The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism

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Heated debates about realism and art often take place outside of university classrooms. After watching a movie, for example, we may find ourselves questioning – perhaps even arguing over – how “realistic” the movie seemed. We praise certain films for how closely they appear to reflect actual, off-screen life, even if the “real life” they depict is quite distant from our own experiences. Other movies we reject for their implausible plot twists, over-the-top acting, contrived dialogue, or clumsy special effects. Sometimes we don’t mind admitting that a movie isn’t realistic and defend it on other grounds, perhaps for its beauty, romance, suspense, or humor. Regardless, evaluating a work’s realism (or lack of realism) has become close to second nature for most movie viewers today, maybe because the only expertise it seems to require is something we all possess: the ability to observe the world around us.

Has it always been second nature for people to comment on how close to actual experience a work of narrative art seems? Aspects of realism as a literary mode, of course, can be traced at least as far back in Western literature as Homer’s epic poem, *The Iliad*, where Olympian gods with supernatural powers coexist with graphic depictions of battlefield mayhem that still ring true. *The Iliad* also includes notably detailed accounts of rituals, weaponry, and some aspects of daily life among the Greek army. Similarly, many of Shakespeare’s characterizations have long been praised for their likeness to life. *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism* focuses on the surprisingly recent moment in American literary history, however, when realism – as opposed, for example, to universal Truth – came to be regarded as a paramount value in fictional narratives: something to be striven for by fiction writers, celebrated or criticized by reviewers, and judged by readers. Over the course of this book we will explore the historical causes underlying literary realism’s rise to prominence in the United States. We will also examine the different, and often contradictory, forms realism took in literary works by different authors; technical and stylistic questions involving how fiction writers actually go about creating what theorist Roland Barthes has called “the reality effect” (*Rustle of Language* 141); the philosophical issue of what relationship, if any, exists between realism produced on the
page and reality outside the book; and, finally, literary realism’s relationship with powerful, often violent conflicts in late-nineteenth-century America involving race, gender, social class, national origin, and geographic region, among other factors. As we will see, American realism’s intense engagement with its social and cultural context has always been integral to its power as literature.

Literary realism became a salient feature of the US literary scene in the decades following the Civil War (1861–65), a period scholar Stanley Corkin has identified with “the birth of the modern United States.” Although the United States was born as a formal nation on July 4, 1776, what Corkin means is that a great many of the economic structures, cultural forms, and social and political conflicts, as well as modes of everyday life, that we think of as characteristic of contemporary America first took shape in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. America’s Industrial Revolution was well under way by the middle of the nineteenth century, but its acceleration after the Civil War changed the United States from a rural country composed largely of distinct “island communities” (Wiebe, Search for Order xiii) to, by the start of the twentieth century, a primarily urban nation, one whose cities included extremes of wealth and poverty and featured large, densely populated slums. Ongoing technological advances – above all in transportation (the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869) and in communications (the telegraph came into widespread use, followed by the telephone) – spurred the growth of a genuinely national economy in which large business monopolies and corporations played an increasingly significant role. The mass production of previously hard-to-come-by goods, along with new networks for national distribution, allowed for consumerism on an heretofore unmatched scale, constantly stimulated by mass advertising, which itself began to affect the texture of American experience. Many individuals’ work lives changed as well, as new jobs and professions developed along with the new economy. For the first time even middle-class women worked outside the home in significant numbers, particularly in the bigger cities. A labor movement arose as workers strove to protect their wages and dignity at the same time that businesses sought to maximize profits.

Social conflicts also followed in the wake of unprecedented levels of immigration, particularly from areas of the world that hadn’t previously sent many people to the United States, including eastern and southern Europe and Asia. Millions of new citizens dramatically expanded the nation’s multicultural resources at the same time as they encountered xenophobia, hostility, and widespread anxiety about how to define American identity (foreshadowing today’s contentious debates about immigration and its effects on the nation). In the Southwest, the forcible incorporation of portions of Mexico into the United States after the United States–Mexico War (1846–48), as well as continuing
immigration from Mexico, brought into the nation tens of thousands of new Americans whose first language was Spanish and whose skin was brown. These Mexican Americans faced discrimination, economic exploitation, and often violence from white Americans hungry for land and resources. So did weakened but still powerfully determined Native American tribes, who fought violent removal from their lands in the often forgotten “Indian Wars” of the late nineteenth century. Also toward the end of the nineteenth century, the United States emerged as a notably larger player on the world’s imperial stage, using military means to assert control over faraway areas from Hawaii to Puerto Rico to the Philippines (where local insurgents battled against a US military occupation from 1899 to 1902). Finally, the Civil War may have brought formal slavery to an end, but the nation’s failure to follow through on Southern Reconstruction meant that racial injustices and conflicts would continue as a shaping – and often explosive – force in American life.

Originating in different parts of the country, but centering in the literary capitals of Boston and New York, a number of authors began attempting to write fiction more closely and more self-consciously responsive to the rapidly shifting world around them. Realist writers sought to understand and explain their changing society, as well as to resist it, celebrate it, influence it, and profit from it – but above all to depict it with what Henry James called “the air of reality.” Fiction writers were not alone in their endeavor to get a handle on an increasingly complex – and, to many, seemingly unstable – social order. The post-Civil War decades saw the rise of a new class of “experts,” including those who ambitiously expanded the purviews and sought to refine the methodologies of such emerging academic disciplines as anthropology and sociology. The latter, announcing itself as the “science” of society, developed models and laws explaining social change, as well as how societies regulate themselves while undergoing change. Sociologists studied race relations, the organization of urban life, and the question of how immigrants assimilate in new cultural contexts. Psychologists, meanwhile, sought to understand the differences among individuals as well as general principles underlying the workings of the human mind. Managers, engineers, and scientists constituted additional groups of experts with increasingly important roles in society. While scientists sought to understand underlying “laws” of the physical universe, and engineers worked on transportation systems, energy generation, and farm mechanization, managers developed systems for motivating and controlling employees and sought greater rationality and efficiency in the organization of large-scale enterprises, including the expanding federal government.

