

# The heart of realism: the luck of roaring camp, the celebrated jumping frog of ca...

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



## **Introduction**

“ A lack of realism in the vision today costs credibility tomorrow” (Maxwell). Realism is a powerful tool many authors use to create a realistic picture in their work. Many authors such as Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and William Dean Howells used this in their work to display a realistic image of the world through their eyes as well as many others. The main objective of realism is to establish the difference between romantic literature and raw literature to show what is real. The Realism movement influenced many authors works including those of Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and William Dean Howells; because of their works realistic composition, they are still widely read and popular today.

## **Realism**

Realism is an artistic movement that began in 19th century France where artists and writers worked for detailed realistic and factual description. This literary form of writing believes in loyalty over reality in its depiction. The root of realism is about reinventing life in literature. Realism concentrates on the honest treatment of common, everyday life (Scheidenhelm). “ Realism in this simplified sense must assume a one-to-one relationship between the signifier and the thing it represents” (“ Realism and the Realist Novel”). Realist authors have a pragmatic view, meaning they are concerned with the impact of the work on the reader and his or her life. Pragmatism requires a work to have some type of provable outcome for the reader that will lead to a better life for him or her. Realism, also, intends to understand the certainties of any characteristic of life, free from subjective preconception,

idealism, or romantic color. It is in opposite to the basis of Romanticism. This importance was brought on by societal changes such as the aftermath of the Civil War in the United States and the emerging of Darwin's Theory of Evolution and its effect upon biblical interpretation. There are countless characteristics used in realistic writing. In realistic writing, complex choices are often the subject and the characters are more important than the action and plot. Characters appear in the complexity of nature and reason; they tend to control their own destiny. Social class is a very important factor in this type of writing, the middle class is usually the focus. Diction is the natural vernacular; the tone may be comic, satiric, or matter-of-fact. Finally, symbolism is not used very often, realistic authors tend to use images to get their point across (Scheidenhelm).

### **Bret Harte and “ The Luck of Roaring Camp”**

Bret Harte was an American short-story writer who is best remembered for his short fiction “ The Luck of Roaring Camp.” Francis Brett Harte was born on August 25, 1836, in Albany, New York, and died May 5, 1902, in London, England. In the 1860s, Harte found a job setting type for The Golden Era and soon began contributing poems, stories, and many other works. His career was confirmed in 1868 when he became the first editor of Overland Monthly, a publication that was widely read throughout the United States. In the second issue of the Overland Monthly, Harte published “ The Luck of Roaring Camp,” which made him famous almost instantly. He was able to create a compelling vision of the West through a combination of romantic adventure and gritty realism. A characteristic that set him apart from the other writers

of this realism era was his ability to portray an ironic perspective that went unnoticed by readers unacquainted with California. In 1871, Harte left San Francisco at the peak of his fame in hopes his fame would grow farther in the East. After his cross-country journey that was covered by daily press, the publisher James T. Fields offered Harte ten thousand dollars to write twelve more poems and sketches to be published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Unfortunately, he was not able to write much in the following twelve months, so his contract was not renewed. The last three decades of his life consisted of a decline in his personal and literary fortunes. In spite of Harte's decline, he is still a widely read author today (Harte 306-7).

"The Luck of Roaring Camp" was surrounded around the birth of a baby boy in a 19th-century gold prospecting camp. There are many key elements that relate this work to realism including: the setting, changing of the characters, and the plot. The story takes place in a camp that "lay in a triangular valley between two hills and a river. The only outlet was a steep trail over the summit of a hill that faced the cabin, now illuminated by the rising moon" (Harte 308). The camp is inhabited by all men except one female, Cherokee Sal. After Cherokee Sal gives birth, her health declines before "she climbed the rugged crossroad that lead to the stars, and so passed out of Roaring Camp" (Harte 309). After her death, the men of the town decide to raise the child together. The men were once described as rough, dirty, and immoral; however, once the child was born the men cleaned up their act and seemed to have found their purpose in life. At the end of the story, a flood engulfs the town taking Kentuck and Thomas Luck with it. The flood taking the lives

of the innocent lives signifies realism in the story because life does not always have a happy ending.

## **Mark Twain and ‘ The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County’**

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known by his pen name Mark Twain, was a well-known American writer remembered for his use of realism. Mark Twain was born on November 30, 1835, in Florida, Missouri, and died on April 21, 1910, in Redding, Connecticut. Like many authors of this era, Twain began his writing journey working for a newspaper before moving on to more taxing tasks. He became close with his fellow realist, Bret Harte, who opened the door for his career and future fame. In his later years, Twain found himself consulted by the press on every subject of general interest. In 1906, he embarked on the journey to creating his autobiography. Twain's autobiography was finally put on the shelf almost one hundred years later in 2010, and instantly became a best seller (Twain 101-4).

“ The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” is about Simon Wheeler telling the story of a man named Leonidas W. Smiley who gambled on everything in sight. There are many characteristics of realism portrayed in this story. Two of the main characteristics include the dialect and the setting. The setting was Angle's Camp, California where mostly men inhabited, this contributed to the laid back/simple times and weak plot. The conversations among the characters are not relevant, which leads to the weak plot. However, the dialogue is used to remind the reader of the setting and time in which the story is taking place. Simple dialect such as, “ And the feller took

it, and looked at it careful, and he turned it round this way and that, and says, ‘ H’m-so ‘ tis. Well, what’s he good for?’” (Twain 107), are used to draw the readers attention to the simplicity the story is trying to accomplish.

## **William Dean Howells and ‘ Editha’**

William Dean Howells was an American realist author and was nicknamed “ The Dean of American Letters.” William Dean Howells was born on March 1, 1837, in Martins Ferry, Ohio, and died on May 11, 1920, in New York City, New York. In 1860, because of Howells support to the Republican party, he was given the opportunity to write Abraham Lincoln’s campaign biography. In 1871-1881 Howells worked as an editor for a magazine company where he published seven novels. After he retired from Cosmopolitan in 1893, he went back to writing other types of works such as short stories until he died from pneumonia. Over Howells lifetime he had many opportunities to do amazing things and his works are still widely read today (Howells 314-16).

“ Editha” tells a story of Editha and her lover George’s views of war and the struggle that it can bring on someone. One of the main characteristics that relates this story to realism is the complex characters. The plot of this story is, once again, simple but the characters are the focus of the story. The main characters, Editha and George, are complete opposite from each other.

Editha believes George should enlist in the war, but George does not want to because he has seen the bad effects war can bring on a family. After George enlists Editha is conflicted; she tells him, “ You don’t belong to yourself now; you don’t even belong to me. You belong to your country, and you have a

sacred charge to keep yourself strong and well for your country's sake”  
(Howells 322).

## Conclusion

Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and William Dean Howells were all American realism authors that contributed greatly to the works of literature. These three men accomplished so many things in their lives and they contributed greatly to American literature. These authors had a different subject matter in their writing, but this did not change the fact they were amazing authors who wrote in a realistic fashion. Harte, Twain, and Howells used what they saw and things they experienced in their lives for inspiration for their writings, and because of this it made their works stronger. Overall, these three authors' works are still popular and widely read around the world today.

## Works Cited

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