

**POST–WORLD WAR II REALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE:
TRAUMA, SOCIETY, AND NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATION AFTER
WORLD WAR II**

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Abstract

This article examines the development of post–World War II realism in American literature, focusing on themes of trauma, social change, and narrative transformation. The study explores how writers responded to the psychological, cultural, and political consequences of World War II by reshaping realist traditions to reflect new social realities. The research highlights how postwar American writers shifted from traditional realism toward more complex narrative forms that incorporate psychological depth, fragmented storytelling, and social critique. Special attention is given to how literature reflects issues such as alienation, suburbanization, identity crisis, and moral uncertainty in postwar American society. Furthermore, the article argues that post–World War II realism played a crucial role in redefining American literary identity by merging traditional realist techniques with modern narrative experimentation. This transformation marked a new stage in American literature, where realism became more introspective and socially critical.

Keywords: Postwar realism, American literature, trauma, narrative transformation, identity crisis, World War II

The post–World War II period in American literature represents a profound transformation in narrative form, thematic focus, and cultural consciousness, emerging as a direct response to the psychological, social, and political consequences of World War II. The war not only reshaped global geopolitics but also deeply affected individual and collective identities, creating a literary environment marked by trauma, uncertainty, and disillusionment. Writers of this period increasingly turned to realism as a means of engaging with the complexities of modern life; however, this realism was no longer limited to objective representation of external reality. Instead, it evolved into a more introspective and psychologically driven form that sought to capture the fragmented inner experiences of individuals living in a rapidly changing postwar society. As a result, postwar realism became a hybrid literary mode, blending

traditional realist techniques with modernist experimentation in order to reflect the instability of the contemporary world.

In this transitional literary landscape, American writers began to focus on themes such as alienation, identity crisis, suburban conformity, and moral ambiguity. The expansion of industrialization, urbanization, and consumer culture in postwar America created new social structures that significantly influenced literary production. Authors depicted characters struggling to adapt to these changes, often portraying individuals who experienced emotional detachment and existential uncertainty. Unlike earlier realist traditions that emphasized social stability and coherent narrative structures, post-World War II realism introduced fragmented storytelling, nonlinear narrative techniques, and deeper psychological analysis. These innovations allowed writers to more accurately represent the complexities of human consciousness in a society marked by rapid transformation and cultural tension.

Furthermore, postwar American literature reflects a growing concern with trauma and memory, both at individual and collective levels. The impact of war experiences, combined with the anxieties of the Cold War era, contributed to a sense of instability that permeated literary works. Writers began to explore how historical events shape personal identity and influence moral decision-making, often questioning the reliability of perception and the possibility of objective truth. This period also witnessed the gradual blurring of boundaries between realism, modernism, and emerging postmodern tendencies, as authors experimented with narrative voice, structure, and symbolism. Consequently, post-World War II realism became a flexible and evolving form of expression, capable of addressing both social realities and psychological complexities.

The study of post-World War II realism in American literature has attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly in relation to its engagement with trauma, social transformation, and evolving narrative forms. Early literary criticism emphasizes that the aftermath of World War II marked a turning point in American literary history, where traditional realist conventions were re-evaluated in response to new psychological and cultural realities. Scholars argue that this period cannot be understood through classical realism alone, as it incorporates elements of modernist fragmentation and early postmodern experimentation.

A major focus in literary studies is the representation of trauma and alienation in postwar fiction. Researchers highlight that American writers began to depict individuals struggling with emotional instability, moral uncertainty, and social disconnection in rapidly modernizing society. This shift is often interpreted as a response to both wartime experiences and the rise of Cold War anxieties. In this context, realism evolves into a more introspective mode, where internal psychological states become as important as external social conditions. Critics note that this

transformation reflects a broader shift in literature from objective representation toward subjective experience.

Contemporary scholarship further explores how post–World War II realism intersects with cultural and social developments such as suburbanization, consumerism, and shifting family structures. These studies emphasize that literature of this period reflects growing tensions between individual identity and mass society. Narrative techniques such as fragmentation, shifting perspectives, and nonlinear chronology are frequently analyzed as formal innovations that allow writers to represent the complexity of modern life. Overall, existing research demonstrates that postwar American realism is not a continuation of nineteenth-century traditions but rather a reconfiguration of realism shaped by trauma, historical change, and narrative innovation.

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and historical-analytical research design to examine post–World War II realism in American literature, with a particular focus on trauma, social transformation, and narrative innovation. The research is based on close reading of selected literary texts and critical analysis of secondary scholarly sources that address postwar cultural and literary developments.

The primary method employed in this study is close textual analysis, which focuses on the detailed examination of literary works that reflect postwar realist tendencies. This approach allows for the exploration of narrative structure, thematic concerns, characterization, and stylistic features. Special attention is given to how authors represent psychological trauma, alienation, and moral ambiguity in the context of postwar American society shaped by World War II.

