerson when he said, "[e]very natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." Their use of symbolism is controlled and limited: they depend more on the use of images.

Realism is faithful to our experience of life lived in a physical and social environment and governed by causes and effects. The most powerful argument for realism is that it represents life as we live it – sequential, contextualized and rooted in the concrete. It can be argued that realism is to be found everywhere in literature, especially when the high mimetic forms such as the epic give way to a feel of the common person – in scripture, in comedy, in historical texts, in fabliaux. Realism brings us close to physical, to our material existence, and so is less likely than other forms of representation to be distorted by ideology or mystification.
2.2 Realism in Drama

The First Phase

The theoretical, technological and social changes that affected the nineteenth century theatre led to an unprecedented outpouring of dramatic creativity across the continent of Europe. Henrik Ibsen, generally considered the first modern playwright, wrote in Norwegian; August Strindberg, Ibsen’s rival and contemporary wrote in Swedish. Anton Chekhov perhaps the most influential of early modern playwrights, wrote in Russian. Despite the linguistic and cultural diversity of this disparate group of writers, in the aggregate they forged a new theatrical world.

The Father of the Modern Drama: Henrik Ibsen

Ibsen is perhaps best known for eight plays he wrote in Italy and Germany between 1877 and 1890. By separating himself physically from his homeland, he gained the freedom and perspective to criticize it. Dissatisfied with the heroic and mythic poetic dramas he had been writing, Ibsen embarked on a series of realistic prose plays exposing contemporary problems in modern Norwegian settings. Concentrating directly on bourgeois Norwegian society, he nevertheless addressed universal concerns, for the social problems that provide the context for these plays – among them the question of women’s rights in A Doll’s House (1879), hereditary syphilis in Ghosts (1881), and municipal corruption in An Enemy of the People (1882) - were instantly recognizable to audiences throughout Western Europe and America.
Realism in the Modern Theatre

The early modern dramatists including Strindberg, Chekhov and George Bernard Shaw knew Ibsen’s work intimately and acknowledged its significance in their own development. One of the great practitioners of psychological realism the American-born novelist Henry James commented on the first London production of Hedda Gabler in 1891, scarcely one year after its original Norwegian production. James explains the power of Ibsen’s theatrical realism by pointing out that “the ugly interior on which his curtain inexorably rises” provides a visual equivalent of “the pervasive air of small interests and standards, the signs of limited local life.”

In Ibsen’s realistic drama, detailed and specific props and scenery were not devices to sweep the audience away to exotic foreign locations or distant historical eras; instead, they encouraged viewers to contemplate the petty possessions, the furniture and bric-a-brac which an acquisitive middle class accumulated in order to stake its claim in the modern world.

Ibsen’s realistic plays take place in three-dimensional rooms rather than against flat painted or architectural backdrops. What James (whose own practice as a novelist in some ways resembled Ibsen’s in drama) and others perceived was how Ibsen manipulated this realistic stagecraft to create a new species of poetic symbolism. The French plays that Ibsen studied in his apprenticeship used decor as window dressing; in the intricately written stage directions of Ibsen’s texts, however, decor becomes symbol. When a second-act curtain rises on an altered stage picture – a piano has been removed in Hedda Gabler, for example, and a Christmas tree stripped of its ornaments in A Doll’s House – the audience must read the significance of such alterations, for the Heddas and the Noras of the modern world reveal through their belongings the motives and passions which they have been taught to repress in
their speech and actions. The essence of realism, in the novel as well as on the stage, is not merely to mirror faithfully the "real world," but also to demand that we scrutinize and judge the details that we often ignore because of their surface familiarity.

