My research compares the sociopolitical circumstances that accompanied the rise of the realist novel in the 19th century with the 21st-century neoliberalism that has coincided with a return to realist narratological strategies and themes in American fiction. I use digital tools for distant reading to identify similarities and differences between 19th-century realism and 21st-century neorealism with the aim of answering questions about the connections between different forms of capitalism and realism. I use topic modeling to detect whether the subject matter of canonical 19th-century realist fiction is similar to contemporary neorealist fiction, with a special focus on gender and family roles and their vocabularies.

In order to do this, I first considered different definitions of the 19th-century realist canon and created different corpora to compare them thematically, reflecting on the image of 19th-century literature in the 21st century. I also compared various groups of 21st-century US novels—award-winners, self-identified family sagas, and bestsellers—to investigate what vocabularies they used to describe family life and how they portrayed gender roles within middle-class everyday life. I finally analyzed the connections between descriptions of economic and family life in both time periods to reflect on the changes that occurred within realism and its ambition to portray the middle class.
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