

Super-Realism in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*

Mukesh Kumar Research Scholar, Sahu Ram Swaroop Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Bareilly, U.P. 
Email: mukeshkumarmjprubly@gmail.com
DOI:

Abstract

The term 'Super-realism', coined by a British American visual artist, a painter named, Malcolm-Morley in 1970s to connote it as photo-realism. This term shows similarity to some extent with the French philosopher, post-structuralism critic, and sociologist, Jean Baudrillard's term 'Hyper-reality'. About this he has written that hyper-reality is not about the outcome, but it is about the process, which makes a text hyper-real or super-real. By saying this Baudrillard was more interested in the process of how a particular incident happened, and not in what happened. Polish-french art critic and writer, Guillaume Apollinaire, who fathered the term, 'cubism' and is fondly called the forefather of the term, 'surrealism'. He was of the view to breaking the reality into various perspectives to look at. Andre Breton in his, 'Manifesto of Surrealism' has discussed the Freudian psychology and working of the sub-conscious and unconscious mind to narrate a story in such a way that creates super-realism, a kind of realism which was created by Tolstoy in his 'Crime and Punishment'. This is the point where dreams and reality lose their boundaries and they both coalesce to form super-realism. The present Paper seeks to analyze the Elements of Super-Realism in the Wolf-Hall Trilogy, written by celebrated author Hilary mantel who has been awarded Booker Prize twice for the first two novels of this trilogy. The Wolf-Hall Trilogy is a Series of Historical novel. It delves into the time of King Henry VIII. Narration is in third person. Whole Story is described from the perspective of Thomas Cromwell, chief advisor of King Henry.

Keywords: Super- Realism, History, Hilary Mantel, Thomas Cromwell. Historical fiction.

Introduction

With the advent of literature as a genre, there has been a clash between facts and fiction, reality and history, morality and amorality. Plato banishes poets, saying they do not represent reality. Aristotle argues that literature is not the job of representing society or nature exactly as they are, or of producing an exact copy of a thing, place, or action. But the question is still debatable to this day. Various types of reality, such as pseudo-realism, abstract realism, hyperrealism, magical realism, naturalism, cubism, surrealism, historical realism, romantic realism, artistic realism, or super realism, are created to address this issue. This has changed not only readers' perspective on literature but also given it new meaning.

Article History : Received: 22 January. 2026. Accepted: 20 March. 2026. Available online: 25 March. 2026. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) **Copyright**: © 2026 The Author(s). **Licensing** : This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) **Conflict of Interest**: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

As a mode in art and literature, super-realism rejects the surface-level photographic realism and objective, linear narration of 19th century naturalism. Hilary Mantel, the most popular historical novelist of contemporary era, has tried to delve deeper into the psyche of the character, so that reader could connect with the memory of the character and get a feel of the various emotions going on there. And this creates super-realism. She herself has told that, 'My concern as a writer is with memory, personal and collective: with the restless dead asserting their claims'. (The Guardian June 2017).

If we try to understand the term 'Super-Realism', we find that it carries the prefix 'Super', meaning 'Beyond' or 'Above', and 'Realism', which derives from the Latin word 'realis', meaning 'real' or 'actual'. Thus, the term 'Super-Realism' suggests vivid or heightened realism. The term was coined by Malcolm Morley (1931-2018), a British American Visual Artist and painter, in 1965. But it was primarily used for the U.S. style of Painting and sculpture in the 1970s. The equivalent word to super-realism, 'Hyper-Realism', was first used in 1973 by Isy Brachot, a Belgian artist, in the title of one of his exhibitions, 'L'Hyperrealisme', at his gallery in Brussels. It expanded into a movement with the publication of 'The Hyper-realism of Simulation' (1976) by Jean Baudrillard. (Amy Dempsey 251-252).

Historical fiction which was popularized by Sir Walter Scott in the Eighteenth Century gradually lost its charm. H. White writes- "The conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information. And the reason why historical studies are in crisis today is not because a bunch of wild-eyed 'postmodernist' have captured the minds of the impressionable young" (H.White.149), but because no one is making it profitable. Credit goes to Hilary Mantel who filled it again with charm with her utmost skill of detailing and super-realism, which attracts the attention of the millions of the readers worldwide. Her *Wolf-Hall Trilogy* gained popularity and critical acclamation. This paper argues that super-realism is a pervasive and pervading force in the Wolf Hall Trilogy. It has coalesced into every aspect of her novels and is the driving force that keeps the action moving.

