

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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Jessica E. McCarthy

The earliest story in this anthology, Louisa May Alcott's "Hospital Sketches: A Day" (1863), and the latest, Theodore Dreiser's "Free" (1918), were published fifty-five years apart. In fact, Dreiser was not even born until eight years after the publication of Alcott's story. To say that much changed in the United States during the nearly six decades covered by this collection is a tremendous understatement. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, West Virginia became the thirty-fifth state in the Union, ground was broken in San Francisco for the first transcontinental railroad, and the United States was at the midpoint of the Civil War. By the end of 1918, there were forty-eight states, the United States Post Office Department (later the United States Postal Service) employed airplanes to deliver mail, World War I had come to an end, and an influenza pandemic had begun. Of course, these changes are only a small sample, and much, much more took place in the United States during the years covered by this anthology. The texts included here are intended to be illustrative of these immense changes and the upheaval that characterized the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. Readers will find that many of the stories take on familiar themes and topics, while others defy expectations and stand apart as unusual exceptions.

When the first story in this collection was published, the Civil War was underway. Tension had risen in the 1850s between the Northern states and the Southern ones as the latter sought to preserve slavery as a means of economic production and to expand it into newly added territories. Abraham Lincoln campaigned against expanding slavery and, in 1860, was elected president of the United States. The Southern states subsequently formed the Confederate States of America (also called "the Confederacy"); however, they were never formally recognized as an independent government by the United States or any foreign country. The Northern states (often called "the Union") wanted to keep the country together and stop the South from seceding. With no apparent possibility of reconciling these divisions, the Confederacy attacked the federal Fort Sumter in South Carolina in April 1861, thus beginning the American Civil War. Each side subsequently formed a large army of volunteers and conscripted men.

The ensuing war would last four years and result in the deaths of approximately 620,000 to 750,000 men; it remains the bloodiest armed conflict in American history. On April 9, 1865, Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union general Ulysses S. Grant, effectively ending the war.

The Civil War marks an important turning point in American history and is notable as one of the first industrialized wars. Both the Union and Confederacy made use of factories, steamships, railroads, telegraphs, and mass-produced weapons to support their efforts. The Union initially fought to keep the states united, but it quickly became clear that slavery was at the heart of the conflict. On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and declared all enslaved persons free. But because this proclamation was made while the country was still at war and Southern states were controlled by the Confederacy, many remained enslaved even after its issuance.

The decade following the Civil War, roughly 1865 to 1876, is referred to as the Reconstruction era. During this time, the Southern states worked to recover and rebuild, while those newly freed from slavery struggled to build lives for themselves. Congress passed two important amendments to the United States Constitution, the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) and the Fifteenth Amendment (1870). The Fourteenth Amendment granted automatic citizenship to all persons born in the United States and ruled that no state could deprive citizens of their rights. The Fifteenth Amendment gave all men the right to vote, regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Although its ratification was a watershed moment for civil rights, the Fifteenth Amendment was not perfect. Many Southern states responded by implementing barriers to voting, such as poll taxes and literacy tests. It also must be noted that women of all races were pointedly left out of this amendment, despite having campaigned for over two decades for their rights.

Women’s ongoing struggle to be included as full members of society continued to be a major social issue during the years covered in this anthology. The women’s suffrage movement began in earnest in 1848, but it lost momentum during the Civil War. In 1869, however, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association to lobby for a constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote. After an 1886 proposal for women’s suffrage was defeated by the US Senate, women turned their efforts to lobbying individual states for voting rights. They made some gains in states and territories, but women would not be granted the right to vote by the federal government until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. At times, there was tension within the women’s suffrage movement when White women activists’ goals did not align with those of their African American colleagues. One can see this misalignment in numerous historical moments. For instance, despite having worked closely with Frederick Douglass, Stanton and Anthony opposed the Fifteenth Amendment for its exclusion of women, even though it granted voting rights to African American men. The 1913 Women’s Suffrage Procession in Washington, DC, asked African American women to march in

the back, a request defied by journalist and suffragist Ida B. Wells. Furthermore, some women's rights activists, including Native Americans and Asian Americans, did not even have access to citizenship. Unfortunately, after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and despite supporting the suffrage movement from its inception, women of color, like their African American male counterparts, were blocked from voting by racist poll taxes, local voting restrictions, and intimidation.