Literary realists claimed forms of expertise and professional authority that were in certain ways similar to these other figures on the late-nineteenth-century
scene. Like scientists, literary realists prided themselves on their objectivity. Like ethnographers, anthropologists, and linguists, they saw themselves as students of those aspects of society soon to be referred to under the umbrella term “culture” – manners and customs, beliefs and values, family and kinship arrangements, varieties of speech. Like psychologists, literary realists probed the inner workings of individual minds and the human mind’s relationship to the outside world. With sociologists, they looked for patterns in how American society changes and adjusts to change. Indeed, literary realism helped middle-class Americans in particular adjust to social change in the sense that realist works sought to make even wrenching changes legible, comprehensible, almost literally containable between two book covers. Some realists also shared an interest with sociologists in categorizing individuals into social “types” (the ruthless businessman, the “street tough,” the newly self-confident “American girl”). To the extent that literary realism was invested in categorizing people, understanding their motivations, and charting their daily activities, it also overlapped with the new “scientific” managerial practices that were starting to become fashionable in the business world.

Like other late-nineteenth-century “experts” and professionals, most literary realist authors belonged primarily to the middle and upper-middle classes. However, as literary artists they also lay claim to their own distinct professional status – an ability to offer persuasively accurate, uniquely intimate delineations of what various social changes feel like from the inside. A realist text could use the device of shifting narrative perspectives to place us imaginatively within, for example, a conflicted capitalist, an unhappy wife, an ambitious doctor, and an angry laborer, potentially all in the course of a single book. If sociologists could call on the emerging science of statistics to study “the slum” (itself a newly defined concept), and professional engineers and architects could design structures utilizing newly mass-producible steel, literary realists honed their own techniques for approaching their material and creating the effects they desired. Among their tools was free-indirect discourse, a style that allows a text’s narrative voice to maintain third-person objectivity while also, often in the same paragraph, speaking from the point of view and in the tone of a specific character. Free-indirect discourse encourages a reader to feel both inside of a character and, at the same time, distant enough to evaluate that character’s emotions and thoughts. As we will see in the next chapter, the ability to enter into a character’s feelings while also maintaining enough detachment not to be overly swayed by them was of critical importance in realism’s attempt to differentiate itself from the most popular form of fiction writing in the period before the Civil War: literary sentimentalism.
Another technique important to literary realists was their very close attention to the surfaces of everyday life, which often led to incorporating into a text objects or small daily activities seemingly irrelevant to a story, but which added to the composite effect of actual reality. Here realists were also inspired by one of the nineteenth century’s most exciting new technologies, photography, with its apparent ability to capture all the visible details of a city street, natural scene, or human face, and to do so with an aura of what William Dean Howells called “impartial fidelity” (quoted in Orvell, The Real Thing 124–25). Yet even as realists sought to produce that same effect of impartial fidelity in their writing, they insisted that their status as literary artists gave their work a significance beyond that of the “merely photographic” (Fluck, “Morality” 92). They would bring the disciplined imagination of professional artists to bear in re-creating the complexity and variety of individuals’ inner experiences of a social world that was itself becoming more complex and various with every passing year.

Over the past few decades, literary scholarship has both expanded and diversified the group of writers we recognize as having played a meaningful part in realism’s development during the period considered its heyday, roughly 1865–1914. Until very recently, such important writers as Sui Sin Far, Zitkala-Ša, and Pauline Hopkins would most likely not have been mentioned in an introductory volume such as this one. Only slightly longer ago, Kate Chopin and Charles Chesnutt, now widely recognized as major realist authors, would probably also have been ignored. The project of recovering from undeserved obscurity the many richly compelling works by white women and minority authors of both genders, works previously left out of the literary canon due to racial, ethnic, and gender biases, has been ongoing since the 1970s, and is still far from complete. Carried on by scholars, teachers, and editors, among others, the recovery process for a given work or author can involve three elements, including a work’s rediscovery (for instance in old magazines and rare book archives), its reinterpretation under new critical frameworks, and its republication in new anthologies or other formats, so that the text becomes available to current readers, critics, and students. Such scholarly efforts have both enriched and productively complicated the entire field of American literary realism. At the same time as the canon has expanded, stimulating new readings developed from a variety of critical perspectives have supplemented previous interpretations of traditionally recognized realist authors such as Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain.

The evolving richness of the field presents exciting opportunities for a book that aspires both to introduce new readers to American literary realism and, at the same time, to offer research and analysis that more advanced scholars will
likely find of interest as well. Rather than attempting some sort of comprehensive “survey” of significant authors, which I feared might result in little more than a series of encyclopedia-style entries given the extent of the field and the space limitations of a single volume, *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism* is primarily organized around concepts, trends, and problems. For instance, one central problem the book explores, from different but related perspectives across several chapters, derives from the claim by William Dean Howells (an important practitioner and public promoter of American realism) that literary realism would help America more fully to achieve its democratic principles of equality, unity, and the toleration of difference. For Howells, American literary realism had the potential to represent “democracy in literature.” “Men are more like than unlike one another,” Howells proclaimed. The task of realism would be to “make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity” (*Criticism and Fiction* 188).

American realist writers attempted to depict a wide range of Americans more accurately than prior literary modes had, including not only middle- and upper-class white citizens but also such politically disempowered and socially marginalized people as recent immigrants, Americans of color, and the urban and rural poor. What were the aesthetic, cultural, and political implications of these efforts, especially given that the preponderance of realism’s reading audience was white and middle or upper class? Members of these classes often assumed themselves to be superior to lower-class and minority Americans. Did realist representations challenge or reinforce such assumptions of superiority? Might some works have done both at the same time? Constructions of gender identity in and by realist writing constitute another recurring theme, as does realist literature’s exploration of different linguistic registers. Such questions reappear throughout the book, in different contexts and in relation to different authors and works.