Super-Realism and Historical Fiction

Cotemporary age is an age of super-realism. Almost all the modern literature is a journey of the psyche. Writers with their utmost caliber and skill create such characters and setting which appears to us fluctuating with life. In case of historical novels, although we already know the fate of the characters and how the story is going to conclude, yet some writers with the power of minute detailing, are able to create the same type of suspense and thrill, as we feel in any detective or crime thriller fictions. This is the Super-realism. Among some notable works we may include ‘*Wolf-Hall Trilogy*’ by Hilary Mantel, ‘*The Crimson Petal and the White*’ by Michel Faber, and ‘*The Pillars of the Earth*’ by Ken Follett. These historical fictions are being known for its vivid description of the past and allowing readers to go deeper into the mind of the characters.

Jim Naughtie, the BBC broadcaster and who chaired the judging panel of Booker Prize in 2009 said- ‘Our decision was based on the sheer bigness of the book, the boldness of its narrative and scene-setting, the gleam that there is in its detail.’ Praising the book he said, ‘We all felt there were paragraphs, passages, pages that we wanted to go back and read again. We have a book which, as a piece of creative fiction, is extraordinary in its technique, its confidence. Once you are in to it – you don’t stop.’ (The Guardian Oct 2009).

Roland Barthes while discussing Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary* writes that insignificant details are actually significant. He writes that “they denote what is ordinarily called, ‘concrete reality’ (insignificant gestures, transitory, attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words)” (Barthes146). History too needs authentication, which writers add with the help of present-day techniques. Barthes writes:

History (historical discourse: *historia rerum gestarum*) is in fact the model of those narratives which consent to fill in the interstices of their functions by structurally superfluous notations, and it is logical that literary realism should have been – give or take a few decades- contemporary with the regnum of ‘objective’ history to which must be added the contemporary development of techniques, of works and institutions based

on the incessant need to authenticate the 'real': the photograph (immediate witness of 'what was here'), reportage, exhibitions of ancient objects (the success of the Tutankhamen show makes this quite clear), the tourism of monuments and historical sites.(Barthes 146).

Writers are generally tempted to cover all the historical events and miss historical realism. Lukacs writes, 'For the historical novel presents the writer with a specially strong temptation to try and produce an extensively complete totality. The idea that only such completeness can guarantee historical fidelity is a very persuasive one' (Lukacs, 43). Balzac points out this serious flaw of historical novel while reviewing Latouche's *Leo*. He shares that the novel has 200 pages and deals with 200 events. This is a mistake. Therefore to quote Lukacs-

What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. (Lukacs 44).

Simulacra and Simulation (1981) by Jean Baudrillard, is a seminal book on hyperrealism. The first chapter, 'The procession of simulacra' begins with a quotation from the 'Ecclesiastes' that "The Simulacrum is never what hides the truth-it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true." (Baudrillard, 1). He writes, 'History is a strong myth, perhaps, along with the unconscious, the last great myth. It is a myth that at once subtended the possibility of an 'objective' enchainment of events and causes and the possibility of a narrative enchainment of discourse. The age of history, if one can call it that, is also the age of the novel.' (Baudrillard 47). For Baudrillard there is no difference between the reality of a novel and that of a history.

Hilary Mantel thinks that there is no difference between the historization of fiction and fictionalization of history. She says, 'As soon as we die, we enter into fiction'. (The Guardian June 2017). Characters of historical fictions are the characters of history too. And if a person does not write, or make someone write

about him/her, then certainly his/her life will be written by others. Writers of History books or novels both employ the available evidences but none is sure about the psyche of the characters or what was going on inside of a character. So they imagine the things and write. She says- “Once we can no longer speak for ourselves, we are interpreted. When we remember- as psychologists so often tell us- we don’t reproduce the past, we create it.” (The Guardian June 2017).

Linda Hutcheon, too in her seminal work, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, writes that ‘history and literature both employ the same material, the text,’ and both are the part of ‘Historiographical Metafiction’. She states that, “The past really did exist, but we can ‘know’ that past today only through its texts, and therein lies its connection to the literary.” (Hutcheon, 128).

