

Literary Naturalism

LIT. 215

PROF. GLENN TURNER
ELGIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Two Approaches to the Concept Of Naturalism (from Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1966.)

1. That it is an extension or continuation of Realism with the addition of pessimistic determinism.

"... no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some Realists ... (that position being one of) a pessimistic, materialistic determinism." - George J. Becker

It is Realism with a "necessitation ideology." - Richard Chase

2. That it is different from Realism.

Subject Matter & Characterization in Naturalistic Fiction

Donald Pizer further suggests specific changes in subject matter and characterization which help in defining Naturalism as different from Realism:

1. The subject matter:

a. The subject matter deals with those raw and unpleasant experiences which reduce characters to "degrading" behavior in their struggle to survive. These characters are mostly from the lower middle or the lower classes - they are poor, uneducated, and unsophisticated.

b. The milieu is the commonplace and the unheroic; life is usually the dull round of daily existence. But the naturalist discovers those qualities in such characters usually associated with the heroic or adventurous - acts of violence and passion leading to desperate moments and violent death. The suggestion is that life on its lowest levels is not so simple as it seems to be.

c. There is discussion of fate and "hubris" that affect a character; generally the controlling force is society and the surrounding environment.

2. The concept of a naturalistic character:

a. characters are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, chance, or instinct; but they have compensating humanistic values which affirm their individuality and life - their struggle for life becomes heroic and they maintain human dignity.

b. the Naturalists attempt to represent the intermingling in life of the controlling forces and individual worth. They do not dehumanize their characters.

"The primary goal of the late nineteenth-century American Naturalists was not to demonstrate the overwhelming and oppressive reality of the material forces present in our lives. Their attempt, rather, was to represent the intermingling in life of controlling forces and individual worth. The Naturalists do not dehumanize man." - Pizer

| **Frank Norris on Naturalism**

According to the novelist Frank Norris, Realism was the literature of the normal and the representative - "the smaller details of everyday life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper."

Romanticism, according to Norris, was concerned with "variations from the type of normal life," and in its desire to penetrate beneath the surface of experience and derive large generalizations on the nature of life. It 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."

Naturalism abstracts the best from Realism and Romanticism - detailed accuracy and philosophical depth. Also important in Naturalism is the "choice of milieu."

"That Zola's is not purely romantic as was Hugo's, lies chiefly in the choice of milieu. These great terrible dramas no longer happen among the personnel of a feudal and Renaissance nobility, those who are in the forefront of the marching world, but among the lower - almost the lowest - classes; those who are falling by the roadway. 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." It is naturalism." - Norris, "Zola as a Romantic Writer."

| **Lars Ahnebrink on Naturalism**

In contrast to a Realist, a Naturalist believes that a character is fundamentally an animal, without free will. To a Naturalistic writer, a character can be explained in terms of the forces, usually heredity and environment, which operate on him/her.

"Realism is a manner and method of composition by which the author describes normal, average life, in an accurate, truthful way."

"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."

The Naturalists introduced **new topics** and helped broaden the scope of American fiction:

Prostitution and seduction - in *Maggie*, *Vandover and the Brute*, *The Octopus*, and *Sister Carrie*.

Exposure of social conditions and social evils - *Main-Travelled Roads*, *A Spoil of Office*, *A Member of the Third House*, *McTeague*, and *The Octopus*.

Free Will or Determinism -

In Naturalism, characters do not have free will; external and internal forces, environment, or heredity control their behavior. This belief is called determinism. All determinists believe in the existence of the will, but the will is often enslaved on account of different reasons.

Reuben, Paul. "American Naturalism." *Perspectives in American Literature*. California State U Stanislaus. 23 May 2009. Web. 16 February 2010.