As for its temporal scope, *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism* begins by discussing precursors to US realism in the decades prior to the Civil War and concludes with a brief consideration of the fate of realism at the time it was displaced, around the time of the First World War, by modernism as the type of literature that critics and readers considered at the forefront of innovation. Within these temporal boundaries, the sequence of chapters does not adhere to a strict chronological order. More than one individual chapter ranges from the 1870s to the first part of the twentieth century because doing so seemed most productive for exploring that chapter’s guiding topic or topics. The book is designed to allow multiple entry points for those who wish to pursue a specific interest, whether it be a theme, issue, or
particular author. In such cases, readers should use the index for guidance. When ideas or information mentioned in one chapter have been (or will be) more fully considered in another chapter, a parenthetic remark will let readers know, in case they wish to flip to that other chapter. Finally, I have tried in some cases to draw readers more deeply into the literature by inviting them to consider current critical controversies in which the arguments involved are especially stimulating to thought and debate.
Chapter 1

Literary precursors, literary contexts

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As with so many other areas of American life, the publishing world underwent dramatic changes in the years following the US Civil War. These changes affected the ways in which authors understood their audiences and markets, their possibilities for generating income, and their own professional identities. Such wide-ranging shifts in authors’ thinking could not help but have an impact on how and what they wrote. Publishing in the decades prior to the Civil War was still in the early stages of its development as a modern industry, at least in the United States; most books in America were either imported from Britain or else were pirated editions of books first published there. Most of those creating what we today think of as classic early American literature – from the Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet to Benjamin Franklin up through the American literary “Renaissance” (as it has become known) of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s – saw themselves not primarily as professional writers but as ministers, statesmen, reformers, lecturers, or simply citizens. Very few of these figures ever imagined supporting themselves by their writing.

It wasn’t until the middle decades of the century that technological innovations – printing from metal plates, new processes for casting type and for manufacturing paper – allowed books to be produced quickly and cheaply enough, and in sufficient quantities, that they could begin to be purchased by consumers in large numbers, which allowed for the possibility of meaningful profits both to publishers and (at least in theory) to authors. The reading population was expanding at the same time as public education increased literacy. The producers of fiction who most immediately benefitted from these changes were those who published, and to a lesser extent those who wrote
for, the period’s cheap and immensely popular “story papers” (available for mere pennies) and “dime novels.” Although most early dime novels targeted male readers with adventure tales (westerns, high seas, crime), growing numbers of women readers quickly boosted the sales of fiction focused on love and romance (whether in pioneer, urban working-class, or high-society settings). Written as escapist entertainment for the masses, this fiction was unapologetically formulaic and sensationalistic: it made no attempt to present itself either as art or, for that matter, as an accurate portrayal of Americans’ real lives.

**Authorship in nineteenth-century America**

By the 1850s the marketplace for novels of more serious intent was dominated by women authors writing sentimental domestic fiction. Even these best-selling authors, however, tended not to think of themselves as fully professional literary artists in the modern sense. For example, in a burst of inspired outrage at Congress’s passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the first American novel to sell one million copies, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly* (1852). Stowe refused to take any personal credit for her achievement, however, asserting that God had written the work through her. Susan Warner, who authored the also enormously popular novel *The Wide, Wide World* in 1850 and went on to publish dozens of books (some of them co-written with her sister Anna), claimed she wrote only in order to promote ideals of Christian piety and self-discipline and to help support her family. Stowe’s and Warner’s reluctance to identify themselves as professional writers was to some extent due to a cultural prohibition on women entering the male-reserved public sphere, particularly in order to express or develop themselves as individuals. Religious motivations or the need to help care for their families (which was seen as women’s proper role) helped make public-ation seem more acceptable for mid-nineteenth-century female authors such as Stowe and Warner (see Kelley, *Private Woman*). None of this modesty, however, kept Nathaniel Hawthorne from his infamously misogynistic dismissal of such authors as a “damn’ d mob of scribbling women,” who should be “forbidden to write, on pain of having their faces deeply scarified with an oyster-shell” (quoted in Reynolds, *Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne* 33). Hawthorne believed that the “mob” of successful women authors was distracting potential readers (and purchasers) from his own more worthy works of fiction, works for which he was in the process of trying to carve a special niche in the literary marketplace.
Hawthorne, art, and literary romance

Nathaniel Hawthorne ultimately became the first American novelist to be widely identified not only as a creator of “high art,” but also as a man who made the production of such art his profession. Working in concert with the visionary publisher and promoter James T. Fields, whose firm issued *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, Hawthorne had come, by the time of his death in 1864, publicly to embody the fiction writer as professional artist (importantly, this does not mean that his works approached the sales or broad popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or *The Wide, Wide World*). Hawthorne’s is an especially impressive achievement given that the novel, ever since its English-language emergence in the previous century, had been considered somewhat below other literary genres (poetry, drama) as a field for genuine art. Most readers thought that the novel might be good for the inspirational or sentimental uses to which writers such as Stowe and Warner put it. Or it might serve, as with books by writers such as Charles Dickens and James Fenimore Cooper, as respectable entertainment. Others worried that novels, with their frequent focus on exciting dramas of love and courtship, might put dangerous ideas into the heads of young women who read too many of them. Virtually nobody, however, thought of the novel as a genre that possessed even the potential to yield literary masterpieces that would last for centuries, as the drama of William Shakespeare and the epic poetry of John Milton had.

The story of how, against these odds, the publisher Fields promoted and marketed the indeed remarkable qualities of Hawthorne’s writing to ensure that educated Americans would come to think of his novels as aesthetically comparable to great poems and plays is a fascinating one that we cannot pause over here (see Brodhead, *School* 17–47). The impressive cultural status achieved by Hawthorne’s fiction, however, served as a model to be imitated and, if possible, surpassed by late-nineteenth-century literary realists such as Henry James, who dedicated his career to proving that the novel could be as “high” a form of art as any other, including painting and sculpture. Yet Hawthorne was also somewhat problematic as a model for James and other realist writers who rose to prominence in the generation following *The Scarlet Letter* because Hawthorne explicitly defined his own fiction in opposition to the kind of writing that would later be called realism. His famous preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) begins with the assertion that he prefers the label “Romance” rather than “Novel” for his work. “The latter form of composition,” Hawthorne writes in reference to the Novel,

is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience. The former [the romance] – while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to
laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from
the truth of the human heart – has fairly a right to present that truth
under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or
creation. (Collected Novels 351)

Profound insights into the inner truths of human nature, for Hawthorne, can
be more effectively pursued if a writer does not constantly strive for a “minute
fidelity” to the everyday experience of a specific time and place – the clothes
people wear, their daily activities and social interactions, their physical sensa-
tions, but instead gives himself the liberty to create circumstances and char-
acters, “fancy pictures,” as he puts it on the next page, of his own choosing. To
be sure, in less frequently quoted sentences from the same preface Hawthorne
adds that “the fiction writer will be wise, no doubt … to mingle the marvelous
rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor” of his work, instead of
serving it as “the actual substance of the dish offered to the public.” Yet even
if the romance writer “disregard[s] this caution” and makes no effort at all to
mingle the fantastical with the realistic, he does not “commit a literary crime”
(351).