Super-Realism and Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*

The Wolf Hall Trilogy, consisting of *Wolf Hall* (2009), *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), and *The Mirror and the Light* (2020), has brought immense fame to the writer Hilary Mantel. The first two novels of this trilogy, i.e., *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, received the Booker Prize, and the third novel, i.e., *The Mirror and the Light*, was also longlisted for the same prize.

In the *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*, Hilary Mantel delves deeper into the time of King Henry VIII (1509-1547), and depicted the intrigue, conspiracy, revenge, power struggle, loyalty, clashes of politics and religion, of the time and the Tudor court. She has actually enlivened all the characters and the time through her most effective writing style. The third person narration has made her writing more convincing and realistic. She has narrated the whole story from the perspective of Thomas Cromwell (1485-1540), who was the chief advisor of the king and harbinger of Reformation in England.

Hilary Mantel herself has said that, ‘Beneath every history, another history’ (WH 66). And in order to fill the gap, she with her utmost imaginative skill, made her work imbued with super-realism. Super-Realism is the key feature of Mantel's

Wolf Hall Trilogy and is evident throughout it. She describes how in a “simple twist of being I was inside Thomas Cromwell’s body. Consequently, the whole story that follows is told from behind his eyes” (The Royal Society of Literature, 2014).

Mantel believes that by writing historical fiction she does not just intend to recreate the past but to make alive the popular gossips, intrigues, tensions, and various other perspectives about the characters and time which were left by the historians. She says:

Evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth; though they are part of it- information is not knowledge. And history is not the past-it is the method we have evolved of organizing our ignorance of the past. It’s the record of what’s left on the record. It’s the plan of the positions taken, when we to stop the dance to note them down. It’s what’s left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it- a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth. It is no more “the past” than a birth certificate is a birth, or a script is a performance, or a map is a journey. It is the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the people who performed them. It’s no more than the best we can do, and often it fails short of that. (The Guardian June 2017).

Mantel employs a special technique to revive the dead from the past. Sara L Knox, writes- “Mantel’s fiction is renowned for its capacity to unsettle in this way, to haunt not just with those intimations of past or future violence done to, or by, her characters, but to haunt by super-adding the violence of the living with the querulous remonstrance of the dead, directly or indirectly recalling the violence done to them in life” (Knox, 314).

If we read *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*, we find that Hilary Mantel has used various technical skills to make it a work of super-realism. She has fused the fact and fiction in such an eloquent way that both have coalesced and become a product of super-realism altogether. Let’s try to encapsulate super-realism in *Wolf-Hall Trilogy* into a few comprehensible points in order to analyze them in a better way. Following headings may be considered under which we may continue this analysis-

1. Setting 2. Dialogue 3. Character 4. Depiction of Past 5. Events.

We will analyze these five headings to find out super-realism in the *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*.

Setting

In *Wolf-Hall Trilogy* we find an alluring and fascinating setting. Hilary Mantel has described the old time of 16th century so vividly and does not leave scope for readers to disbelieve the things she wrote in her Trilogy. See her skill of describing, in a scene when Cardinal Wolsey, after losing power reaches at Esher, where his usher George Cavendish finds the kitchen in worst condition. He says:

At Hampton Court, the kitchens have running water; here, nothing's running but the cooks' noses. Cavendish is right. In fact it is worse than he thinks. The larders are impoverished and such supplies as they have show signs of ill-keeping and plunder. There are weevils in the flour. There are mouse droppings where the pastry should be rolled. It is nearly Martinmas, and they have not even thought of salting their beef. The batterie de cuisine is an insult, and the stockpot is mildewed. There are a number of small boys sitting by the hearth, and, for cash down, they can be induced into scouring and scrubbing; children take readily to novelty, and the idea of cleaning, it seems, is novel to them. (WH 61)

She has given so many overwhelming sensory details which can be felt by the readers. When we read above quote, we feel the meager and dismal condition of Waynefflete Tower at Esher, which has no comparison with the Hampton Court, where Cardinal Wolsey used to live but now confiscated by the King Henry VIII.