The great plays of the past tend toward generalized settings, although the psychological implications of place were not unimportant. In a Shakespearean play for instance, a change in scene often reflects a change in mood; the forest typically creates a special mental freedom that is not available in the court. But Ibsen and his colleagues rarely set their characters free in any undefined territory. On the contrary, their modern insight told them that human beings were never free. Indeed, it is significant that most early modern drama is played out in domestic sets. The smaller size to which the modern world seems to reduce its inhabitants dictates that crucial actions occur in enclosed architectural limits. In Strindberg's Preface to Miss Julie, written in 1888, he complained of flimsy old-fashioned canvas-painted sets still in use that prevented audience involvement. A one-act play of searing intensity, daringly staged not in the drawing room but the kitchen of an aristocratic home, Miss Julie demanded authentic production. Strindberg insisted that "there is nothing so hard to find on the stage as an interior set that comes close to looking as a room should look."

There are so many other conventions on the stage that strain our imagination; certainly we might be freed from overexerting ourselves in an effort to believe that pots and pans painted on the scenery are real.10

Yet modern dramatists know that realism in the theatre transcends set design and involves more than real pots and pans. Ibsen's mid-career decision to abandon poetry for prose signals his conviction that the key to characterization lay in authentic speech. By replacing brilliant soliloquies with the conversational rhythms of everyday
expression Ibsen began to write in a way that audiences accepted as “true to life.” Although dramatic dialogue is always artificial every important playwright must find a strategy for tailoring that artifice to seem as real as possible. Early modern drama, it should be remembered, was written while Sigmund Freud was developing a psychoanalytic treatment that asked patients to speak in their own everyday voices until unwittingly they revealed their unconscious feelings. Ibsen and his contemporaries exploited a similar insight. They created dramatic characters whose routine-sounding dialogue divulged the truth about themselves as surely as and more “realistically” than an explicitly self-revealing soliloquy. Every hesitation, every slip of the tongue, every euphemism for Ibsen and for Chekhov, as for Freud, has profound meaning. Thus ordinary speech and mundane settings originally manipulated by the likes of Scribe and Sardou to serve a facile melodrama, provided realistic instruments to probe psychological and social truths in the work of the early modern dramatists.

**Modern Drama after Ibsen: Shaw, Strindberg and Chekhov**

Shaw, Strindberg and Chekhov, the three eminent successors of Ibsen discovered different dramatic models in the realistic mode evolved by Ibsen. Of the three, the Irish-born George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) openly acknowledged his debt to Ibsen. The author of one of the earliest appreciations of Ibsen entitled *The Quintessence of Ibsen* (1891), Shaw believed that Ibsen had fundamentally transformed the theatrical formula drawn from the French Boulevard plays by incorporating a new intellectual vigour in them. “Now the serious playwright recognizes in the discussion . . . the real centre of his play's interest,” Shaw observed.
Shaw’s own witty plays explore the possibilities of discussion which refers to intellectual discourse. For August Strindberg (1849-1912), the social questions raised in plays like *A Doll’s House* were only of superficial interest. A neurotic and troubled person, Strindberg responded more to the emotional tangles in which Ibsen’s characters struggled. In his own drama Strindberg probed the disfigurations of family life even more scathingly than did the man he regarded as his rival. In his domestic plots, a category that includes *Miss Julie* and *The Dance of Death* (1901), the thrice-married Strindberg, son of a debased aristocrat and a servant woman showed men and women trapped in cruel and all-consuming sexual relationships. These plays, more naturalistic than realistic in their depiction of the unrelenting pressure of heredity and physical impulse, leave little room for the possibility of remaking the self to which Ibsen’s characters at least could aspire. In other works like *A Dream Play* (1902) and *The Road To Damascus* (1898, 1904) Strindberg experimented with a phantasmagoric style that may have influenced Ibsen in his final, less realistic plays, a style that pointed to the theatrical expressionism that the next generation of modern dramatists was to explore.

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) left a major body of short stories and plays and in both forms continued to examine the minutiae of everyday experience. Less schooled than Ibsen in the conventions of nineteenth century French theatre and less morbid than Strindberg, Chekhov used realism more delicately than they did. The characters in his four great plays – *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1897), *The Three Sisters* (1900) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) – rarely experience definitive revelations of truth. However dreadful the events encompassed in his plays, like lovers separated and families dispossessed, and death by duel and by
suicide, Chekhov maintains so fine an emotional balance that his characters are simultaneously tragic and comic, pathetic and ridiculous.

