

# Regionalism and Naturalism: Historical Context

**KEY IDEAS** The post-Civil War period saw the nation reunited and transformed. Writers responded by attempting to preserve in their writing the distinct character of America's regions and to come to terms with some of its harsh new realities.

## Reconstruction's Failures and Successes

The Civil War left the South in ruins. Its primary labor system, slavery, had been abolished. Freed African Americans lacked money, property, education, and opportunity. Farms, factories, and plantations had been destroyed, and rail lines were unusable. The federal government had to come up with a plan to solve these problems and to readmit the Southern states to the union. That plan was **Reconstruction**.

Reconstruction did not go smoothly. The president and Congress clashed over how to best carry it out. Southern states resisted many of the protections granted to newly freed blacks, while blacks felt that too little was being done to ensure their civil rights and economic independence. However, Reconstruction did succeed in a few significant ways. African Americans gained citizenship and equal protection under the law as well as the right to vote, and all of the Confederate states returned to the Union.

Although Americans were glad to move past the divisiveness of the war years, they regretted losing their regional identities and were unsettled by the many changes taking place in the country. These circumstances influenced writers of the time to begin trying to capture the customs, character, and landscapes of the nation's distinct regions—a type of writing that would come to be called **regionalism**.

## A Nation Transformed

In the decades following the Civil War, the country as a whole changed radically. In 1869, the first **transcontinental railroad** was completed. It was an event of huge importance. The railroad brought a flood of new settlers west—so many, in fact, that in 1890 the government announced the closing of the frontier. This westward expansion was yet another influence on writers of the time. It created an appreciation for America's diversity, which was celebrated by **local color writers** such as **Mark Twain** and **Bret Harte**.

The railroad also expanded industry. By 1885, four transcontinental lines had been completed, creating manufacturing hubs in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago. In turn, cities grew exponentially as more and more people came looking for work. In 1850, Chicago was a small town of 20,000; by 1910, the population was more than 2 million. Yet although new technologies and industrial modernization ensured the nation's prosperity, much of its wealth lay in the hands of only a few.



PERFORMANCE  
STANDARDS

READING STANDARD  
ELAALRL3.1.b Relates a literary work to the characteristics of the literary time period that it represents

### ▶ TAKING NOTES

**Outlining** As you read this introduction, use an outline to record the main ideas about the characteristics and literature of the period. You can use headings, boldfaced terms, and the information in these boxes as starting points. (See page R49 in the **Research Handbook** for more help with outlining.)

#### I. Historical Context

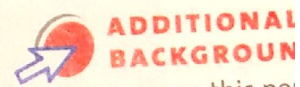
##### A. Reconstruction

1. Failures

2. Successes

3. Effect on writers

##### B. Transformed Nation



ADDITIONAL  
BACKGROUND  
For more on this period, visit the Literature Center at [ClassZone.com](http://ClassZone.com).



The Hatch Family (1871), Eastman Johnson. Oil on canvas, 48" x 73 3/8". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Frederic H. Hatch, 1926 (26.97). Photo © 1999 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**ANALYZE VISUALS**  
What might have been the artist's purpose in rendering the scene in this painting? How would you describe the photographer's purpose for capturing the image on page 621?

## Cultural Influences

**KEY IDEAS** Industry's success created a better life for many Americans. For a few, it brought great wealth, but others suffered poverty and hardship. Both regional and naturalist writers were influenced by these developments.

### The Gilded Age

As the 1800s drew to an end, a very small group of men controlled the vast majority of industry, including the enormously profitable steel, railroad, oil, and meatpacking sectors. Captains of industry such as John D. Rockefeller, the oil tycoon, and Cornelius Vanderbilt, the railroad magnate, enjoyed showing off the vast fortunes they had made. They built palatial mansions, draped their wives and daughters in diamonds, and threw extravagant parties (at one, guests were handed silver shovels and invited to dig in a sandbox filled with jewels)—in short, they did everything but actually coat themselves in gold. When writers **Mark Twain** and **Charles Dudley Warner** dubbed this period “the Gilded Age,” they did not exaggerate. It was a time of sparkle and glitter, luxury and excess.

