NATURALISM

Naturalism in literature originated primarily in France, in particular with Balzac and Zola beginning in about 1871. It was prompted by new developments in science, Darwin's in particular, and by deterministic philosophers including Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer. It is the first literary movement in western history to deny the existence of God. Critics differ in defining Naturalism. Most are loose in their usage. Strictly speaking, Naturalism has 4 defining characteristics: (1) Atheism; (2) deterministic philosophy; (3) denial of free will; and (4) documentary method.

The first "Naturalistic" novel in America was *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893) by Stephen Crane. However, the moral tone of the narrative in sympathy with poor Maggie implies free will in criticizing those who victimize her, a usual characteristic of "Naturalist" novels that is contrary to the definition of pure Naturalism. "The Open Boat" (1898) is usually taught as a model of Naturalism, but it does not deny free will absolutely. In *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and "The Blue Hotel" (1898) Crane's belief in free will is the basis of his satire of Henry and of the cowboy for denying they have any responsibility.

Many other American writers such as Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton are "Naturalistic" in that they dramatize themes of Naturalism, determinism in particular, but they do not deny the existence of free will--they usually affirm it. Nor do they deny the existence of God. Like Crane they also differ from the pure Naturalists extremely in their aesthetics. They do not document, they select. They are not scientific, they are poetic. Hence they are not Naturalists.

In "The Beast in the Jungle" Henry James depicts a man who realizes too late that he has free will and has failed to live his life because he believed it was determined. As his brother William James said in his *Principles of Psychology,* it is impossible to prove that free will exists or not because there are too many independent variables that cannot be measured. Therefore, absolute determinism is based on faith rather than fact, and it is just as vulnerable to challenge as religion. Naturalists, however compelling emotionally, can never prove their case for absolute determinism intellectually. And to deny free will amounts to arguing that all criminals should be set free. Naturalism is sentimental liberalism.

AMERICAN NATURALISM

In the United States, except for Norris and Dreiser, until the 1930s Naturalism was more an influence than a native variation on the European model. In America, even novelists traditionally designated as the first Naturalists—Norris, Dreiser, London—differ from the Europeans in their metaphysics and mix their Naturalism with unscientific romance and mysticism. Norris even defined his Naturalism as a form of Romance. Naturalism in America revived a tradition of deterministic philosophy that began with the Calvinist Puritans, got reinforced by the Gothicism of Brown and Poe, then was reasserted later by Civil War writers such as Ambrose Bierce and by the late pessimism of Twain.

Frank Norris called himself "the boy Zola," but he considered Zola's Naturalism romantic. His *McTeague* (1899) is the most deliberately Naturalistic novel in American fiction after *Maggie*, whereas his more ambitious *The Octopus* (1901) is an oil-water "blend" of mysticism, Christianity, and Naturalism. As a reader at Doubleday, Norris discovered and promoted Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), which later became the preferred model of Naturalism taught in American schools. Dreiser's masterpiece of Naturalism is *An American Tragedy* (1925). Yet Dreiser too became a mystic in his last novels. Jack London's *Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), and *White Fang* (1906) are examples of the primitivist Naturalism popular during the age of Kipling and Teddy Roosevelt.

In the early 20th century, the plays of Eugene O'Neill are often Naturalistic, and there is Naturalism too in Sherwood Anderson. Modernists such as Hemingway, Faulkner, Eliot, Porter, and O'Connor celebrate transcendence of the deterministic forces that defeat the protagonists of Naturalist works, through exertions of the human spirit and faith in God. Naturalism revived during the Great Depression of the 1930s with John Dos Passos and fused with Marxism in writers such as James T. Farrell. WWII fiction, in particular *The Naked and The Dead* by Norman Mailer and *From Here to Eternity* by James Jones, fused Gothicism

and Naturalism in the tradition of Ambrose Bierce. Because of its emphasis on determinism and pathetic victimization, Naturalism became a genre of ethnic protest, most notably in *Native Son* (1940) by the black novelist Richard Wright.