As the world around them changed, women saw potential opportunities to improve their daily lives and expand their reach beyond the domestic sphere. Middle- and upper-class women typically stayed at home to care for their families—usually with the help of servants—while lower-class women labored in factories or service jobs. Women's role in the home was often seen as nurturing and providing a positive moral influence. Some women used this characterization as a way to argue for a voice in more public forums, claiming that their civilizing influence was needed to create more humane and just laws. Many women authors, including some in this anthology, supported the women's rights movement by writing stories that showed women making significant contributions outside of the home and challenging conventional gender roles.

Even as women and members of various racial minority groups struggled to be recognized as full US citizens, the nation as a whole grappled with understanding how it would come together and what the future would look like in the aftermath of the Civil War. Virtually every aspect of the country was undergoing dramatic changes, including its expanding borders as well as the size and constitution of its population. During the 1830s and 1840s, a great number of settlers headed to newly acquired western territories in search of land and opportunity; some followed the Oregon Trail all the way to the Pacific Northwest. Later, with the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862 and the completion of the transcontinental railway across the western United States in 1869, settlement of the Great Plains became even more widespread. In addition to seeking land, many people ventured west in hopes of finding wealth in other ways. The California gold rush began in 1848 and drew approximately three hundred thousand people toward the Pacific coast. Even after the initial boom ended around 1855, the lasting impacts of the rapid influx of people would continue to be felt. Similarly, the Klondike gold rush inspired large numbers of people to travel to Alaska and Canada's Yukon Territory after the discovery of gold there in 1896. It should be remembered that as settlers and fortune seekers moved west after the Civil War, and even to Alaska, they caused great damage to the natural environment as well as to the Indigenous peoples who were violently displaced. Many were forcibly relocated to reservations on land deemed undesirable to non-Native settlers, and a great number of their children were taken away and sent to boarding schools where students learned to "be American" and thereby lose their Native languages and cultures.

While many Americans headed west in the nineteenth century, even more people were immigrating to the United States. Nearly twelve million immigrants

entered the US from 1870 to 1900, hoping to build a new life. Most immigrants to the eastern states came from European countries such as England, Germany, Italy, and Ireland. On the West Coast, a large number of immigrants came from China. Intense competition over jobs fueled racism and ethnocentrism and consequently high levels of hostility toward almost all these newcomers throughout the country. Just one terrible result of this prejudice was the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), which explicitly prohibited the immigration of Chinese workers. In 1892 the Geary Act extended the ban for another decade and added a new requirement that Chinese residents carry and present proof of residency or face deportation or hard labor. This act was not repealed until 1943, and even after that date approximately only one hundred visas were granted annually to Chinese immigrants until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Expansion into the West, as well as the increasing population of the United States, coincided with a number of industrial developments that helped secure the country's position as a global economic force. New industries emerged, such as steel, electricity, and petroleum. Expanding industries created economic prosperity for some, especially those at the top; they also helped create a growing and flourishing middle class. Simultaneously, however, the increasing mechanization and production capacity of these industries meant that a great many skilled craftspeople were replaced by factory workers, most of whom toiled for low wages at repetitive tasks for more than ten hours a day, six days a week. The poor working conditions of so many laborers led to the creation of workers' unions. Differences between socioeconomic classes widened, both in terms of financial wealth and overall quality of life.

One of the other major developments of this period was the increasing urbanization of the American population. The industrial boom created new jobs in urban centers and drew people from rural areas to the cities, especially as technological developments increased means of production and made family farms less profitable. It was also more efficient to operate factories near a readily available urban workforce. The tremendous influx in people meant new demands for transportation, sanitation, and adequate living spaces, all of which were met quite unevenly. Resources were divided along class lines. Wealthier residents enjoyed the amenities of urban living, such as restaurants, museums, and theaters. At the other end of the spectrum, impoverished people and immigrants often lived in overcrowded slums and tenements. These terrible conditions were brought to the public's attention when journalist and photographer Jacob Riis published *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890). The photographs in Riis's book exposed the grim reality of poverty and helped prompt social reforms to improve housing and working conditions. As the public became increasingly aware of social inequities and political corruption, it demanded change. The period that spans from approximately 1895 to 1915 is known as the Progressive Era. During this time, reformers sought to remove corruption from government and industry while improving living conditions for

average citizens. For instance, they advocated for anti-trust laws and the creation of government agencies that would improve public health, such as the Food and Drug Administration, founded in 1906.