Many ordinary people had more money too and all sorts of new things to spend it on. They could take the train to an amusement park and ride the Ferris wheel, then snack on soda and a candy bar. City dwellers could shop in the new department stores, while country folks pored over the mail-order catalog from Sears, Roebuck (known as “the wish book,” it offered everything from skin lotion to bicycles, and even an entire house—assembly required).

#### A Voice from the Times

*The only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it.*

—Edith Wharton

There were telephones now, thanks to Alexander Graham Bell. In 1908 Henry Ford brought out the first Model T, a “horseless carriage” cheap enough for his own factory workers to buy. Thomas Edison alone patented more than 1,000 inventions, from the phonograph to the electric light bulb.

## The Have-Nots

Unfortunately, the Gilded Age was not so shiny for many other Americans. The settling of the West forced Native Americans off their land and onto reservations. Although Native Americans fought back—among them **Chief Joseph** of the Nez Perce and the legendary Sioux warriors Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull—there was no stopping the tide.

Life was hard for freed African Americans as well. The failures of Reconstruction in the South left many poor and powerless, held down by segregationist Jim Crow laws and forced to work as sharecroppers under conditions much like slavery.

Others who found themselves facing hard times during this period were many immigrants who had come to America in search of freedom and opportunity. Russian, Italian, Scandinavian, German, Dutch, and Japanese immigrants—all were seeking a better life. Some joined the settlers heading west; others stayed in the cities, where they lived in crowded tenements and found work in factories. Unfortunately, many of these new city-dwelling Americans found themselves working 16-hour days in airless sweatshops for subsistence wages.

### A Voice from the Times

*Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.*

—Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce,  
from his 1877 surrender speech

Child Coal Mine Workers in Hughestown, Pennsylvania (1911). Lewis Wickes Hine/© Corbis.

Even independent farmers faced hard times. They borrowed money from the banks for new machinery that made them more productive than ever before; but high yields meant low prices, and when they couldn't pay back their loans they lost their farms.

People knew that they were missing out on the prosperity that others were enjoying, and it made them angry. Workers began to form **labor unions**; many farmers, white and black, joined the **Populist Party**, hoping to make the government more responsive to workers' needs. However, the opposition had money and power, and these early efforts often ended in bitter defeat.

More and more, the individual seemed helpless, at the mercy of forces beyond his or her understanding or control. Life became a constant struggle, and the world appeared to be a harsh, uncaring place. These feelings found their voice in a literary movement called **naturalism**. Naturalist writers, such as **Stephen Crane**, were concerned with the impact of social and natural forces on the individual. These writers tended to portray characters victimized by brutal forces and unable to control their lives.

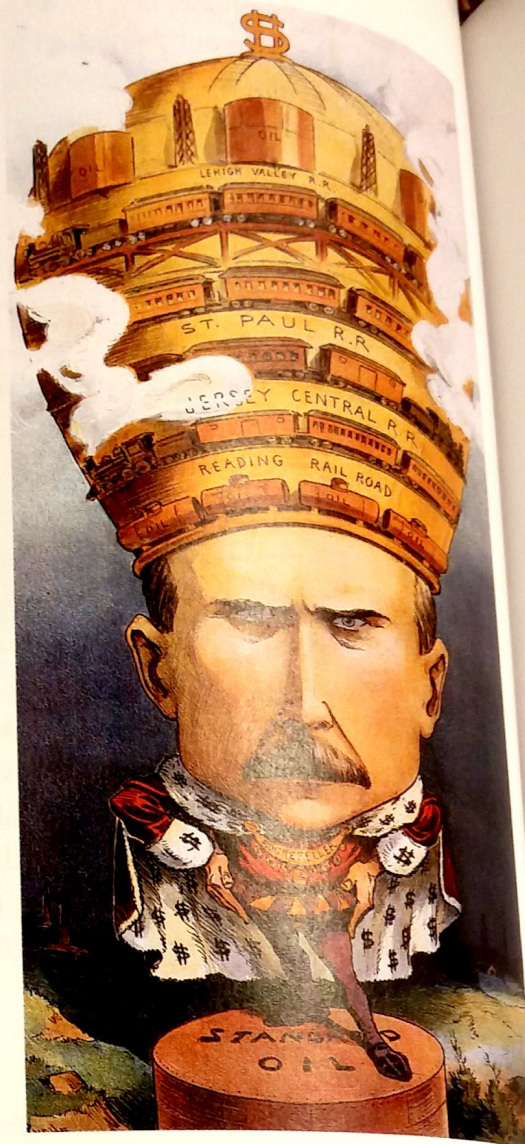
## Ideas of the Age

**KEY IDEAS** During this period, some Americans believed in "survival of the fittest," while others worked for social justice.

