

The Influence of French Realism on Narrative Techniques in 20th-Century Novels

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DOI: 10.31364/SCIRJ/v13.i05.2025.P05251025

<http://dx.doi.org/10.31364/SCIRJ/v13.i05.2025.P05251025>

Abstract- This paper investigates the enduring influence of 19th-century French Realism on the narrative techniques employed in 20th-century novels. By examining the defining features of French Realism and analyzing how these elements shaped the narrative strategies of modern novelists, the study demonstrates how literary forms adapt in response to changing social and cultural landscapes. The paper first contextualizes French Realism through a historical and literary lens, highlighting the works of key figures such as Balzac and Flaubert. It then traces the evolution of narrative forms in the 20th century, including non-linear storytelling, stream-of-consciousness techniques, and multi-perspective narration. The final section addresses the continued relevance of Realist aesthetics in contemporary fiction and their transformation under modern cultural dynamics. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical continuity in narrative practice and offers new insights into the interplay between literature and its sociocultural environment.

Index Terms—French Realism, 20th Century Novels, Narrative Techniques, Literary Evolution, Stream of Consciousness

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the many threads that compose literary history, 19th-century French Realism stands out as one of the most influential literary movements of its time. Its impact extended far beyond its contemporary period, continuing to resonate within the literary world throughout subsequent centuries. In the realm of fiction, the influence of French Realism on 20th-century narrative techniques is particularly profound and multifaceted. This paper aims to investigate the nature and scope of that influence, focusing especially on how the realist tradition of the 19th century evolved into distinctive narrative strategies in the 20th-century novel. Prominent figures such as Balzac [1] and Flaubert [2], who not only depicted the intricate social landscapes of their era with precision, but also injected fresh vitality into the novel form through innovative perspectives and techniques, laid the groundwork for later developments. These techniques evolved in subsequent eras, shaping the trajectory of modern narrative. Through this study, we seek to understand the specific literary influences of French Realism and explore how shifts in narrative reflect deeper transformations in cultural and societal contexts.

As a major literary movement of the 19th century, French Realism profoundly mirrored the complexities and turmoil of its social environment. It emerged not only as a reaction against Romanticism and its idealized portrayals, but also as a direct response to the accelerating forces of industrialization and

modernization. The essence of this literary form lies in its unembellished, candid depiction of reality, illuminating the multifaceted nature of society and its underlying tensions. Over time, this sharp observation and critical perspective became integrated into 20th-century narrative structures, significantly shaping literary production throughout the century.

In exploring the influence of French Realism on 20th-century narrative techniques, this study emphasizes not only the evolution of literary form itself but also the social and cultural conditions that prompted such changes. Transformations in social structures following the Industrial Revolution, the process of urbanization, and the dynamics of class conflict all found rich expression in literature. Realism, with its commitment to portraying the truth of society, became a powerful literary tool for exposing its deeper realities.

Analyzing the works of writers like Balzac and Flaubert reveals how they used realist techniques to depict complex social relationships and personal experiences. Their writings not only reflect the reality of their time but also forecast the future direction of narrative technique. Twentieth-century novelists such as Marcel Proust [3], James Joyce [4], and Virginia Woolf [5], though differing in style, drew inspiration from this realist tradition and further developed narrative strategies.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF FRENCH REALISM AND ITS INITIAL INFLUENCE ON NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

In the 19th century, France underwent a series of profound transformations—from the political turbulence of the Napoleonic era to the economic restructuring brought by the Industrial Revolution. These sweeping social changes offered fertile ground for the development of Realist literature. As a significant literary movement, French Realism was characterized by its direct and detailed portrayal of real life, reflecting the diversity and complexity of society at the time. In contrast to the idealized visions of Romanticism, Realist writers sought to depict the ordinary lives of individuals with psychological depth and social awareness.

Among the most prominent representatives of this movement were Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert. Balzac's magnum opus, *The Human Comedy*, offered a panoramic depiction of various social classes and occupations, painting a comprehensive portrait of French society. His narratives not only delved into deep psychological portraits but also employed intricate multi-threaded structures. For instance, in *Old Goriot*, Balzac used multiple plotlines to reveal the

protagonist's rise and moral downfall in a capitalist society governed by money and ambition.

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, on the other hand, excelled in its psychological depth and minute observation of mundane details. The novel's exploration of Emma Bovary's inner world and her disillusionment with reality demonstrated a new level of introspective narration, emphasizing individual experience over grand historical events. These narrative innovations played a pivotal role in shaping the techniques that would later be refined in 20th-century fiction.

By the early 20th century, the influence of Realist techniques became increasingly evident in modern novels. Realism's focus on daily life and psychological nuance provided new avenues for narrative development. Writers began to turn inward, exploring subjective experience and the interiority of characters with increasing complexity. Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* exemplifies this shift, using memory and time as central narrative mechanisms to delve into the protagonist's psyche.

