

## THE ROLE OF REALISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** Realism, as a literary movement, emerged in England during the 19th century as a response to romanticism and the social transformations brought about by industrialization. This article explores the development and influence of realism in English literature, focusing on its thematic concerns, stylistic features, and socio-political implications. It examines the works of key realist writers such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, analyzing how their narratives reflect the complexities of ordinary life and challenge idealized representations of society. The article also highlights realism's continuing influence on contemporary literature, arguing that its emphasis on character psychology, moral ambiguity, and social critique remains relevant in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Realism, English literature, 19th century, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, literary criticism, industrialization, social realism, narrative form

Realism in English literature arose as a reaction to the excesses of romanticism and as a response to rapidly changing social and economic conditions. Unlike romanticism, which emphasized emotion, imagination, and the sublime, realism focused on the ordinary, the everyday, and the plausible. It sought to represent life "as it is," portraying real people in believable situations with an emphasis on ethical complexity and social conditions.

The rise of realism coincided with the Industrial Revolution and Victorian-era social reform. England in the 19th century experienced profound transformations—urbanization, class mobility, and a widening gap between rich and poor—which demanded a literature that could capture these realities. Realist authors moved away from the romantic idealization of nature and heroism, choosing instead to examine the fabric of contemporary life.

Realism in English literature was shaped by a number of key authors who redefined the role of fiction by depicting life with a sense of psychological, social, and moral authenticity. This section explores the contributions of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy—three pivotal figures in English realism—detailing their thematic concerns, literary innovations, and lasting impact.

### Charles Dickens (1812–1870)

Charles Dickens is often considered one of the founding figures of literary realism in England. His novels, while occasionally tinged with sentimentality and caricature, vividly portray the harsh realities of Victorian society. Dickens focused extensively on themes such as poverty, child labor, industrial exploitation, and class inequality.

#### Key Contributions:

**Social Critique:** Novels like *Oliver Twist* (1837) and *Hard Times* (1854) expose the cruelty of the workhouse system, the neglect of orphaned children, and the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism.

**Characterization:** Dickens created a gallery of memorable characters who embody social types yet possess individuality. While exaggerated, his characters often represent larger social issues—e.g., Mr. Gradgrind as a symbol of utilitarianism in *Hard Times*.

**Urban Realism:** He was a master of depicting the crowded, grimy, chaotic life of cities like London, using detailed description to convey both physical and emotional environments.

**Realist Elements:** Although Dickens sometimes resorted to coincidences or melodrama, his attention to societal conditions and moral ambiguity makes him a key realist precursor.

George Eliot (1819–1880)

*Pen name of Mary Ann Evans*

George Eliot is perhaps the most philosophically rigorous of the English realists. Deeply influenced by contemporary science, psychology, and ethics, Eliot aimed to portray characters as morally complex and situated within the constraints of their environments.

**Key Contributions:**

**Psychological Realism:** In novels like *Middlemarch* (1871–72), Eliot examines inner conflicts, motivations, and ethical dilemmas. Her characters are not idealized heroes but flawed individuals striving to make sense of their roles in society.

**Narrative Innovation:** Eliot employed omniscient narration with philosophical asides, offering reflective commentary on human behavior. She was one of the first English authors to use *free indirect discourse* effectively.

**Thematic Depth:** Her works delve into marriage, gender roles, education, political reform, and the struggle between individual desire and social duty.

**Realist Elements:** Eliot's fiction combines meticulous social observation with intellectual insight, aiming to create morally serious literature that encourages empathy and ethical reflection.

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

Thomas Hardy represents the darker, more deterministic side of English realism. His novels frequently focus on rural communities in the fictional region of Wessex, depicting the impact of modernity on traditional ways of life.

**Key Contributions:**

**Tragic Realism:** Hardy's characters often face insurmountable social, moral, or environmental forces. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), for example, Tess is a victim of rigid social mores and male dominance.

**Pessimism and Determinism:** Hardy's worldview was shaped by Darwinism and a belief in the indifference of the universe to human suffering. His fiction is marked by fatalism and critiques of religious hypocrisy.

**Depiction of Rural Life:** In novels such as *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Hardy offers an unvarnished look at agrarian labor, gender inequalities, and the fading traditions of rural England.

**Realist Elements:** Hardy's work is grounded in detailed observation of nature and society. His focus on the limits placed on individuals by fate, class, and culture aligns closely with the aims of literary realism.

While Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy are central to the canon, several other authors contributed significantly to realism in English literature:

**Elizabeth Gaskell** – Her novels such as *North and South* (1854) and *Mary Barton* (1848) confront industrial unrest, class conflict, and women's roles with a balanced, documentary-like style.

**Anthony Trollope** – Known for the *Chronicles of Barsetshire*, Trollope's works explore politics, religion, and provincial life through carefully drawn characters and complex interpersonal relationships.

**Wilkie Collins** – Although associated with sensation fiction, Collins's works like *The Woman in White* (1859) incorporate realist techniques in their portrayal of legal injustice and gendered vulnerability.

**Arnold Bennett** – A later realist whose novels such as *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) focus on the lives of ordinary people over long periods of time, highlighting social change.

Realism continues to influence modern and postmodern literature, particularly in its attention to character complexity and moral depth. Contemporary realist fiction, such as the works of Ian McEwan and Zadie Smith, extends the tradition by addressing multiculturalism, globalization, and psychological introspection.

Realism in English literature represented a significant shift in narrative form and thematic focus, aiming to portray life truthfully and critically. Through its enduring legacy, realism has shaped not only the novel form but also the way literature engages with reality, ethics, and social change.

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