Other writers who produced what we now consider the literary classics of
Hawthorne’s age also did not consider a “minute fidelity” to commonplace
experiences as their most important goal. Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps the
era’s most influential literary figure, claims in his early lecture “The American
Scholar” (1837) to embrace the significance of “the feelings of the child, the
philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life” (Essays and Lectures
68). He goes on to explain, however, that what is most important about “the
meaning of” these everyday actualities is their “ultimate reason,” which is “the
sublime presence of the spiritual cause lurking” within them. Details of ordi-

As we will see, the realist writers who came along later in the century did
not view the texture of everyday life as constituting a symbolic code for spirit-
ual truths nor as merely a “mask” of surface appearances, needing to be broken
through in order to reach what is truly meaningful and important. Instead,
the realists sought meaning and value precisely within the elements of daily existence as people were living it in their own modern America. As a result, realist writers faced harsh censure from critics who complained that it was the task of art to create beauty and inspire people toward the ideal, not to reproduce what these critics saw as the flat, tedious, and often depressing vulgarities of commonplace American life.³

Walt Whitman: Poetic Precursor

In 1855 Walt Whitman, a 36-year-old journalist and printer from Brooklyn, published a remarkable book of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, which he would subsequently add to, edit, and re-issue throughout his lifetime. Whitman's poems broke virtually all of nineteenth-century poetry's accepted rules. The poems dispensed with conventional regularities of rhyme, meter, and line-length in favor of a free verse whose more subtle music, Whitman insisted, grew organically from the “facts of the open air” he wished to voice (ix). Above all, Whitman aimed for his poetry – especially *Leaves of Grass*’s long central poem, later titled “Song of Myself” – to realize in a literal sense America's founding democratic ideals of freedom, tolerance, and equality. Lengthy poetic catalogues juxtaposed diverse men and women of widely varied regions, social classes, races, and occupations. The catalogues gave equal space and importance to, for example, a “tipsy and pimpled” prostitute, the President and his cabinet, and the hard-working crew of a “fish-smack” (22, 23). More so than any previous poet, Whitman emphasized the lives and activities of working people from urban street-pavers to teamsters and canal-workers; from farm laborers to sex workers; and from hunters and trappers supplying the fur trade to slaves working on Southern plantations. He attempted to convey the very feel of life in America's growing cities, through cataloguing not only sights but sounds: what he called “the blab of the pave” (18). Finally, *Leaves of Grass* also constituted an unprecedentedly frank celebration of sexuality and the human body: Whitman's poems praised copulation, homosexuality, masturbation, and sexual fantasy (for men and women). His poetic appreciation of the physical body extended even to the “aroma” of armpits (29).

In the first years after *Leaves of Grass* appeared many reviewers did not know what to make of it or of Whitman, including a young, pre-realist William Dean Howells who, in the very earliest book review he ever wrote (of the 1860 edition), could only conclude, “You cannot apply to him the tests by which you are accustomed to discriminate in poetry” (quoted in Cutler, “Literary Modernity” 134). In the decades following the Civil War, however, it became clear that the extraordinary range of American lives and places Whitman's poetry brought into literary representation; the multiple facets of rural, urban, and industrial existence he strove to convey to readers; the bodily desires and experiences to which he gave voice – all of these features anticipated and, in some cases, inspired realist fiction writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
During the 1880s, William Dean Howells, successful novelist, powerful editor, and prolific reviewer and columnist, became the nation’s best-known explicator and defender of realism as a literary movement [see text box in Chapter 2]. Howells defined realism primarily in opposition to what he called “romance.” The latter term was useful to him because it had more than one meaning in the literary discourse of the time. On the one hand, the concept of romance gave Howells a respectful way to allude to those writers whom, although he thought American literature should now develop in a different direction, he still considered his generation’s most distinguished national predecessors, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Hawthorne, as we have seen, had called his own novels “Romances,” and Emerson’s work was in close dialogue with the luminaries of German and British Romanticism. At the same time, Howells used the terms “romance novel” and “romanticistic” novel (a neologism he coined) in a derisive sense to refer to popular adventure narratives, historical romances of derring-do (what novelist Frank Norris dismissed as “the cut and thrust business”), and sentimental domestic literature written primarily by and for women. Speaking of “romanticistic” novels, Howells insisted, “If I do not find it is like life, then it does not exist for me as art; it is ugly, it is ludicrous, it is impossible” (Selected Literary Criticism III 216).

**Sentimental fiction**

Only in recent decades has literary scholarship, primarily thanks to research and insights by feminist literary critics, come to recognize the multi-dimensional importance of female-identified sentimental and domestic literature, whose popularity outstripped that of any other type of literature in pre-Civil War America. The best way to describe sentimental fiction is as novels and short stories that emphasize – and not only emphasize, but promote and celebrate – the power of strong feelings and emotions both to effect change within individuals and to connect individuals to one another. Nineteenth-century sentimental literature depicted intense feelings on the parts of its characters but, of equal importance, it also strove to provoke readerly identification with those feelings and thereby produce sympathetic tears, sympathetic fears, and sympathetic outrage.

Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* accomplished exactly that. The novel was not only immensely popular, but it also helped to turn many previously neutral or uninterested Americans against slavery. Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said to Harriet Stowe when he was introduced to her in 1862, as the Civil
War raged, “So you’re the little woman whose book started this great war.” Howells and James both expressed admiration for Stowe’s novel, and there is no doubt that in meaningful ways *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* anticipated and helped to spread realist techniques that became more prominent after the war, including such techniques as careful research, an emphasis on the essential factuality of what is portrayed, and gestures, at least, toward accurate depictions of dialect. But *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* also epitomizes the use of what critic Jane Tompkins has called “sentimental power” (*Sensational Designs* 122). A passage from the novel demonstrates how literary sentimentalism mobilized readers’ sympathies. Eliza, a house slave on a Kentucky plantation, has overheard a slave-dealer arranging to buy her beloved young son Harry and has determined to run away with him that very evening, despite the frost on the ground and the lack of time to make preparations for a journey. In describing Eliza’s escape, Stowe addresses her readers directly:

> If it were your Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, tomorrow morning, – if you had seen the man, and heard that the papers were signed and delivered, and you had only from twelve o’clock till morning to make good your escape, – how fast could you walk? How many miles could you make in those few brief hours, with the darling at your bosom, – the little sleepy head on your shoulder, – the small, soft arms trustingly holding on to your neck? (67–68)

Presuming that most of her readers are women, and that many are mothers (or eager to imagine themselves mothers), Stowe asks her readers to enter almost physically into Eliza’s sensations, to feel the endangered child’s head on *their* shoulders, the child’s soft arms holding onto *their* necks.