In a way, Chekhov's achievement brought the early modern drama to an impasse. Like Ibsen, Shaw and Strindberg he identified a series of social and personal problems that defined a seemingly worldwide collapse of central authority as the twentieth century evolved. His work, however, proposes neither a rationale nor a resolution for that collapse. In fact, the short stories and plays of Chekhov convince us that no matter how intimately we may probe character, the human condition remains mysterious.

As with every art form, once theatrical realism totally fulfilled its mission the genre began to seem obsolete and gradually gave way to a new phase of modern theatre. A second type of modern drama soon developed that both reflected the unstable world of the twentieth century and broke the impasse of realism created by Ibsen, Shaw and Chekhov. Those playwrights, still living in a relatively rational world, had been able to create rational play of discussion and ideas. In the manner of all conventional dramatists, they took a situation, showed the inherent conflict, and then sought to resolve that conflict. Such plays were possible because their creators believed in logical discourse, a common reality and stability of character. But somewhere around the turn of the twentieth century these beliefs, along with a general faith in traditional authority vanished. The prevailing attitude was that the modern world was irrational and incoherent. Consequently, the conventional play that purported to imitate reality was no longer relevant, for "reality" became increasingly problematic. A new kind of theatre was needed.

Pirandello is one of those playwrights who problematised reality. Pirandello's modernist belief is that there is no universal fixed reality; there is only
every person's individual perception of what is real. Or, as the French playwright Eugene Ionesco would later write in his play Rhinoceros: “there are many realities. Choose the one that’s best for you. Escape into the world of the imagination.” In Six Characters in Search of an Author written in 1921, Pirandello does exactly what Ionesco recommends with the result that the line between illusion and reality breaks completely. In Pirandellian situation illusion cannot be distinguished from reality.

**Brechtian Alienation and the German Dramatic Tradition**

Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright, director and theorist, stands for a distinctive style and a way of looking at the world as well as a certain method of staging plays. To understand what made Brecht “Brechtian,” it is necessary to see his dramatic style both as the product of his personal and historical experience and as a culmination of a century of stylistic experimentation in the German theatre.

Brecht is hailed as the founder of Epic theatre. Epic theatre arose in the by years following the Bolshevik Revolution, when progressive Europeans like Piscator and Brecht gravitated towards Communism thinking that they could help the working classes find justice in a world that had too long oppressed them. Structurally, epic theatre combines narrative and dramatic elements, alternately telling as well as showing, purposely breaking the flow of action by interrupting the live performance with filmed interludes and musical commentary generally with a didactic even propagandistic purpose in mind. Thematically Brechtian theatre concerns the grotesque social imbalances fostered by capitalism in the years following World War I. Nevertheless, the Communist Party always had difficulty with Brecht whose plays never conformed to the requirement of socialist realism.
2.3 American Tradition

The American situation was quite distinct from that of Europe, however, for the strategic reason that the various movements like realism, naturalism, expressionism and symbolism did not arise independently, or in response to each other as they did in Europe but rather arrived in the United States virtually simultaneously as the Americans who had travelled abroad brought back news and examples of the new movements. J. L. Styan explains that critics such as George Jean Nathan started to bring information about the modern theatre to the attention of his readers and, examples of the new European drama began to appear onstage via both tours and native productions. The result of this plethora of new artistic influences was that American theatre practitioners embraced the dizzying array of creative possibilities this new drama presented, selecting elements from many of the genres and combining them in ways unique to the American theatre.

James Herne’s 1897 manifesto offered a new conception of “truth” in the American theatre. His theorization renewed interest in the old question of aesthetic truth and its relationship to social truth. Herne’s realism, however, takes the form of social drama that provocatively examines the nature of human rights, responsibilities and relationships. His work, often compared to Ibsen’s, compels audiences to confront the contingent nature of cultural constructs, often including the oppressive constraints of gender configurations. But his realism is not one that rejects theoretical convention. In spite of Herne’s unkind words about melodrama, his attempts to display “truth” and “humanity” in a new realism involve him in a recurring struggle to reconcile the competing claims of social realities and melodramatic structures. It is Herne’s legacy; in particular, that affects the subsequent development of twentieth century American
In the first decade of twentieth century the American theatre was dominated by major playwrights like Claude Clitch, David Belasco, Langdon Mitchell and Augustus Thomas who wrote popular commercial plays with a veneer of realism.

