

Realism in Fiction and
Howells' Relation to It.

Marietta Smith.

Realism in Fiction and Howells' Relation to it.

Table of contents.

Beginning of realism.

Begins in man's attempts to explain natural phenomena. Is lost in the unrealities of the chivalrous age.

The "doubt of the age" again demands it.

Principles of realism.

1st. The "exact reproduction of life."

This proves a source of error as the realist is apt to attempt to portray too much.

2nd. The "disinterested attitude of the narrator."

Writers of Realism.

Balzac.

Founder of the school.

Zola. Connecting link between early and later writers.

Tolstoi.

Ibsen. His lack of realism. Seen in his poems.

Bird and Bird-Catcher.

Howells.

Changes the subject-matter.

Realism in Fiction and Howells' Relation to It.

We are ever told that "truth is stranger than fiction", and as we come to realize the truths of life we believe the saying more and more firmly. If primitive man, who attempted to explain the phenomena of life and death, the phenomena of disease, disaster, and storm by the presence of spirits and gods, had known the true causes he would have most devoutly believed "truth to be stranger than the fiction" which he created.

When the story-tellers took for their models the king and his court, the stories assumed such an imaginative form, for the purpose of pleasing the models, that reality was lost sight of. But with the passing of the age of chivalry and of minstrels the fairy-tale gave place to stories of humanity. Each age has produced the literature which satisfied its demands, and the realism of today is the result of the doubt of the age. The age which has produced realism, we can say with Bates, was "an age in which existed a mighty spirit of doubt and negation,

and such a period is slow to trust itself to any guide save cold blooded veracity."

In this one of the principles of realism can be discerned. It is "the exact representation of life." This excludes all the romantic, the unreal, the fantastic of previous storytellers. The stories are to be written from the note-book, all characters to be only such as occur in life. This makes the story contemporary, it is "founded on and limited by actual experience." Society is to have a mirror held before it where it may see its vices and virtues, its infamy and honors. The realists accepted this in full confidence of its power, but for a time failed to reach the height at which they aimed. And why? Because life is everything. Each individual has his own life history, which, though similar to the many, is still distinctly his own. The flat surface of the book-mirror, to which the realist would bring life in portrait, is not capable of mirroring the "vast arch of life." Therefore the smaller the section of life, the nearer the realist comes to the truth, the larger the section the greater the dis-

ortion. And this section, great or small, must, by the realists own code, be a portrait not a photograph, giving a yet greater scope for distortion.

Another principle of realism is the "disinterested attitude of the narrator."

This elimination of the writer's personality causes insipidity, or overdrawing of the facts, which calls forth the criticism on the latter that the realist "sees nothing in life but filth and crime."

However we view this, we cannot but admit that realism has taught needed lessons. Its success in accomplishing good will not be disputed, nor will this good be readily overestimated by a non-partisan. The realist has introduced us to life as it occurs everyday, by emphasizing the ordinary, everyday woman, her nervousness generally, yet giving the heroic of her nature its place. In contrast we have the god-like hero and extraordinary heroine of the story-teller.

But the age calling for "cold-blooded veracity" has had its demands satisfied in the facts which realism brought forth, and

realism will give way in the near future to another style of novel which will in its life time supply the demands which have created it. The criticism which can be brought with partial justice against the realist that he "sees nothing but filth and crime" only shows the exaggeration necessary to waken people. This need of exaggeration is seen at the close of the age of chivalry in the work of Cervantes, "Don Quixote", which ridiculed the absurdities of chivalry.

Of the writers in realism, Balzac may be considered the founder of the school. His life was one continual struggle for the fame he gained, but which came too late for him to enjoy. He was not encouraged in his literary passions, but he applied himself so unceasingly as to finally gain recognition and fame. His "Comédie Humaine", a series of stories, is successful as a realistic story, partly because in continuing his characters through the series he can portray them more as they are in life.

In Zola we see the connecting link between Balzac and other first writers and

those of today. Zola is a true realist in the fact holding himself free from his characters. His idea, and he really gave this to realism, is to be an observer simply, and not to so enter into his story as to become a partisan. He adheres to another of the dogmas of realism in that the characters must be types of those to be found in life. To the accusations that his characters were overdrawn, he would always answer by citing at least one similar case, probably three or more, which he knew in life.

A fault, which is quite deplorable in Zola's work, is his inability to select from the mass of fact that which is important. The tendency of realism is to lose sight of the comparative value of important facts by elevating details, and it is the yielding to this which casts a shadow over Zola's work. While this and similar criticisms can be urged against Zola's writing, it does not obscure the fact that he has written many forcible and fascinating pages.

Russia's realistic writer is Tolstoi. His master-pieces are additions to literature.

Ibsen has given poetry as well as

prose. In reading his poetry one is inclined to think him less realistic than some not called realists. In the first part of his poem, Bird and Bird-catcher, which tells how the bird-catcher captured a linnet, carried it to his room, there frightening it, one is prone to turn away from the "wanton" glee in disgust. The latter part tells how the bird has its vengeance, for the boy is imprisoned, frightened. He, like the bird, fancies the window ajar, but

"With a broken wing he tumbles

In the cage, which still immures him."

But this is almost wholly summarized in the words of Wordsworth:

"Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy."

In this similarity, yet unlikeness, we are more and more inclined to think the true realist is he who can see the good as well, or plainer than, the bad in life, that "he must," and will, "paint and write and work and think until the world shall learn so much and grow so good, that the true will be all beautiful and all the real be ideal." Then it will be, as Dar-

row tells us, that "it is from the realities of life the highest idealities are born". When the realist learns this and the other lesson, taught him by the scientist, that as "the fiercest heat may be transformed to light," so, as is shown by life, "from the strongest passions are sometimes born the sweetest and the purest human souls," then it will be that he can teach others.

In the later writers of realism the vice is not so continuously shown. Howells, as a realistic writer changes the subject-matter considerably. In his works we have an album of nervous women and other everyday people. Yet his lightness of touch and drollery give the relief sought in story reading. His reality consists in his way of considering each event as one of a series. The crises in his stories are such only as the reader considers them so. It is said of him had he written the life of Julius Caesar he would have represented the Rubicon in all its diminutiveness, not broadened by its historical overflow.

As an exponent of realism, Howells has freed it from much of its objectional charac-

ter in the way of representing vice, and by his lightness of touch has done away with much insipidity and dullness. He offers the relief sought in stories by not taking up the "burning questions" of the day. He has been accused of forcing his works on the public by his connection with certain magazines, while this may have served as a shield for a time, he would not have been accepted for so long a time if the people had really not wanted his style of novels.

"One of the uses of realism", he tells us, "is to make us know people." His success may be considered as due to his power to "make us know people." He has given the details of life their proper value, not emphasizing vice to the exclusion of the good and true. This portrayal of facts as they are is the work of the true realist. Then to Howells must realism ascribe the greatness which is his for dwelling on the "romantic side of familiar things."