Stowe strove to evoke sentimental identification in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with the aim of helping white middle-class women in the North experience through their sympathies at least some degree of the suffering that slave women in the South underwent, instead of merely grasping the fact of that suffering on an abstract or intellectual level. Stowe hoped that her novel would stimulate these women to act against the Fugitive Slave Law and against slavery itself, although such action would occur mostly through the women’s appealing to their husbands, brothers, and sons, who unlike them were legally permitted to vote in elections and fight in the military. Stowe and other sentimental writers such as Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and (in a slightly more sensationalist vein) E. D. E. N. Southworth employed similar strategies – that is, triggering strong sympathetic emotions in readers – as a way to lead their audiences toward a firmer embrace of Christian principles, devotion to the concept of the nuclear family as society’s primary unit, and support for such reform movements as temperance.
**Manliness and the realist critique of romance**

William Dean Howells and other realists defined their own literary project in part by opposing it to “romance” genres – although, as we will see below, the relationship between realism and these genres was in fact more complex and ambiguous than most realists liked to admit. Viewing themselves as professionals with missions different from but related to those of scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists, realist writers strove for an effect of objective, disinterested narration. This did not mean that most literary realists did not also want their writing to have an impact on individual readers or on society at large. Howells, for instance, profoundly hoped that realism would produce greater understanding and solidarity across America’s deepening divisions of social class. But he believed that the best way to achieve such goals was to cleave as closely as possible to reality as most people experienced it. The facts of daily American life, as lived in different regions and by people occupying different social stations, would speak for themselves if they were presented more fully and openly than previous literature had cared to attempt. Sentimental fiction’s manipulation of readers’ feelings by depicting so many scenes of intense emotionality, Howells believed, caused more harm than good insofar as it interfered with readers viewing the world rationally and in proper perspective.

An important subplot in Howells’s best-known novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), directly challenges what Howells saw as the pernicious effects of sentimental fiction, in this case its glorification of self-sacrifice in the name of a romantic principle. In *Silas Lapham’s* subplot, two sisters, Irene and Penelope, as well as their parents, believe that Tom Corey visits their house to court Irene, the more conventionally pretty girl who, largely because she believes Tom loves her, falls in love with him. When it turns out that all along Tom has wished to marry Penelope, who has herself secretly come to love him too, Irene is heartbroken and humiliated. Penelope, blaming herself for Irene’s suffering, determines to sacrifice her own desires and never see Tom again, although this will not solve Irene’s problem and will leave both Tom and herself bereft. Penelope comes to this resolution after having read a book that many of the ladies in the novel enjoy, *Tears, Idle Tears*, whose title Howells concocted as an allusion to sentimental literature. A female character describes the book as “perfectly heart-breaking, as you’ll imagine from the name; but there’s such a dear old-fashioned hero and heroine in it, who keep dying for each other all the way through, and making the most wildly satisfactory and unnecessary sacrifices … You feel as if you’d done them yourself” (174).

It is just this sort of “old-fashioned” literature that Howells has the thoughtful Reverend Sewell, who tries to advise the family through its crisis, decry as
“perverted,” even “monstrous” in its effects on readers (212, 175). If it were not for the popularity of such novels devoted to “the shallowest sentimentality,” Sewell asserts, the usually perceptive Penelope would not have been drawn to “a false ideal of self-sacrifice” (212). She would have seen that it makes most sense that “one suffer instead of three, if none is to blame … That’s sense, and that’s justice” (212). Sewell, who can be taken here as speaking for Howells himself, makes an implicit plea for literary realism: “The novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious” (175).

Realist writing by men certainly contained highly emotional, even tear-jerking moments. Such moments sometimes served, for instance, to facilitate the bonding between two male characters, as when, in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Jim tearfully confesses to Huck an incident in which he beat his young daughter for not listening to him, without realizing that she was deaf (Camfield, *Sentimental Twain* 11). In the same novel, however, Twain parodies feminine emotionalism in his characterization of Emmeline Grangerford, a teenaged girl famous in town for her series of paintings showing tearful women, who mourn with equally great intensity for dead lovers and for dead canaries. Grangerford’s paintings have titles such as, “Shall I Never See Thee More Alas,” “And Art Thou Gone Yes Thou Art Gone Alas,” and, for the painting of a woman with a dead canary, “I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas.” The repetitive, clichéd, archaic language that Grangerford chooses for her titles signifies to us that the paintings’ emotional content is equally contrived.

A more explicit criticism of literary sentimentality came from a young Henry James, who had not yet managed to publish any fiction of his own. In the course of reviewing Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) – often regarded today as a direct predecessor of American literary realism and naturalism (as we will see in the next chapter) – James acknowledged Davis’s originality in treating industrial factory workers as fit material for fiction. But he simultaneously accused her of “drench[ing] the whole field beforehand with a flood of lachrymose sentimentalism” (Essays 221). “Nothing is more trivial,” James continued, “than that intellectual temper which, for ever dissolved in the melting mood, goes dripping and trickling over the face of humanity, and washing its honest lineaments out of all recognition” (222).