Mantel has the knack to mingle symbol, imagery, metaphor, facts and fiction, so much that it altogether creates an enchanting setting and produces the effect of super-realism. In *Bring Up the Bodies* when she writes about the setting of the infamous London Tower, see how it gives us a feeling of torture, punishment, and Queen Anne's inevitable death:

The solemn procession, through cold harbor Gate: the city first, alderman and officials, then the guard. In the midst of them the queen with her women. She wears a gown of dark damask and a short cape of ermine, a gable hood; it is the occasion, one supposes, to hide the face as much as possible, to guard the expression. That ermine cape, does he not know it? It was wrapped around Katherine, he thinks, when I saw it last. These furs, then, are Anne's final spoils." (BUTB 469).

Dialogue

If we see the dialogue used in this Trilogy, we find that they are so real and dynamic that it appears the writer may have seen the characters conversing among themselves, through her own eyes. It gives authenticity into the mind of the reader. The dialogues in the Trilogy are filled with psychological depths and live conversation. In Wolf-Hall when Cromwell returns home see how his wife welcomes him:

Forget where you lived?'

He Sighs.

'How was Yorkshire?'

He shrugs.

'The Cardinal?'

He nods.

'Eaten?'

'Yes.'

'Tired?'

'Not Really.'

'Drink?'

'Yes.'

'Rhenish?'

'Why not.'" (WH. 34).

We feel the rapport Cromwell has with his wife from above quote. We also feel the psychological depths. All this seems like Mantel has recorded the

conversation herself, going back into the Time. Cromwell always know what to speak, how to speak, when to speak and how much to speak. Super-realism is discernible everywhere in Mantel's *Wolf-Hall Trilogy* when we go through such dynamic dialogues.

Character

Character is the second most important element in a tragedy, after plot, as Aristotle had asserted long ago. We see so much immersiveness and psychological depth in the characters of *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*. Mantel is master craftsman of character creation. Her characters are not just stereotyped; they are alive and living characters. We are given the insights to see what is running into the mind of a particular character. She was not happy with earlier portrayal of Cromwell in fictions where he was depicted as villain. She writes, "And at the same time, the word is out: help Cromwell and he will help you. Be loyal, be diligent, be intelligent on his behalf; you will come into a reward. Those who commit their service to him will be promoted and protected. He is a good friend and master; this is said of him everywhere" (WH 532).

With her master craftsmanship she created a Cromwell who is not just a caricature but a living being, a humane figure, who breaths, who has multi-dimensions of his personality. She developed his character as an individual who is product of his time and circumstances. R. Arias write that "Mantel acts as a resurrectionist, or a medium, because she channels communication between the Tudor world and today". It seems she has 'conjured' the dead Cromwell from the history. "Therefore, Mantel appropriates Cromwell's 'translating' capacities, and becomes an author/translator who translates a foreign past into a familiar present, without falling into the trap of 'domestication'." (Arias, 2014, P. 19).

Mantel's characters exhibit so much psychological depths that we start feeling, relating, listening and understanding those characters' temperament, body language, anxiety, behavior, situation, to such an extent as these characters are in our mind. A. Alghamdi writes-"Cromwell, in Mantel's fiction, is profoundly human", it is the clear sign of super-realism employed by Mantel. "Cromwell's

feelings, history, sympathies, relationships, and essential, powerful humanities are conveyed clearly”. This is the reason that Mantel’s portrayal is so convincing. She has recreated history, “her account of Cromwell is neutral, ambiguous, and avoids judgment of the character”. (A. Alghamdi, 120).

In *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*, Mantel has created the characters so intense, powerful and vivid, as reader can feel them, see them interacting. She skillfully and successfully shows the bond and rapport one character maintains with another. We can easily feel the essence of love, greed, affection, tension, power dynamics, and threat under the lines, described by the writer. Her characters are haunted by dreams and memories like us. Minute sensory details, and third person narration with utmost psychological depths, in the characters of *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*, have created an effect of Super-Realism.

Depiction of Past

Hilary Mantel has portrayed past unembellished and undecorated. She, like a painter, fills the color which is needed to make it more real than it originally was. She painstakingly paid heed on minute details of the past. She has depicted past in such a realistic way that past appears to us a new present. Her description of the past totally immerses us and we feel as we are walking, roaming, wandering, watching, experiencing through our own senses the grand imagery of the past. See how Mantel describes the demand of relics in those days through her through her knack of super-realism –

In the year 1257, an elephant died in the Tower menagerie and was buried in a pit near the chapel. But the following year he was dug up and his remains sent to Westminster Abbey. Now, what did they want at Westminster Abbey, with the remains of an elephant? If not to carve a ton of relics out of him, and make his animal bones into the bones of saints? (BUTB. 82-83).