Rachel Crothers examined a society that offered limited opportunities for women. In *A Man's World* (1910) she depicted a career woman who rejects the man she loves because she condemns the double standards that he upholds. She continued to present realistic depiction of women at a time of great social change. In terms of development of realism in the American theatre Crothers' play contributed towards its advancement. Throughout her career, Crothers wrote plays in which she attempted to depict realistically the social conditions of American society. She felt that theatre could be used to awaken an audience to injustice and inequality. Her plays exemplify this conviction of the playwright.

Another important aspect of early twentieth century American drama was the arrival of the Provincetown Players. The term 'Provincetown' refers to a small community which was founded between 1915-16 in the Bohemian enclaves of Provincetown, Massachusetts and Greenwich Village in New York City. Many members of this community were prominent in the artistic avant-garde and socialist/communist movements of the era. The Provincetown Players, like their counterparts in cities and towns all across the country, were first and foremost a community theatre. According to J. Ellen Gainor the notions of identification and mimesis take on distinct resonances in the context of community theatre production. In a community where the identities of the actors are known to the audience, where their status as members of the community doubles with their artistic identities as performers, she argues that it is impossible for the audience to "identify" with the characters.\(^{13}\)
Though this is not all the same phenomenon as Brechtian alienation, it may function in a related fashion, disrupting a link of audience to play. The key distinction of course, is that this performative structure operates regardless of the style of work being produced. Realism was a dominant type of drama produced by the Provincetown Players. J. Ellen Gainor has perceptively observed that the authors’ identities and proclivities known equally well to the audience as are those of the actors, would preclude the suspension of authorial consciousness even within a realist production. The plays of the Provincetown Theatre merit examination for the ways in which they utilize and manipulate the conventions of dramatic realism imported from Europe. Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* and *Inheritors* as well as Dreiser’s *Hand of the Potter* according to J. Ellen Gainor use distinctive means of subverting the conventions of realism without completely transgressing its generic parameters. Susan Glaspell consciously subverts the codes of realists’ dramaturgy to break down the very process of mimesis and identification theoretically integral to the realist form, and uses this same subversion to highlight her feminist agenda. She achieves her goal of subverting prevailing notions of legality, justice and the value of women’s experience. She presents a related kind of subversion in her transgression of the semiotic codes for a realist setting instead of reinforcing images of ideal domesticity. There is radicalism of the subject and conservatism of form. Glaspell consciously chose to work with conventions of realism to expose problems of ideology and political perspective in the dominant culture.

Dreiser’s *Hand of the Potter* uses theatrical strategies and a socio-political viewpoint very different from Glaspell’s in his exploration of dramatic naturalism. Dreiser leaves precious little to audience’s imagination in his lurid depiction of sexual perversion, child molestation and murder. At first, it might appear that the central
character Isadore Berchansky epitomizes the realist figures “who refuse to co-operate with social definitions of the self and of the nature and range of the self’s desire” and thus become the “scapegoats” whose “expulsion . . . has a culturally stabilizing function.” 15 The frankness and fullness of Dreiser representation of his action seems to contradict his stabilizing potential. In fact, it is very transgression of codes which limit the representation of desire in conventional realism that gives *The Hand of the Potter* its realist impact and subversive status. Dreiser is preoccupied with individual psychology and its connection to contemporary society.