Whether by illustration of a made-up sentimental novel’s insidious effects, as in Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, by mockery, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, or by direct criticism, as in the young Henry James’s comments about Rebecca Harding Davis, male realists continued to scorn what they saw as the typically
forced and artificial emotionality of women's cultural productions. Although some mid-nineteenth-century fiction writers who made heavy use of domestic sentimentality's imagery and textual strategies were men (e.g., Timothy Shay Arthur, author of Ten Nights in a Bar-Room, and What I Saw There), recent scholars have convincingly argued that male realists insisted on portraying the sentimentalism they despised as essentially feminine at least in part out of anxiety about their own masculine status (Bell, Problem of American Literary Realism; Derrick, Monumental). Nineteenth-century American men were supposed to prove their manliness by success in what was conventionally regarded as the cutthroat world of business or on the field of battle, or both. Key male realist writers who became prominent in the late 1870s and the 1880s, including Howells, James, and Twain, had not fought in the Civil War, although they were of the appropriate age to have done so. By casting the literary effects achieved by successful women writers as cheaply manipulative, shallow, and dangerously out of control, male realists tried to separate themselves from whatever seemed “feminine” about being an author in their society. The realists thus carved out their own professional identities as serious, disciplined, and responsible artists who, rather than wantonly tugging at their readers' heartstrings, sought to present “life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation” (Howells, Silas 175). Realist writing might reach readers' hearts, but that would not be realism's primary goal or raison d'être. If readers were emotionally moved, it should be by a “simple, natural, and honest” portrayal of life itself (Howells, “Editor's Study,” 1887 [76.451], 155).

Although it was female-identified sentimental and domestic writing from which realists sought most energetically to differentiate their work, other types of “romanticistic” fiction (in Howell's phrase) written during their own era, much of it by men, also constituted a crime against the standard of showing “life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation.” Realist writers expressed their disgust at the popularity of romantically written historical novels, a popularity that grew to new heights during the 1890s. Using what critics regarded as sloppy historical research and overblown, clichéd prose, historical romances characteristically depicted red-blooded men proving their bravery, strength, and nobility in settings that ranged from the Ancient Roman Empire to Tudor England to Revolutionary-era America. William Dean Howells was not alone at the time in speculating about a connection between what he called “the horrid tumult of the swashbuckler swashing on his buckler” in American fiction and the United States' apparently growing hunger to project military force on the global stage (Howells, “New Historical Romances” 936, quoted in Kaplan, “Romancing the Empire” 659–60).
Realist critics of romantic historical novels traced the baleful genre back to Sir Walter Scott, the Scottish author who essentially invented it and whose work served as a model for James Fenimore Cooper’s popular *Leatherstocking Tales*, written between the 1820s and 1840s and set during the eighteenth century in America’s Northern woods. Such novels of Scott’s as *Rob Roy* (1817), *Ivanhoe* (1819), and *Redgauntlet* (1824) were widely admired in the United States and were frequently reprinted and circulated well into the realists’ own era, especially in the Southern states. Mark Twain took Scott’s historical fiction as a particular target of acrimony and ridicule, contending that the entire American South had been perverted by the author. In Twain’s eyes, Scott’s novels about chivalric medieval knights and warriors glorified battle and glamorized such practices as fighting deadly duels over perceived insults to “honor,” a concept whose use within romantic discourse Twain found silly and juvenile. Scott’s writing also glamorized death, especially in the service of historically lost causes, such as the ongoing right of the Scottish-descended Stuart dynasty to rule Britain long after they had been overthrown and replaced. For Twain, it was the “Sir Walter disease” that had made the white South so sensitive to the slightest infringement by the national government on the traditional “rights” of slaveholders and slave-holding states, and so ready to fight in defense of Southern honor. “Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war,” Twain wrote in 1882, “that he is in great measure responsible for the war” (*Mississippi Writings* 501). After the war, it was still the “Sir Walter disease” that led the defeated South to resist social progress by making a cult of what was referred to as the noble “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy. The very name of the Ku Klux Klan was intended to connote a warlike tribe or “clan” of Scottish Highlanders similar to those celebrated in Scott’s fiction.

Twain’s critique of Scott also casts aspersions on the version of male identity Scott and his writing represented, and thereby suggests through implicit contrast the form of manly professionalism that literary realists wished to embody. Twain’s calling Scott’s style “flowery,” and his finding at the heart of Scott’s writing “the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead, and out of charity ought to be buried,” implies that Scott’s version of masculine identity is, at best, immature and out of date and also, perhaps, somewhat effeminate (*Mississippi Writings* 500). If it were not for the “enchantments” cast by Sir Walter, which have set the Southern “world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms,” what would prevail there instead would be “practical, common-sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works,” like those performed by the professional engineers and inventors Twain always admired (one of whom he made the hero of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*) (*Mississippi Writings* 500).
Realism’s debts to romance

American literary realists defined their manly professional identities – and the nature of their own writing – in opposition to literary “romance,” by which they meant not only domestic sentimentality but also the sort of romantic historical novels initiated by Scott. The realists owed more to these denigrated modes of fiction than they acknowledged, however. For instance, in depicting the daily lives of women in their homes, mid-nineteenth-century sentimentalist novelists devoted closer attention to the quotidian details of everyday existence – clothes, food, those trivial spats among family members that everyone has experienced – than previous American fiction ever had. In doing so, women writers of domestic literature anticipated and helped lay groundwork for the “solidity of specification,” the “truth of detail” in fiction that late-nineteenth-century realists would celebrate as a “supreme virtue” for novels and strive to achieve in their own work (James, Essays 53).

The Southwestern Humorists

In addition to the other precursors discussed in this chapter, another significant influence on post-Civil War American realism was exercised by a group of writers, today little-known, whom scholars refer to as the “Southwestern Humorists,” who began publishing in the 1830s. Writing at a time when the category of “professional author” did not yet exist in America, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, George Washington Harris, Jim Thorpe, and William Gilmore Simms, among others, spent most of their time working in gentlemanly professions such as the law, medicine, and the military. The literature they originated, however, was unique for its period. Set in states and territories bordering the Mississippi, which were then regarded as the nation’s “frontier,” their fiction characteristically centered on a backwoodsman with a comical name telling tall tales to a more sophisticated narrator figure, who would subtly invite readers to laugh at, not with, the backwoodsman. (In fact, the Southwestern Humorists can be said to have invented the stereotypical male figure mocked in later phases of US culture as a hillbilly, a redneck, or “white trash.”) Despite the genre’s focus on...
humorous characters and obviously exaggerated tall tales, Southwestern Humor included several elements that would later be of crucial significance to the realist project. The genre features, for instance, many of the earliest examples of dialect writing in American literature, which Longstreet apologetically (but with tongue in cheek) described as “coarse, inelegant, and sometimes ungrammatical language.” Longstreet further noted for readers – again, despite the importance of humor and exaggeration in the genre – that the writing of himself and his peers was constituted by “fanciful combinations of real incidents and characters.” In his own work, he added, “some of the scenes are as literally true as the frailties of memory would allow them to be.”