### Laissez Faire vs. Progressivism

Many of the naturalists' ideas corresponded to new scientific, political, and economic theories emerging at the time. Various thinkers of the day felt that Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection could be applied to human society. An English philosopher named Herbert Spencer called this idea **survival of the fittest**, claiming that those who rose to the top of society were "fit," while those who suffered at the bottom were best left to die out. **Social Darwinists** used these ideas to justify the huge gap between rich and poor and to push a governmental policy of **laissez faire** (French for "allow to do"), meaning that business should not be regulated, because the law of nature would ensure success for the "fittest" and inevitable failure for everyone else.

This self-serving philosophy infuriated many Americans. A **progressive movement** emerged, which aimed to restore economic opportunities and correct injustices in American life. The progressives did not see inequality as the way of the world. They believed that social change was possible and necessary and that it was the job of the government to make laws to protect people.



Industrialist John D. Rockefeller is portrayed as a wealthy king, with the oil and railroad industries as the "jewels" in his crown.

### A Voice from the Times

*Let no one underestimate the need of pity. We live in a stony universe whose hard, brilliant forces rage fiercely.*

—Theodore D.

# Regional and Naturalist Literature

**KEY IDEAS** The country's rapid growth and change was reflected in new literary movements and voices, including regionalism, naturalism, and women's writing.

## Regionalism and Local Color Writing

The end of the Civil War, the country's rapid expansion, and the growth of industry all led to the birth of local color writing, a form of regionalism. Aware of the speed with which the nation was changing, regional writers sought to record for the future the unique character of their areas.

Prominent among the early local colorists were **Bret Harte** and **Mark Twain**. Their versions of life on the frontier captured the imagination of readers in the more settled communities of the East, Midwest, and South. For those who could not hop aboard the new transcontinental train and see the country for themselves, reading all about it was the next best thing. Americans were endlessly fascinated by tales of life in the mining camps, on the cattle ranches, and in the frontier towns. The new regionalist literature satisfied this curiosity with its honest portrayals of the people and their way of life in different areas of the country, especially the West. Writers carefully recorded how ordinary people spoke, dressed, acted, thought, and looked, from the knobby, roughened hands of a Nebraska farm woman to the dust-covered boots of a California gambler.

**AN OUTGROWTH OF REALISM** Regionalism, with its emphasis on everyday experience and accuracy, grew out of **realism**. Many regionalist writers, such as **Willa Cather**, shared the realist goal of showing ordinary lives as they

► For Your Out

### REGIONAL LOCAL COL

- Writing wa  
by end of C  
country's e  
industry's g
- Regionalist  
record for t  
unique cha  
region.
- Regionalist  
life on the  
in other reg
- Regionalism  
outgrowth
- Native Ame  
literature v  
of regional
- *Huckleberry*  
a masterpie  
regionalism

were, without romance or sentimentality. Cather's story, "A Wagner Matinee," for example, gives a very unromantic view of life on the plains. Other writers tended to exaggerate a bit, either for comic effect—as in Twain's "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"—or to make their stories livelier. Our national legend of the Wild West, with its gunslingers, saloons, and sheriffs, had its origins in the picturesque settings and characters of writers like **Bret Harte**.

**NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE** While this kind of regional literature thrived, another was under siege. For generations, Native American tribes had passed down from one generation to the next folk tales, legends, and other **oral literature**, relying on the memories of traditional storytellers and their audiences. Now, the tribes found themselves scattered. Children were forcibly taken from their elders and sent away to "Indian schools," where teachers demanded they forget their language and heritage and assimilate into American society. Entire cultures were rapidly disappearing. However, through the efforts of Native Americans and sympathetic outsiders who helped them write their stories down, some of the literature was saved, thus giving another view of life in the West.