We see London as a place and center of attraction for whole country through the words of the novelist in *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*. Mantel has left the space for

readers to speculate and understand that the London is symbol of prosperity, power and uncertainty. It truly depicts Tudor way of life hyper-realistically.

Events

Hilary Mantel is master storyteller. She has employed a technique to craft the events in *Wolf-Hall Trilogy* to make it so real as we tend to believe that those great historical events in Tudor era had happened exactly same way as Mantel has depicted. She dealt the historical events with great care and precision. She has humanized the history by juxtaposing mundane with monumental, commonplace with historical, ordinary with outstanding.

She writes Cromwell thinking of Reformation and waiting for meal. Attending meeting with the king Henry VIII and thinking about the boot his father kicked in his childhood, thinking about the political intrigue and at the same time cajoling his son, witnessing Queen Anne's execution at the same time thinking about his meal, signing the final warrant of More's execution and at the same time worrying about the grocery he has to purchase for his kitchen. He kneels at the grave of Queen Jane Seymour and immediately starts menial work like gardening.

References are scattered on every page that Mantel with her utmost skill made these monumental events so real that even real that even real incidents recorded in history books seem a piece of fiction. Every page of *Wolf-Hall Trilogy* is filled with such Super-Realism. In 'Bring up the Bodies', see how Mantel has described a most pivotal historical event i.e. Anne Boleyn's execution:

—the executioner calls out sharply, "Get me the sword". The blinded head whips around. The man is behind Anne, she is misdirected, she does not sense him. There is a groan, one single sound from the whole crowd. Then a silence, and into that silence, a sharp sigh or a sound like a whistle through a keyhole: the body exsanguinates, and its flat little presence becomes a puddle of gore. (BUTB. 472)

Conclusion

Thus, it can be aptly said that Super-Realism is all pervasive and pervading in Mantel's *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*. Mantel has employed a unique technique to familiarize the readers with the unfamiliar. And lo! With her great knack of constructing the past, so real, she has filled the gap of what was missing in history. With her Super-Realism, now the story of Thomas Cromwell and King Henry VIII has gain a different perspective. She made Cromwell a real human being who has heart, emotion, passion, tension etc. She has humanized history through Super-Realism.

Works Cited:

- Alghamdi, Alaa. "Hilary Mantel: Embodying Thomas Cromwell and Redefining Historical Fiction through 'Women's Writing.'" *Arab World English Journal for Translation and Literary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, Feb. 2018, pp. 117–34, <https://doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol2no1.9>.
- Arias, Rosario. *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction*. Edited by Elodie Rousselot, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 197.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard, 2nd ed., University of California Press, 1989.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Brown, Mark. "Booker Prize goes to Hilary Mantel for Wolf-Hall" *The Guardian*, 06 Oct. 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/06/booker-prize-hilary-mantel-wolf-hall?CMP=share_btn_url
- Dempsey, Amy. *Art in the Modern Era: A Guide to Styles, Schools & Movements 1860 to the Present*. Harry N. Abrams, 2002.
- "Hilary Mantel in Conversation with Harriet Walter (Full) - YouTube." *Youtube, The Royal Society of Literature*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msEaOzzRSOU>.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.

Knox, Sara L. "GIVING FLESH TO THE "WRAITHS OF VIOLENCE."” *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 25, no. 65, Sept. 2010, pp. 313–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2010.504295>.

Lukács, György. *The Historical Novel*. University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

Mantel, Hilary. *Bring up the Bodies*. Fourth Estate, 2012.

———. *The Mirror & the Light*. Fourth Estate, 2020.

———. *Wolf Hall*. Fourth Estate, 2009.

Mantel, Hilary. "Hilary Mantel: Why I became a historical novelist" *The Guardian*, 03 June 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist>

White, Hayden. "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality." *Rethinking History*, vol. 9, nos. 2–3, June 2005, pp. 147–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642520500149061>.