In addition, a historical-contextual approach is used to situate literary texts within the broader socio-political environment of the postwar United States. This includes examining the impact of industrial growth, suburban expansion, Cold War tensions, and changing cultural values on literary production. Such contextualization helps to explain how realism evolved in response to new historical realities and shifting social structures.

Furthermore, the study incorporates a comparative analytical method to distinguish post–World War II realism from both nineteenth-century realism and modernist literary traditions. This comparison highlights the hybrid nature of postwar literature, which combines realistic representation with psychological depth and experimental narrative techniques.

Secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books on literary theory, and historical studies, are also utilized to provide a theoretical framework for interpreting the selected texts. These sources help situate the analysis within broader academic discussions on realism, trauma studies, and narrative transformation.

Overall, this methodological framework enables a comprehensive examination of post–World War II realism as both a literary and cultural phenomenon, demonstrating how trauma and societal change reshaped narrative strategies in American literature.

Post–World War II realism in American literature represents a complex and evolving narrative mode shaped by the profound psychological, social, and cultural consequences of World War II. Unlike traditional nineteenth-century realism, which primarily focused on external social conditions, postwar realism integrates internal psychological experience with external reality, reflecting a deeper concern with trauma, alienation, and fragmented identity. This transformation indicates that realism in this period is no longer a purely objective mode of representation but rather a hybrid form that combines psychological depth with social critique.

One of the central features of post–World War II realism is the representation of trauma and emotional instability. Writers of this period depict characters who struggle with the lasting psychological effects of war, even in civilian life. This trauma is often expressed through fragmented narratives, disrupted chronology, and shifting perspectives, which mirror the instability of human consciousness in the modern world. Literature becomes a medium through which the invisible effects of war—fear, anxiety, and moral uncertainty—are articulated and explored in depth.

Another important aspect of this literary movement is the exploration of social transformation in postwar American society. The rapid expansion of suburban life, consumer culture, and industrial development significantly altered traditional social structures. Authors critically examine how these changes affect individual identity, often portraying characters who experience a sense of isolation despite living in increasingly connected and modern environments. This paradox highlights the tension between social progress and personal disconnection, a recurring theme in postwar realist fiction.

Furthermore, narrative transformation is a defining characteristic of this period. Post–World War II realism frequently incorporates techniques associated with modernism and early postmodernism, such as nonlinear storytelling, interior monologue, and multiple perspectives. These stylistic innovations allow writers to represent the complexity of human perception and the fragmented nature of reality. As a result, realism becomes more flexible and expressive, capable of capturing both external social conditions and internal psychological states.

In addition, postwar literature reflects a growing skepticism toward absolute truth and stable meaning. Writers often question traditional moral frameworks and explore ambiguity in human behavior and decision-making. This shift reflects the broader intellectual climate of the postwar era, characterized by uncertainty and

reevaluation of established values. Literature thus becomes a space for critical reflection on the nature of truth, identity, and human experience.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that post–World War II realism is not merely a continuation of earlier realist traditions but a significant transformation shaped by historical trauma and cultural change. It redefines realism as a dynamic and adaptive literary form capable of addressing the complexities of modern existence.

Post–World War II realism in American literature represents a significant and transformative stage in the evolution of literary expression, shaped profoundly by the psychological, social, and cultural consequences of World War II. This study has demonstrated that realism during this period is no longer confined to the objective representation of external reality but has evolved into a more complex and multidimensional narrative form that integrates psychological depth, social critique, and experimental storytelling techniques. The emergence of trauma-centered narratives, fragmented structures, and introspective characterization reflects the literary response to a world marked by instability, uncertainty, and rapid transformation.

The findings of this research indicate that postwar American writers redefined realism by incorporating elements that traditionally belonged to modernist and early postmodern literature. This hybridization allowed authors to represent both the external conditions of society—such as suburbanization, industrial growth, and Cold War tensions—and the internal emotional realities of individuals affected by these changes. As a result, literature of this period becomes a space where personal trauma and collective historical experience intersect, producing a more nuanced understanding of human identity and social existence.

Furthermore, the study highlights that themes such as alienation, moral ambiguity, and identity crisis are central to post–World War II realist literature. These themes reflect the broader existential concerns of the postwar generation, who struggled to reconcile traditional values with the realities of modern life. The narrative transformation observed in this period, including nonlinear storytelling, shifting perspectives, and psychological realism, demonstrates the adaptability of literary form in responding to historical and cultural change.

In addition, this research confirms that post–World War II realism played a crucial role in redefining American literary identity. By moving beyond the boundaries of classical realism, writers contributed to the development of a more flexible and expressive literary tradition capable of addressing the complexities of contemporary society. Literature became not only a reflection of reality but also a means of interpreting and questioning it.

Overall, this study concludes that post–World War II realism is best understood as a transitional and evolutionary literary form that bridges traditional realism and

modern narrative experimentation. Its emphasis on trauma, identity, and social transformation continues to influence contemporary American literature and remains essential for understanding the cultural and intellectual landscape of the twentieth century.

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