**AN "AMERICAN" NOVEL** With the publication in 1884 of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, regionalism and local color writing reached a zenith. *Huckleberry Finn* was the first novel written entirely in "American"—that is, it was told in the colorful, colloquial, and often ungrammatical voice of its young narrator, Huck. Twain was known for using his gift of humor to make a serious point, and in this novel he used biting satire to tackle the issue of racism in America. Despite Twain's immense popularity with readers worldwide, critics of the time dismissed *Huckleberry Finn*, calling it vulgar and immoral, and libraries banned the book from their shelves as "the veriest trash." Today, many consider it not only Twain's finest work but possibly the best book ever written by an American author. The novel had a huge influence on later writers, among them Ernest Hemingway, who said, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

## The Rise of Naturalism

As the 19th century came to a close, several factors led to the rise of a literary movement called **naturalism**. The final decades of the century were a time of rapid change and sharp contrasts—a time when "captains of industry" amassed vast fortunes by exploiting the cheap labor of immigrants and other workers who flooded the cities in search of work. By 1916, the majority of American workers were industrial laborers in factories.

### A Voice from the Times

*Authorship is not a trade, it is an inspiration; authorship does not keep an office, its habitation is all out under the sky, and everywhere the winds are blowing and the sun is shining and the creatures of God are free.*

—Mark Twain

**WRITING REFLECTS REALITY** The work of naturalist writers, such as Theodore Dreiser, reflected this harsh new reality. In the first pages of his novel *The Financier*, for example, a boy named Frank stares through the window of a fish shop at a lobster and a squid that have been placed together in a tank. Day after day, the two creatures battle it out, the sharp-clawed lobster attacking, the squid fighting for its life. At last, the lobster devours the squid. That's the way of the world, Frank thinks—one creature lives off another. When Frank grows up and becomes a banker, he applies this lesson to the ruthless world of business.

Why do people do the things they do? Are humans capable of choice, or do they act on instinct, like other animals? Is life a losing battle? Looking to the theories of Darwin and other scientists, naturalists such as **Dreiser, Frank Norris, Jack London, and Stephen Crane** saw human beings as helpless creatures moved by forces beyond their understanding or control.

Despite this grim attitude, many naturalist writers were quite popular. Some, like Frank Norris, gave a voice to ordinary people and portrayed the rich and influential in an unflattering light, as in his famous 1901 novel *The Octopus*, which attacked the railroad interests in his home state of California. Jack London, on the other hand, captured readers with his tales of an arctic world entirely outside their everyday experience. Riveted by the exotic setting and thrilling action of novels such as *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild*, readers were willing to accept less-than-happy endings.

### A Voice from the T

*A man said to the uni*

*"Sir, I exist!"*

*"However," replied the*

*"The fact has not crea*

*A sense of obligation."*

### ► For Your

#### THE RIS NATURA

- Natura  
time of  
and sh  
when v  
concer  
hands.
- Natura  
as help  
beyon



## A New Role for Women

Women writing in this period in the United States tended to be realists. Some were regionalists and others embraced naturalist themes, but all were breaking barriers as women's roles slowly shifted. "The power of a woman is in her refinement, gentleness, and elegance; it is she who makes etiquette, and it is she who preserves the order and decency of society." So said a popular book of etiquette in 1880, voicing a widely held notion about women's place in society.

At the same time, however, the movement to give women the **right to vote** was reemerging after a period of inactivity in the years immediately following the Civil War, when male reformers argued that black and white women should wait until black men gained their rights. Women were growing impatient, not just for the vote, but to have a larger voice in every aspect of public life, from politics to literature.



women of the era. Newspapers of the day trumpeted the dangers of this development. An 1896 *New York Journal* headline proclaimed: "Are We Destroying Woman's Beauty? The Startling Warning of a Great English Physician Against Higher Education of Women. How Intellectual Work Destroys Beauty." Despite such dire warnings, women continued to seek education. Then they found that the limited roles assigned them did not make full use of their abilities and knowledge.

**BREAKTHROUGH WRITERS** Charlotte Perkins Gilman—related on her father's side to a noted family of writers and social reformers that included Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—became one of the most well-known advocates for women. Fleeing a repressive marriage, **Gilman** moved from the East Coast to California, where she wrote and spoke out on behalf of women's rights and against male domination. One of her most famous stories is "The Yellow Wallpaper," about a woman writer who, as treatment for her "nervous condition," is forbidden to write.