Another significant development of the nineteenth century was the implementation of free standardized public education. Rather than being restricted to private or religious educational institutions, many children were now able to attend public schools that taught a curriculum approved and regulated by a board of education, usually by state. This development helped establish a common knowledge base because children were learning the same materials, even if they did not reside in close proximity to each other. Increased access to education also resulted in an increasingly literate population with a desire for reading materials.

As the population became more literate, so did the broad distribution of printed materials increase. In many ways, the local or regional newspaper was a perfect embodiment of modern society: heterogeneous, confusing, yet trying very hard to “order” current events. It also helped satisfy people’s interest in “the others” who lived far away from them, and it seemed to have the potential to connect the disparate parts of America—divided by region, class, gender, ethnicity—together in a united nation after the Civil War. But until the end of the century, objectivity was not a stated goal of newspaper journalism and readers likely questioned the truthfulness of these publications and photographs.

The standardization of manufacturing also enabled the development of an expanded print network that helped play a large role in crafting a national identity for a country recently divided by war. Magazines became extremely popular due to their greater affordability, the result of numerous technological innovations that drove down the costs of production. Editors and publishers catered to audiences’ interests, which ranged from news to literary features. Many of the stories included in this anthology were first published in some of the most influential of these periodicals, such as *Harper’s Weekly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Scribner’s Magazine*. Because of the exponential increase in the availability of media, Americans during this era were exposed to more ideas, places, and people than ever before. Modern scholar Benedict Anderson has astutely described this expansion of “print capitalism” as having helped forge a national identity by creating “imagined communities” that fostered understanding between people despite geographical distances.

American literary authors were acutely aware that the expanded print network afforded them the opportunity to play a significant part in the country’s search for identity. One important way they responded to this challenge was by transitioning from literary Romanticism to Realism. Prior to the Civil War, Romanticism dominated American literature. Born out of national optimism that followed the War of 1812, Romanticism sought to depict the ideal country America *could* be. Romantic American authors were both male and female, but they were also predominantly White, Christian, and financially secure members of the middle class who could afford to be writers. Many of these authors believed America had the potential to be a perfect society for the world to emulate.

There was also an emphasis on breaking from the traditions of the past and a high regard for individualism and trusting one's own instincts. With this optimism came an idealistic view that writers should portray life as it *should* be, not as it was. This belief resulted in many stories in which moral behavior and general "goodness" are rewarded, malice and immoral behavior are punished, endings are happy, and a useful moral "lesson" is given. Nature figures prominently in Romantic writing because it was identified as a place to reclaim innocence and draw closer to God. Of course, there was not a single strain of Romanticism. There were Sentimental Romantics, whom Nathaniel Hawthorne famously called "that damned mob of scribbling women," whose works did generally end with wedding bells; people like Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe, who used the term "Romance" to define a middle space between reality and fantasy; Historical Romance writers, such as James Fenimore Cooper; and Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who focused especially on nature. However, one must question whether Romanticism has ever died in America. One need not look far to find examples of media celebrating a sense of national destiny and pride in achieving an ideal through constant improvement and refinement. If one accepts the usual definition of Romanticism as involving the human relation to nature, and its byproduct Sentimentalism as dealing with domestic reality in unrealistic ways, examples of persistent American Romanticism can easily be found today on television, online, and in any number of popular novels.

Literary genres do not have absolute lines of demarcation, but most scholars conveniently date the end of Romanticism in American literature to 1861, when the Civil War severely challenged the country's idealism and optimism. In the aftermath of the Civil War, literary focus on the *ideal* gave way to a desire for the *real*. Americans found themselves living in a more complex, diverse, and often confusing nation. Romanticism, many felt, was incapable of reflecting and capturing the emerging society, and its happy endings felt hopelessly naive to many Americans reeling from the trauma of a war that had killed roughly 2.5 percent of the population in the short span of four years. The shift from Romanticism to Realism is especially evident in Louisa May Alcott's "Hospital Sketches: A Day," presented in this anthology. In the fictionalized account of her time as a Civil War nurse, Alcott illustrates the tension between belief in a noble, patriotic duty and the exhausting reality of injury and death in a military hospital. Other stories in this volume similarly combine Romantic elements with more Realistic ones.