The particular brand of humor that the Southwestern writers brought to literature rendered them especially meaningful to Samuel Clemens as he shaped the pseudonymous persona of “Mark Twain.” Many other realist writers would later dismiss their writing as vulgar and trivial, but in several significant areas the Southwestern Humorists got there first.

For example, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), a still-popular classic of domestic fiction (although it was written slightly after the genre’s heyday), includes many passages of heavy sentimentality, as well as didactic moral lessons with Christian overtones and a memorable example of sentimental domesticity’s many idealized mothers. In the first chapter, Marmee makes use of the well-known Christian allegory, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, to instruct her four daughters, who are nothing but grateful for the moral inspiration: “Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City” (18). The teenaged Beth’s death from a disease she contracted while charitably assisting an impoverished widow and her six children has made generations of readers shed sympathetic tears. Yet along with its sentimental and moralistic elements, *Little Women* also contains detailed and realistic descriptions, for instance of some props and costumes the girls make for a play they perform at home, which occurs in the same chapter as Marmee’s didactic speech:

> Very clever were some of their productions … antique lamps made of old-fashioned butter-boats, covered with silver paper, gorgeous robes of old cotton, glittering with tin spangles from a pickle factory, and armor covered with the same useful diamond-shaped bits, left in sheets when the lids of tin preserve-pots were cut out. (22)

The concrete details *Little Women*’s narrator gives regarding the homemade costumes and props render the objects almost materially present to a reader, who can virtually see the everyday butter dishes wrapped in silvery paper. Note,
in particular, the information we are given about the “spangles” the girls use to decorate their robes and create their “armor”: they are scraps of tin left over from the canning process at a pickle factory. That particular detail is one that even an experienced reader of sentimental fiction (a reader easily able to foresee, for instance, that the angelic and physically weak Beth will die before the book ends) could not have anticipated. It is a detail so banal, yet at the same time unpredictable, that it evokes precisely what James would call “the air of reality” (*Essays* 53; see Chapter 3, below). In addition, the casual allusion here to a factory, presumably located near the girls’ home, where a machine cuts lids for tin cans from sheets of metal, points to just the sorts of historical changes – in this case, the shift of formerly home-based production processes (pickling and canning) to an industrial factory – that the literary realists would make it their project to incorporate into American literature.

### Slave Narratives and Literary Realism

Truth-based accounts written by African-American slaves who had escaped their bondage, which scholars today refer to as slave narratives, played a significant role in the abolitionist movement’s growth and eventual success. In providing first-hand accounts of the horrors of slavery, works such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) brought powerfully home to their mostly white readers the full humanity of those who suffered under, and resisted, Southern slavery. This writing was revolutionary in that it embodied the achievement of a public voice, as well as literacy, for those whom slavery had tried to rob of both. Slave narratives expanded the purview of American literature to include both people and subject matter that had previously been unrepresented or misrepresented, which later became a primary goal of the realist literary project. As realism would later do, slave narratives also often included concrete and specific details involving living and labor arrangements on plantations, as well as slaves’ clothing and food. Finally, slave narratives helped to break a path for literary realism in their frankness about the human body and sexuality. Narratives did not shy away from reporting the most brutal physical aspects of slavery, including bloody whippings and rapes, as well as the harsh physical effects of overwork, insufficient nourishment, and other abuses. That the human bodies described in slave narratives were often victimized and in pain made their actual physicality seem still more vivid in mid-nineteenth-century America, where “respectable” public discourse tended to represent bodily experiences in euphemistic and abstract terms, if at all.

As with sentimental domestic novels, the tradition of historical fiction associated with Sir Walter Scott was also more relevant to late-nineteenth-century realist writers than might appear from their frequently harsh criticisms of it. Even with Scott’s romantic idealization of characters and his glorification of
chivalric codes, his work played a vital role in demonstrating the potential for fictional narrative to engage with a changing historical world rife with social conflicts and cultural differences. Scott’s introduction of historical fiction advanced the then-young novel genre in two related ways that would later prove crucial to late-nineteenth-century American writers, including Twain, his severest judge. First, historical fiction is by definition structured around the passage of historical time. The pleasure a reader derives from it at least partly depends on the continual recognition of how his or her own time both differs and descends from the past the novel depicts. Further, Scott was drawn to portraying characters, as well as cultures and societies, who find they must react in the face of some political or historical change. American literary realists writing in the decades after the US Civil War set most of their fiction during their own present time, but they viewed their time as defined by change more than by anything else. The realists were deeply interested in the effects, on individuals and on American society at large, of the immense alterations they saw occurring all around them – changes in technology, in the economy, in political and legal institutions, in the very make-up of the US population – even if the characters in realist fiction rarely respond to such changes with swordplay, as Scott’s characters might. Critic Harry Shaw has remarked that much of what is “important about realism stems from its attempt to come to grips with the fact that we live in a historical world,” by which Shaw means a world that changes over time (Narrating Reality 6). Scott may have used a romanticizing lens, but his focus on a past – usually that of his own British Isles – in which the seeds of the present are at least intermittently visible made him the first major novelist to put “the fact that we live in a historical world” at the center of his work.

Second, Scott’s portrayal of Scottish Highlanders, and Scotland in general, as having a culture – customs, values, modes of speech, clothes, weapons – related to but also distinct from that of England meaningfully advanced the use of regional and cultural differences as a thematic background for narrative fiction. As we will see in later chapters, such differences, especially as manifested between a dominant culture and a relatively disempowered or minority culture, were of fundamental importance in the development of American literary realism. Regionalist or “local-color” realist writers, for example, tended to depict American rural and village life as a mode of existence quickly moving into the past, which their works at least implicitly contrasted with modern urban living. Ironically, given his vituperative criticism of Scott, Mark Twain’s own portrayal of the American South as a stubbornly “backward” region – albeit a region whose cultural forms, thought-systems, and, especially, speech patterns he was devoted to capturing in his fiction – can be said at least loosely
American and European realisms

American literary realism is frequently presented as if it emerged within a literary context that included only US writers. American realism did develop in its own way and at its own pace, and some of the social conditions it responded to were specific to the late-nineteenth-century United States. These specifically American conditions included the powerful impact of the Civil War and its long-unresolved aftermath (above all the nation’s ongoing treatment of African Americans, over 12 percent of the population, as second-class citizens), as well as a massive post-War influx of immigrants representing an unprecedentedly wide range of national and ethnic backgrounds (see Chapters 9 and 10). All of these developments occurred, moreover, within the context of a nation whose official founding principles of democracy and equality could be called upon to support literary realism’s commitment to focusing on common everyday people. In addition, there is also no question that much of the writing that US realists defined themselves against (even as it also influenced their work) was by American authors. But leading American realists cited European realists as positive influences on their writing much more frequently than they cited American authors. As a self-conscious aesthetic movement, modern realism began in Europe.