**Kate Chopin** wrote fiction that articulates the frustrations of generations of women confined to a sort of extended childhood by the men in their lives. Her gentle stories depicting some of the most obvious of women's troubles were extremely popular in the 1890s. Her 1899 novel *The Awakening*, however, stepped over the line in its portrayal of a woman's hidden passion, arousing a public protest so vigorous that Chopin ceased writing completely.

Works by women of this period often end tragically, in madness, ruin, scandal, and death. In part, this was a reflection of their **naturalist** leanings; at the same time, though, it grew out of their own experiences in a culture that did not encourage women's artistic goals. **Edith Wharton**, who in novels such as *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth* decried the stifling small-mindedness of upper-class society, made her own escape by running off to Paris, only to have her marriage fall apart. Facing overwhelming obstacles, women writers fought with, in the words of New England's local color writer **Mary Wilkins Freeman**, "little female weapons." When the weapon was a pen, the impact could be revolutionary.

As the country moved farther into the 20th century, writers would begin to turn from regionalism and naturalism to the more experimental works that characterize modernism. Thankfully Twain, London, Chopin, and the other writers of their time captured for future generations the unique spirit of late 19th- and early 20th-century America.

## 1870

**1872** Susan B. Anthony is arrested and fined for leading a group of women to test their right to vote. ►

**1876** Alexander Graham Bell patents first telephone; at Battle of Little Bighorn, 1,500 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors defeat and kill about 200 U.S. Army troops, commanded by George A. Custer.

**1877** Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe surrenders to U.S. Army; Thomas Edison invents the phonograph.



## WORLD CULTURE AND EVENTS

## 1870

## 1880

**1880** John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company of Ohio controls U.S. refining; George Eastman patents his rolled camera film.

**1883** The first metal-framed skyscraper, ten stories high, is built in Chicago.

**1886** The Statue of Liberty, a gift from France to the United States, is dedicated in New York Harbor. ►



## 1880

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Who were some inventors at work in Europe and the United States?
- How did American women fare in gaining the right to vote as compared with New Zealand women?
- What evidence do you see that the United States was becoming an imperial power?
- Name two works of American literature from this period that describe real people or events.

### 1890

- 1890** Charlotte Perkins Gilman describes the emotional and intellectual decline of a young wife and mother in "The Yellow Wallpaper."
- 1893** Stephen Crane publishes *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*; Paul Laurence Dunbar publishes his first volume of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*, while working as an elevator operator.
- 1899** Kate Chopin publishes her novel *The Awakening*.

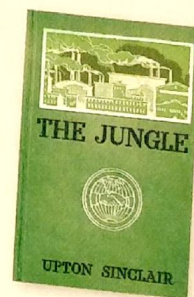
### 1890

- 1892** New York's Ellis Island becomes entry point for European immigrants.
- 1896** Supreme Court upholds "separate but equal" doctrine of Jim Crow laws, widely used to discriminate against African Americans; the Klondike gold rush begins in Alaska and Canada.
- 1898** The Spanish-American War results in United States gaining control of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines; U.S. also annexes Hawaii.

### 1890

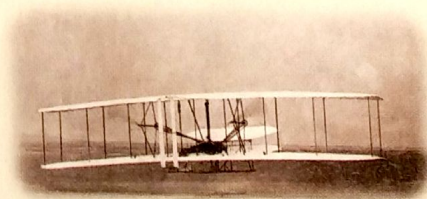
### 1900

- 1900** Theodore Dreiser publishes *Sister Carrie*.
- 1901** Booker T. Washington publishes *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*.
- 1903** Jack London publishes *The Call of the Wild*; W. E. B. Du Bois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*.
- 1905** Edith Wharton publishes *The House of Mirth*.
- 1906** Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* ► exposes dangerous conditions in meatpacking factories.



### 1900

- 1901** William McKinley is assassinated; Theodore Roosevelt becomes president of the United States.



- 1903** Near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Orville and Wilbur Wright make first flight in engine-powered airplane.
- 1906** Earthquake and fire destroy much of San Francisco.
- 1908** Ford Motor Company brings out the first Model T automobile.

### 1900