American Realist authors' desire for verisimilitude resulted in numerous works that aimed to depict average people—particularly from the growing middle class—engaged in often unremarkable tasks, and without interjection from the author or the obvious use of manipulative plot devices. As William Dean Howells challenged his peers in an Editor's Study column published in the April 1887 issue of *Harper's Monthly* magazine: "We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that

shape the life of actual men and women?” Of course, one must remember that no matter how objective authors might claim to be, their own identity greatly influenced what they presented as “truth.”

One way Realist authors sought to differentiate themselves from Romantic authors was by avoiding explicit moralizing or didacticism in their fictions. Rather than presenting the world as it could be and leading the reader to a specific conclusion, Realism let readers reach their own conclusions. Literary critic Thomas Sergeant Perry explained this new approach in an 1885 review of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: “That is the way that a story is best told, by telling it, and letting it go to the reader unaccompanied by sign-posts or directions how he shall understand it and profit by it. Life teaches its lessons by implication, not by didactic preaching; and literature is at its best when it is an imitation of life and not an excuse for instruction.” In short, Realism challenged writers to “show, don’t tell.” In his influential essay “The Art of Fiction” (1884), Henry James denigrated Romantic novels because they “hand out rewards at the end and tie up all ends neatly.” In contrast, Realists sought to depict probable everyday events. Romantic plot contrivances were removed, and as would be expected, endings were not always happy or ideal, a characteristic often heightened by the author’s use of irony. Realism lacked the optimism of Romanticism, but success was still possible. Howells and his colleagues subscribed to the idea that humans had God-given individual wills and thus they could make choices—both good and bad. The lessons of these fictions resulted from readers discovering which choices were “better” and which were “worse.” More-perceptive characters were more likely to make good choices that resulted in achievement or enlightenment. Ultimately, the ability to succeed was based on one’s choices, a characteristic that reinforced the long-held American ideal of individualism.

As was the case with Romanticism, not all authors interpreted Realism in the same way. There were roughly three primary strains: Genteel/Psychological, Regional, and Urban. Genteel Realists were generally middle-class authors who tended to view the world from a distance, such as through the windows of houses, apartments, or trains. These authors include Howells and James. Genteel Realism attempted to faithfully depict life, although some critics derided it as “parlor realism” because to them it lacked action and relevance to everyday life, particularly if the authors were writing from within the bubble of their own privilege and comfort. Regionalists and Local Color writers, such as Sarah Orne Jewett, chiefly sought to render an accurate and sympathetic representation of very specific American locales and the people who inhabited them. In some Regionalist stories, especially those that took place in rural areas, the author’s intense connection to a specific location often resulted in engagement with themes of conservation. In Genteel/Psychological and Regionalist Realist works, humans did possess an innate spirituality that could result in edification. Urban Realists, on the other hand, wrote about the bleak realities of life in the growing cities, particularly the struggles facing members of the lower class, including poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, child labor, and homelessness. While

these authors sought to present a faithful representation of their subject, they, too, were undeniably limited by their own perception and experience. Stephen Crane's "An Experiment in Misery," for example, offers a fascinating illustration of the potential and limitations of Urban Realism. As is made clear by the original narrative frame included in this version of the story—it was removed in subsequent publications—the main character assumes the appearance of a homeless person to experience his daily life, but he is never really in peril because he is always free to return to his more comfortable and secure "real" life.

Because Realism placed so much stock in the veracity of an author's depiction of a place, it is no coincidence that many Realist fiction writers were also journalists, with their fictional stories set in current society and real places; plots were often based on actual current events. However, just as newspaper writers and photographers during this time period could not always be trusted to present an accurate or objective account, the world as depicted by Realist fiction writers was not free of bias either. Even if objectivity or truth were the goals of many Realist authors, today we recognize that ultimately the "truth" they presented heavily depended on their own backgrounds. For instance, as is evident in many of the stories gathered here, authors often went to great lengths to faithfully represent the speech of characters as it would have been heard rather than how "proper" grammar would dictate; this accounts for the widespread use of colloquial language and attempts at writing dialect. Despite their efforts, the accuracy of that depiction often fell short or relied too heavily on stereotypes. For all Realists, there was the risk that their work would reinforce the legitimacy of negative stereotypes and social or cultural hierarchies. Because modern scholars have increasingly questioned the biased "reality" presented by the mostly White, male, and middle-class authors of this period (as well as by a number of White women), there have been efforts—such as the construction of this anthology—to broaden our understanding of American Realism by turning attention to works by a more diverse group of authors, including African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans.