The first consistent use of realism as an aesthetic term occurred in France during the early 1850s, initially in reference to the paintings of Gustave Courbet. Courbet rejected the formalities and idealizations of the classical art tradition, as well as the exotic subject matter of romantic art. Instead, he painted pictures of working- and lower-middle-class people performing everyday tasks, including manual labor. Courbet also painted intensely lifelike, non-idealized nudes, including a scandalous close-up of an adult woman’s genitalia labeled “L’Origine du Monde” (“The Origin of the World”). When his paintings were rejected for 1855’s official French Universal Exhibition, Courbet set up his own Pavillon du Réalisme near the official exhibition site.

French literary reviewers adopted the term “realism” from art criticism almost immediately to describe the work of some of Courbet’s literary contemporaries, particularly Gustave Flaubert, whose 1857 novel Madame Bovary depicted the life and death of an alienated, lower-middle-class housewife in

to follow the model first laid out in Sir Walter’s portrayal of the Scots. And of course, as we will return to in later chapters, the narrative representation of cultural difference lay at the heart of American realism’s treatment of race, ethnicity, and social class.
the French provinces. Flaubert set as his task to represent in literature “commonplace situations and trivial dialogue. To write the mediocre well and to see that it maintains at the same time its appearance, its rhythm, its words” (quoted in Fluck, “Morality” 87). The term realism was also used retroactively by critics to describe the massive achievement of Honoré de Balzac, whom American realist Henry James would later describe as the “founder” of literary realism (French Writers 49). Balzac took as his lifelong project the writing of a series he called La Comédie Humaine (The Human Comedy), which ultimately included almost ninety volumes (1829–48). Balzac attempted in the series to give fictional life to every division and sub-division of French society of his time. He offered detailed pictures of the worlds of Parisian actresses, high-ranking church officials, provincial tradesmen, journalists, the nobility, midwives, and army officers, among others. For James, although Balzac wrote before the term “realism” was in use, he was the writer who first “saw the real as clamouring to be rendered” and who “rendered it with unequalled authority” (French Writers 97, 99).

In fact, well before the mid-nineteenth-century French advent of the term “realism,” eighteenth-century English writers such as Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding began incorporating into their work central elements of what would later be called realist fiction. Key figures in creating the genre of the novel as such, these authors characteristically focused more on the middle and lower classes than on the aristocracy, took a deflationary attitude toward the conventions of chivalric romance, and paid careful attention to the accoutrements of daily life (even on Robinson Crusoe’s island). Writing in 1897 about the history of literary realism, Howells insisted that contemporary realism “is a fresh impulse of a kind in English fiction that has always existed. We haven’t anything more realistic in the work of today than Defoe’s novels” (Selected Literary Criticism II 287). Both Howells and James also wrote extensively about such later British literary realists as Jane Austen, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, George Moore, Thomas Hardy, and others, although Howells remarked in 1887 that “A true arrangement of the literatures in which realism has attained the ascendancy over romance would place the Russians first; the French, by virtue of Zola’s strength, second; the Spanish next; the Norwegians fourth; the Italians fifth; the English last” (quoted in Becker, “Modern Realism” 133).

As Howells’s ranked list indicates, the writers who developed realism in the United States after the Civil War wrote in response to their own local and national circumstances, but they were quite aware of participating in an international literary movement. Indeed, Howells took as one of his most important tasks when he served as editor at the prestigious magazines the Atlantic
American and European realisms

Monthly and then Harper’s Monthly to help his American readers become better acquainted with (or, in many cases, learn about for the first time) European realist writers from Scandinavia to Spain, including the realist whom Howells came most to admire, the Russian Leo Tolstoy. When asked by Munsey’s Magazine at the age of sixty to name his “favorite novelist,” Howells insisted that he had many favorites and that the list changed almost daily, growing in length the longer he lived. Announcing that he would purposefully “leave out romantic fiction” in favor of “the realistic,” he proceeded to name novelists representing at least twelve countries, adding that he had lately “got hold of a novel by a Polish novelist, Sinkiewicz, which instantly became my favorite … I imagine [it] pictures very faithfully the society of Poland at this moment” (Selected Literary Criticism II 286).

In other words, what we now designate as American literary realism did not emerge in a literary vacuum. Its borders cannot be marked as cleanly as the organization of literature anthologies, the listings in college course catalogues, or the titles of books such as this one might seem to suggest. Realists born in the United States, including Howells, James, Wharton, and others, saw themselves as part of an international group of writers with roughly similar approaches and aims. Within the US literary context, modes of writing that some literature anthologies and scholars present as “pre-” or even “anti-”realist (transcendentalism, sentimentalism, other varieties of “romance”) had significant overlaps, both chronologically and in methods and themes, with literary realism. Characteristics that we now consider central to literary realism, such as close attention to the surface details of everyday life, can be found in American fiction written well before the Civil War, while post-Civil War “realist” texts not infrequently include within them key features even of the “romanticistic” writing the realists denigrated, such as moments of high sentimentality.

Toward the end of his career in 1907, Henry James conceded that “it is as difficult … to trace the dividing line between the real and the romantic as to plant a milestone between north and south” (Essays 1067). In the following chapter we will consider three US works of the 1860s and 1870s that played key roles in mediating between literature that utilizes certain “realist” techniques, including the attention to quotidian details we find in mid-nineteenth-century works of sentimental domesticity and slave narratives’ vivid depictions of wounded bodies, and, on the other hand, later nineteenth-century fiction that self-consciously aims at “realism as a basic literary goal and concept” (Becker, “Modern Realism” 4).