

American Literary Naturalism

English 519, Roggenkamp

I. Naturalism Defined

- a. “A term used by (French novelist Emile Zola) to describe the application of the clinical method of empirical science to all of life. . . . If a writer wishes to depict life as it really is, he or she must be rigorously deterministic in the representation of the characters’ thoughts and actions in order to show forth the causal factors that have made the characters inevitably what they are. . . . Unlike realism, which also seeks to represent human life as it is actually lived, naturalism specifically connects itself to the philosophical doctrine of biological and social determinism, according to which human beings are devoid of free will” (Greig E. Henderson and Christopher Brown, *Glossary of Literary Theory*).
- b. Determinism—position that human life is determined by environmental forces, not by human free will
- c. Humans as SUBJECTS
 - i. “A type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings” (Campbell).
 - ii. A philosophical position—humans are “human beasts” (Emile Zola) and so can be *studied* in relation to their environments
 - iii. Humans should be studied scientifically, impartially, objectively, without any moralizing about their behaviors or basic nature
 - iv. Naturalists “studied human beings” as “governed by their instincts and passions as well as the ways in which the characters’ lives were governed by forces of heredity and environment” (Campbell).

II. Realism vs. Naturalism

- a. “Put rather too simplistically, one rough distinction made by critics is that realism espousing a deterministic philosophy and focusing on the lower classes is considered naturalism” (Donna Campbell, “Naturalism in American Literature”).
- b. Some scholars believe naturalism is simply a pessimistic extension of realism, while others argue it is an independent genre altogether (see Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*).
- c. “Although many critics see the naturalistic movement which began in the 1890s as an outgrowth and extension of realism, others consider it, at least in part, a reaction against realism and, therefore, the start of a decline of realism as a movement” (Soo Yeon Choi).
- d. Realists (Howells, James, et al.) depict meaningful human choice and free will—but naturalists draw “a stark fictional landscape where force rules and the autonomous will is just a nice idea we fall back on.”
- e. Lars Ahnebrink: In contrast to a realist, a naturalist believes that a character is fundamentally an animal, without free will. “Realism is a manner and method of composition by which the author describes normal, average life, in an accurate, truthful way,” while “Naturalism is a manner and method of composition by which the author portrays ‘life as it is’ in accordance with the philosophic theory of determinism.”
- f. “Naturalism shares with Romanticism a belief that the actual is important not in itself but in what it can reveal about the nature of a larger reality; it differs sharply from Romanticism, however, in

finding that reality not in transcendent ideas or absolute ideals but in . . . scientific laws . . . This distinction may be illustrated in this way. Given a block of wood and a force pushing upon it, producing in it a certain acceleration: Realism will tend to concentrate its attention on the accurate description of that particular block, that special force, and that definite acceleration; Romanticism will tend to see in the entire operation an illustration or symbol or suggestion of a philosophical truth and will so represent the block, the force, and the acceleration . . . that the idea or ideal that it bodies forth is the center of the interest; and Naturalism will tend to see in the operation a clue or a key to the scientific law which undergirds it and to be interested in the relationships among the force, the block, and the produced acceleration . . ." (C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 4th edition).

ROMANTICISM	REALISM	NATURALISM
Often Subjective	Objective	Objective
Free Will	Free Will	Deterministic
Optimistic—Emotional	Often Optimistic	Pessimistic—Emotional
Intensity	Settings in the Everyday	Coldness
Tends to Exotic Settings	World	Settings in the Everyday
Extraordinary Events	Ordinary Events	World
Unusual Protagonists	Everyday Characters	Ordinary Events
		Everyday Characters

Genre	American Authors	Perceived the individual as...
Romantics	Ralph Waldo Emerson Nathaniel Hawthorne	a god; idealistic figure
Realists	Henry James William Dean Howells Mark Twain	person with depth, ability to make ethical choices & act on environment
Naturalists	Stephen Crane Frank Norris	a helpless object who is nevertheless heroic

III. Characteristics

a. Characters

- i. Often poorly educated, lower class
- ii. Controlled by forces of heredity, animalistic instinct, raw passion
- iii. No free will or choice—DETERMINISM
- iv. Characters cannot control “the brute within”
- v. “The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. . . . His fictional world is that of the commonplace and unheroic in which life would seem to be chiefly the dull round of daily existence, as we ourselves usually conceive of our lives. But the naturalist discovers in this world those qualities of man usually associated with the heroic or adventurous, such as acts of violence and passion which invoke sexual adventure or bodily strength and which culminate in desperate moments and violent death” (Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*, 10).
- vi. But goal not to utterly dehumanize characters: “The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance. But he also suggests a compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates which affirms the significance of the individual and of his life. The tension here is that between the naturalist’s desire to represent in fiction the new, discomfiting truths which he has found in the ideas and life of his late nineteenth-century world, and also his desire to find some meaning in experience which reasserts the validity of the human experience” (Pizer 11).

- b. Key themes
 - i. Survival (often survival in brutal nature), determinism, violence, social taboo—man against nature, man against himself
 - ii. Social determinism, as well—“Survival of the fittest”
- c. Plots
 - i. Often follow a “plot of decline”
 - ii. Plot that depicts progression toward degeneration or death
- d. Typical settings: slums, sweatshops, factories, farms
- e. Nature
 - i. Nature pictured as indifferent force acting on the lives of humans.
 - ii. Again, determinism
 - iii. Describe the futile attempts of human beings to exercise free will, often ironically presented, in this universe that reveals free will as an illusion.”
 - iv. Stephen Crane, 1894: “A man said to the universe: / ‘Sire, I exist!’ / ‘However,’ replied the universe, / ‘The fact has not created in me / A sense of obligation.’”

IV. Frank Norris and Naturalism

- a. Realism
 - i. Realism is the “drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner” (“A Plea for Romantic Fiction”).
 - ii. Realism is the literature of normality and representative: “the smaller details of everyday life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper.”
- b. Romanticism
 - i. Romanticism, on the other hand, deals with “variations from . . . normal life”—it aims to dig below the surface of common experience and reach the ideal, a vision of the very nature of life.
 - ii. Explores “the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the unsearched penetralia of the soul of man.”
- c. Naturalism
 - i. Draws upon the best aspects of both Realism and Romanticism—it uses both detailed accuracy and philosophical depth.
 - ii. In a naturalistic novel, “This is not romanticism—this drama of the people working itself out in blood and ordure. It is not realism. It is a school by itself, unique, somber, powerful beyond words.” This new “school” is Naturalism.