Just as the Realists criticized Romanticism, so did the Naturalists—the Realists' successors, beginning in the 1890s—point out the shortcomings of Realism. In "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (1901), a response to Realism, Frank Norris wrote: "Realism is minute; it is the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner." For him, the type of Realism previously offered had not actually been *real* because it had a myopic focus. Taking their inspiration from grittier Urban Realists, Norris and his peers (including Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Hamlin Garland, and Jack London) introduced literary Naturalism. Many—but not all—Naturalists took their readers even further into the margins of society than did the Realists, depicting lower- or lower-middle-class characters struggling against obstacles that included poverty, addiction, and violence.

When many readers first see the term "Naturalism," it suggests a literary philosophy that would celebrate nature and stories set in the natural world.

However, it refers to the idea that human beings are a part of nature and subject to its indifference, randomness, and chance. The emphasis on evolution stems from Naturalists' interest in the ideas of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) and Herbert Spencer's theories of social Darwinism and the "survival of the fittest." Authors such as Norris were also influenced by French author Émile Zola, whose groundbreaking essay "The Experimental Novel" (1880) suggested authors should assume a position of detachment from characters by placing them into an environment and watching them without interference, as one might observe a lab specimen. As he said of his own work: "I chose characters completely dominated by their nerves and their blood, deprived of free will, pushed to each action of their lives by the fatality of their flesh." In works of Naturalism, heredity and environmental factors—natural, social, or economic—are everything, and the goodness or moral fortitude that could guarantee a Realist happy ending count for nothing. Some critics argue that Naturalism is, despite being descended from Realism, a distinct genre of its own; in truth, though, the two are difficult to separate on a time line, and principles of both often coexist in a single text.

In "Late Nineteenth-Century American Literary Naturalism: A Re-introduction" (2006), noted scholar Donald Pizer writes, "The nature of this [genre] is not easy to describe, given the dynamic flexibility and amorphousness of naturalism as a whole in America, but it appears to rest on the relationship between a restrictive social and intellectual environment and the consequent impoverishment of both social opportunity and of the inner life." While Romanticism generally depicted an ideal, and Realism depicted the ordinary, Naturalism typically grappled with the consequences for people who struggled within the ordinary but who lacked the resources to improve their situation. In Romanticism nature brings humans closer to God, but in the strongly atheistic Naturalism, nature frankly could not care less about humans, who are often brought to a tragic end by their own flaws or succumb to natural disasters that take no notice of their presence. In general, Naturalist authors tended to have little faith that an individual's success depended primarily on will or effort, and they drew attention to the havoc wreaked by external forces beyond an individual's control. Because many of the authors most frequently associated with Naturalism came from backgrounds less privileged than those of the Realists, they likely had much less confidence in average people's ability to overcome the forces—both natural and human made—that formed their environment. Significantly, like the Realists, many Naturalists took their material from real life; unlike them, though, they were often drawn to stories that highlighted the worst examples of human behavior. For example, Norris's novel *McTeague* (1899) was inspired by a brutal murder in a San Francisco kindergarten, and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) was based on the callous murder of a pregnant young woman in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York.

Historically, critics have aligned Naturalism with predominantly White male writers, but others are now reconsidering how the genre might be expanded to

include works by White women and minority writers, including some of the writers in this collection: Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Edith Wharton. For example, Canute in Cather's "On the Divide" is an excellent example of a naturalistic brute whose actions seem predetermined by "barbarian ancestors."

During the period this anthology covers, from 1863 in a Civil War hospital to 1918 among the glittering skyscrapers of New York City, the United States was utterly transformed. Realist and Naturalist authors, coming from diverse backgrounds, employing a wide range of techniques, and speaking with a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints, sought to deal with the many significant changes in American society and contribute to the creation of a new national identity. As the stories included here demonstrate, American Realism was not at all a straightforward, univocal genre but instead offered an extremely complex response to an increasingly complicated nation.