Eugene O’Neill is an important figure in the history of American realistic drama. He once wrote in a letter to drama critic George Jean Nathan: “Damn that word, ‘realism’! . . . I [mean ] something ‘really real,’ in the sense of being spiritually true, not meticulously life-like – an interpretation of actuality by a distillation, an elimination of most realistic trappings an intensification of human lives into clear symbols of truth.” 16 Like most of the great modernist writers essentially subversive of established structures, O’Neill was revolutionary in several sense of the word. His aesthetic concern was to create more humanly responsive, organic and imaginative realism merged with spiritual / social quest. He attempted to lay bare the often twisted and scarred psyches of his characters.

O’Neill’s belief that the human condition was improvable has correlatives in realistic thought which, in their critical anthology entitled *The Modern Tradition*, Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson Jr. have termed “melioristic realism.” This form of realism moves towards ethics. “Its eye is always on what life should be.” 17 Radical dramatist John Howard Lawson states that social protest and reform are inherent in the nature of realism that an “ameliorative and humanistic . . . is the general philosophy of realism which nourishes the hope that men possess the reason
and will to improve their condition . . .” that the form employs “an ultimate hope of progress toward a more moral and meaningful existence.”

M. H. Abraham in his “Literary Criticism in America: Some New Directions,” has observed that the importance of such socially embedded view of the world inheres in its dealing with ‘matters of abiding human concern.’ This position is in accord with Marxist critic George Lukacs who sees art as embedded in the world, “saturated with social and moral humanistic problems.” Interpreting Lukacs’ Marxist realist thought, Terry Eagleton writes: “A ‘realist work is rich in a complex comprehensive set of relations between man, nature and history . . . the task of the realist writer is to flesh out . . . those latent forces in any society which are . . . most historically significant and progressive . . . in sensuously realized individuals and actions; in doing so it links the individual to the social whole.”

O’Neill’s conception of realism as flexible, of the art of literature as imaginative as well as strictly representational has distinguished antecedents in the history of commentary about realism. Welleck and Warren remind us that literature must “stand in recognizable relation to life, but the relations are very various . . . it is in any case a selection, of a specifically purposive sort from life.” Perhaps the most significant of the nineteenth century theorists of realism, Henry James recognized the complexity inherent in realistic art. James writes, “[h]umanity is immense and reality has myriad forms . . .”

In his plays O’Neill expresses his vision of American culture employing and developing a melioristic realism to delineate weakness in America’s social fabric. O’Neill advances toward ‘poetic realism’ in the 1914 sea play Bound East for Cardiff in which subject and theme reflect James’s myriad sense of reality. O’Neill alternated between realism and experimental presentation of his ideas through the
media of mask, choruses, asides and different types of music and monologue. In
Marco Millions (1925) he experiments and represents his critique of American
materialism and vulgarity through both realistic and expressionistic techniques in a
drama that contains most successful realism of the experimental plays. Hughie
reveals O’Neill’s melioristic realism as one infused both with subjective, imaginative
geniuses as well as with social concern useful in a democracy.

Odets is another important playwright belonging to this generation. Critics
noticed that Odets was principally a realistic writer with revolutionary perspective and
therefore, described his style as ‘revolutionary realism.’ Odets rejected the old dictum
“art for art’s sake” and sincerely believed that drama could bring about social
transformation.

Thornton Wilder on the other hand, belongs to “the theatricalist” tradition in
American drama. His plays rely on non-realistic sets and radical distortion of
chronological time. Wilder argues that realism when it becomes “mere copying”
cesces to reveal “truth.” Wilder has had little influence on the American stage. He has
singularly little in common with his contemporaries O’ Neill, Miller and Williams.

Tennessee Williams, one of the most influential playwrights of modern
America, championed his own brand of realistic drama. In his essay, “Critics Says
‘Evasion,’ Writer Says ‘Mystery,’” Williams proclaims: “My characters make my
play... I always start with them; they take spirit and body in my mind... They build
the play about them like spiders weaving their webs, sea creatures making their
shells.”24 His unique realism dramatizes conflict or reconciliation between characters
conceived for their psychological verisimilitude situated in a setting, what he terms
the ‘webs’ or ‘shells,’ almost invariably handled non-realistically or even
expressionistically.25 Citing the need for “unusual freedom of convention,” “to
achieve a closer approach to truth,” Williams calls for “a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of the culture.”