At the same time, early 20th-century authors started integrating detailed Realist descriptions with emerging literary techniques, such as stream-of-consciousness and symbolic representation. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance, inherited Realist attention to everyday detail while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of narrative form. Through these hybrid techniques, modern fiction carried forward the Realist legacy while paving the way for experimental modernism.

III. EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The 20th century witnessed remarkable shifts in the narrative techniques used by novelists, marking a transition from traditional Realist approaches to more experimental forms. This evolution was not merely stylistic; it reflected broader changes in philosophical thought, psychological theory, and the social structure of the modern world. Authors began to break free from linear storytelling and omniscient narration, embracing more subjective and fragmented forms that mirrored the complexities of contemporary life.

A key innovation during this period was the use of non-linear narrative structures. Writers employed flashbacks, foreshadowing, and temporal fragmentation to represent time as a fluid and subjective experience. This technique challenged the conventional chronological flow of narratives and allowed for a deeper exploration of memory and perception.

Stream-of-consciousness narration emerged as another defining feature of modernist fiction. This technique sought to capture the flow of a character's thoughts and sensations in real time, often abandoning standard syntax and logic. Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is a prime example, where narrative unfolds through introspection and associative memory. Time is no longer external and objective, but an internal construct shaped by human consciousness.

Virginia Woolf also mastered this technique in works such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, where she explored the psychological landscapes of her characters with remarkable nuance. Through the internal monologues and shifting perspectives of multiple characters, Woolf depicted not just individual experiences but also broader social tensions, including gender roles and post-war disillusionment.

In addition to stream-of-consciousness, multiperspectival narration gained prominence. By presenting events through multiple viewpoints, authors could construct more nuanced and

multi-dimensional narratives. William Faulkner [6]'s *The Sound and the Fury* exemplifies this approach, as it reveals complex familial and societal dynamics through the intersecting perspectives of different characters.

These innovations expanded the possibilities of narrative, enabling writers to depict psychological depth and social fragmentation with unprecedented subtlety. Collectively, they marked a departure from the objective realism of the 19th century and established the foundation for the diverse narrative strategies of contemporary fiction.

IV. LONG-LASTING INFLUENCE OF FRENCH REALISM

The far-reaching impact of French Realism on 20th-century narrative techniques extended beyond literary style, reflecting profound cultural and societal transformations. As the world endured two world wars, rapid industrialization, and the rise of post-colonial consciousness, novelists began to incorporate Realist principles in response to these historical developments. Realism, with its commitment to portraying everyday life and social conflict, became a lens through which writers examined the complexities of modern life.

During and after the world wars, Realist techniques were increasingly used to explore the psychological and societal consequences of violence, displacement, and existential crisis. Writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Chandler depicted characters shaped by war and modern urban life, emphasizing sparse language and realistic dialogue to reflect the harsh realities of the times.

From a theoretical perspective, developments in narratology helped scholars understand how Realist modes of storytelling influenced modern fiction. Narrative theory, particularly as developed by Gérard Genette [7] and Mikhail Bakhtin [8], emphasized the ways in which narrative structures reflect and reshape human understanding of reality. Through the lens of these theories, French Realist fiction is seen not just as a representational form but also as a dynamic process of interpreting and constructing meaning.

The continuation of Realist techniques is also evident in existential and philosophical literature. Albert Camus [9]'s *The Stranger*, for example, combines psychological detachment with moral ambiguity, using minimalist prose and third-person narration to highlight the alienation of the individual. Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre [10]'s *Nausea* delves into the existential dilemmas of modernity using introspective narration that echoes Realist traditions.

These works demonstrate how Realism evolved in the hands of 20th-century writers, adapting to contemporary concerns while preserving its core principles of psychological depth and social commentary. They also illustrate the convergence of literary technique with philosophical inquiry, reinforcing the versatility and durability of Realist approaches in navigating the complexities of modern life.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the enduring influence of 19th-century French Realism on the narrative techniques employed in 20th-century novels. By tracing the historical evolution from classical Realist depictions of social reality to modernist explorations of individual consciousness, the paper has highlighted how narrative forms adapt to changing cultural and historical contexts.

French Realism, through its meticulous portrayal of social detail and psychological nuance, opened new narrative possibilities that continued to shape literary production well into the 20th century. Techniques such as non-linear structure, stream of consciousness, and multi-perspective narration are rooted in the Realist legacy and were reinterpreted by modern authors to address the complexities of modern identity and society.

Moreover, the continued relevance of Realist techniques in post-war and existential literature shows that Realism is not confined to a historical moment but evolves alongside new philosophical and cultural concerns. Contemporary writers, building upon this tradition, continue to use Realist principles to navigate modernity's moral ambiguities, emotional depth, and social fragmentation.

Ultimately, this research underscores the dynamic relationship between literature and its socio-historical context. By analyzing the transformation of narrative techniques across time, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how literary forms serve as mirrors and mediators of cultural change. The enduring legacy of French Realism affirms its central role

in shaping modern narrative and its capacity to adapt to evolving human experiences.

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