It is a theatre heavily dependent upon visual symbolism. Williams claims that all “art is made out of symbols . . . symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama . . . purest language of plays . . . Sometimes it would take page after tedious page of exposition to put across an idea that could be said with an object or a gesture on the lighted stage.”

Arthur Miller being William’s contemporary acknowledges the influence of A Street Car Named Desire upon the structure and style of a Death of a Salesman proclaims: “What was new in Tennessee Williams was his rhapsodic insistence that form serve his utterance rather than dominating and cramping it.”

It is significant that the most celebrated American realist dramatists Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller and later Sam Shepherd — all confront major aspects of the mythic vision of American society and offer instead rival versions of experience that were presented as not merely different but realistic, more accurate versions of social existence. The postmodern realism in the contemporary American drama demonstrates the vitality and innovation of contemporary writer’s quest for the real.

2.4 Forms of Realism

There are different versions of realisms under circulation in art like “classical” realism, “Naturalism,” “photo” realism, “political” realism, “social” realism, “magic” realism, “historical” realism, “psychological” realism and so on. Simply put, all forms
of realism in the visual arts present recognizable images representative of objective reality, that is, the physical world including mankind. Some of the significant forms of realism are discussed below.

**Naturalism**

Naturalism is a literary movement with distinct theories, groups and practices. In literature ‘naturalism’ is an approach that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. It is a theory which believes that literary composition should be based on an objective empirical composition of human beings. The naturalistic writers regard human behaviour as controlled by instinct, emotion and a social and economic condition, and reject free will. It adopts in large measure, the biological determinism of Charles Darwin and the economic determinism of Karl Marx. This affinity to science becomes clear from the definition offered by Paul Alexis, Emile Zola’s closet ally, who summed up naturalism as:

A way of thinking, of seeing, of reflecting, of studying, of making experiments, a need to analyse in order to know, rather than a particular style of writing. 29

In the nineteenth century French writers, especially Edmond Louis Antoine de Goncourt, Jules Alfred Huot de Goncourt and Emile Zola exhibited naturalism in their writings. Emile Zola the high priest of naturalism was inspired by his readings in history and medicine. He tried to apply methods of scientific observation to the depiction of pathological human character in his series of novels devoted to several generations of single French family. His essay “The Experimental Novel” (1880; trans. 1993) explains his theory of literary naturalism.
In U.S.A. 'naturalism' is closely linked to social and economic problems. The struggles of the poor and the machinations of the capitalists are the theme of naturalistic writing. For instance, such a world is reflected in the novels of Dreiser or the short stories of Stephen Crane, or in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* which shows how the large powerful combines took over the small holdings, leaving the tenants destitute and homeless. American naturalism owes more to local factors than to outside influences. Darwin, Marx, Comte and Spencer made an impact, but not with the same immediacy as across the Atlantic.\(^{30}\) The effect of Zola in U.S.A. is not easy to assess partly because of the conflicting statements made by some of the American naturalists such as Dreiser and Crane. As American naturalism arose out of social and economic problems it presented a different aspect from the European Naturalist movement. There were no groups united by common aims and manifestos. It was more a matter of successive waves of writers. In the first wave which spanned from mid 1880s to the closing of the century the prominent writers were Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris. The second wave which began after the 1900 included an assorted group of writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson and James T. Farrell. Naturalism in the U.S.A. was a view of man in society and a style of writing in consonance with the age and this is why it appears in so many diverse writers over such a long period.\(^{31}\)

**Photorealism**

The term photorealism was coined and popularized by Louis K. Meisel in his well-known anthologies primarily because the artists whom he included under the title
“use the camera and photograph to gather information” and “have the technical ability to make the finished work appear photographic.”

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the birth of a new art form called photo-realism. A group of young artists in America – relatively independently of one another – were stirring up new styles in art with realism as their guide.

Appropriate attempts have been made to brand this latest resurgence of realism with a title that suits its distinguishing characteristics, that individuates it from its parentage and ancestry. Super Realism, Realism Now, Sharp-Focus Realism, New Realism and Photorealism number among the labels that have been bandied about as appropriate codifiers for this new art. The debate centres on the difficulty of finding a title fit to describe the variety of independent styles and modes of expression that characterize it. Just as critics have debunked the art, so the term itself – for all of its apparent simplicity as a word – has been rebuffed by its very practitioners. Of course, the term photorealism seems to have made the biggest impression, superceding all other terms mentioned above.

**Historical Realism**

Historical realism is realistic but set in the past; it could have happened at that period in history. It is generally of two kinds: a fictional story about actual events and people of the past, some characters, even the main ones, may be imaginary. Secondly, some stories are laid in a particular period and are affected by the social history of the times, but are not built around a particular historical event. Some realistic novels make use of events and personages from the historical past to add interest and picturesqueness to the narrative. The historical novel began in the nineteenth century
with Sir Walter Scott. The historical novel not only takes its setting and some characters and events from history, but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and narrative. Some of the greatest historical novels also use the protagonists and actions to reveal what the author regards as the deep forces that impel the historical process.

**Magic Realism**

Magic realism, originally applied in the 1920s to a school of painters is used to describe the prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina as well as the work of writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez in Colombia, Gunter Grass in Germany and John Fowles in England. These writers interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements as well as with the materials derived from myth and fairy tales. In Latin America in the 1940s, magic realism was a way to express the realistic American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature. Magic realism expresses emotions of the real and the unreal. Life is magical and unreal. Magic realism, the combination of the real with the magical, is the opposite of social realism. Jorge Luis Borges gave the definition of magical realism when he said, “I imagine a labyrinth of labyrinths, one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars.”

According to the critic William Rowe, the “main characteristic of the marvellous in the real is the way in which European myths and dreams, from the Fountain of Eternal Youth to Surrealism’s desire to make dream reality, have found their real counterparts in Latin America.”
Social realism

Social realism is concerned with dynamic interpretations of life with the purpose of changing the existing reality. In the nineteenth century England Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Meredith and Thackeray endeavored in this direction. Social realism developed as a reaction against idealism and the exaggerated ego encouraged by romanticism. Social realism began as an artistic movement in the visual arts and other realist arts. It describes visual and other realistic arts which chronicle the everyday working conditions of the working classes and the poor. Social realists are critical of the social environment that causes these conditions. Consequences of the industrial Revolution became apparent, urban centres grew; slums proliferated on a new scale contrasting with the display of wealth of the upper classes. The social realists focused on the ugly realities of contemporary life and sympathized with the working-class people, particularly the poor. They recorded what they saw in a dispassionate manner.

Psychological Realism

Modern psychologists have exercised extensive influence on literature in the twentieth century. Psychoanalysis grew into world wide movement. It became a dominant influence in psychiatry and it also found its way into literature and other products of western culture. Freud, Adler and Carl Jung made notable contributions to the development of psychoanalysis. Many of the writers of the 40s and 50s regularly turned to psychoanalytic psychology for source material to depict inner thoughts of characters. The writers have aptly described the sufferings of their characters in sharp
focus and dramatized their inner private world. Modern artists generally try to depict the inner reality of their characters since they believe that the inner reality is more important than the external reality. The stream of consciousness method and flashback technique help the writers for in-depth analysis of characters. In this mode of realism the subjective reactions of man's inner consciousness are objectified and enacted on the stage. Many realists, American or otherwise, have also embraced what might be termed interior or psychological realism, as they have turned from emphasizing the accuracy of external detail to reporting internal details the thought processes of the human mind or consciousness. Psychological realism places unusual emphasis on interior characterization and on the motives, circumstances and internal action that spring from external action. Psychological realism not content to state what happens, goes on to explain the internal psychological dynamics of this action.

Chapter Notes


8 Ibid., 130, 137, 124, 118.


14 Ibid., 62.

15 Leo Bersani, **A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature** (New York; Columbia UP, 1984) 68.


30 Ibid., 34.

31 Ibid., 35.