A signature metaphor in Naturalism is life as a trap. However, Naturalism itself proves to be a trap, for the more that unjust deterministic forces are emphasized, the more they seem inevitable, making reform futile. If we have no free will, nothing can be done. The Naturalist reformer subverts his own argument for social change. It turns out that, like the Atheism that prompted it, Naturalism is a dead end. Ralph Ellison transcends black Naturalism with Existentialism, its opposite, in his Modernist classic *Invisible Man* (1952). Later in the 20th-century Naturalism revived as an *aspect* of Postmodernism, in diverse writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy. At the end of his career, however, McCarthy expresses belief in God at the end of *The Road* (2006).

Sympathy for the poor as victims of injustice has made some Naturalistic writers incline to the left in their politics: Crane said he was a Socialist for "two weeks," until leftist conformity and intolerance drove him away. Norris wrote a powerful indictment of monopoly capitalism in *The Octopus* and Dreiser became a Communist and a Christian at the same time. London was an ardent Socialist, but resigned from the Party just before he committed suicide. Upton Sinclair and Sinclair "Red" Lewis were prominent Socialists. John Dos Passos was a Communist until he went to Spain during the Civil War in the 1930s, was enraged when the Communists executed his Spanish translator, had to recant the politics of all his major fiction and became an anti-Communist conservative. Farrell was a Marxist and Richard Wright became a Communist but was disillusioned like the invisible man of Ellison.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NATURALISM

1. Omniscient narrator
2. Philosophical interpretation of life
3. Scientific empiricism, with deductive leaps
4. Documentary method, accumulating realistic details
5. Frankness especially about sex, though still inhibited until the 1960s
6. Humans compared to lower animals as participants in the natural order rather than idealized
7. Themes of decline, degeneration, and atavism—regression to an animal state
8. Pessimistic vision of existence as sordid, ignoble and cruel
9. Signature metaphors are that life is a *jungle* and a *trap*
10. Deterministic circumstances—usually poverty or war
11. Biased selection of characters:

    a. Lower class
    b. Small intellect and strong animal drives
    c. Neurotic temperament at the mercy of moods
    d. Vulnerable to overwhelming external forces

12. Determinist plot, minimizing or denying free will:

    a. Genetic: *heredity* + environment + chance + mystical *Supreme Force* = Fate (Norris)
    b. Mechanistic: *chemistry* of character + *environment* + chance = Fate (Dreiser)
    c. Sociological: character + *environment* + *chance* = Fate (Crane)
    d. Psychological: *character* + environment = Fate (Anderson)
    e. Fatalistic: malignant *chance* usually = Fate (Bierce)
    f. Biological: *nature* + environment = Fate (London)
    g. Ethnic: *race* + environment = Fate (Wright)
    h. Economic: *class* + *state* = Fate (Marxists)

REALISM, IMPRESSIONISM, NATURALISM, EXPRESSIONISM

1. The Realist tries to *report* truth from a normative *collective* viewpoint as if *objectively* detached from the stream of life, focusing upon *commonplace* or *representative* elements. Like a reporter.

2. The Impressionist tries to *render* truth from a *representative individual* point of view as if *subjectively* immersed in the stream of life, focusing upon vivid *pictorial* elements. Like a painter.

3. The Naturalist tries to reveal truth from a *cosmic* vantage point as if *scientifically* analyzing the the stream of life, focusing upon *extreme* elements. Like a philosopher.

4. The Expressionist tries to *express* truth from a deeply *personal* point of view as if submerged in a *dream* of life, *projecting* an internal vision. Like a dreamer.

The Realist tries not to distort the consensus view of reality. The Impressionist tries to convey a representative impression of reality without distorting the consensus view. The Expressionist tries to express a personal view by distorting the consensus view. The Naturalist may distort the consensus view to a lesser extent than the Expressionist in order to reveal general truth beyond the limited consensus view. In some writers—such as Bierce, Crane, Chopin and Wharton—these modes coincide in synthesis, which became a characteristic of Modernism.

Michael Hollister (2015)

INDIFFERENT UNIVERSE

A man said to the universe:
'Sir, I exist!'
'However,' replied the universe,
'The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.'

Stephen Crane (1899)

"Because we act for conscious ends, we suppose that all processes have such ends in view; and because we are human we suppose that all events lead up to man and are designed to subserve his needs. But this is an anthropocentric delusion, like so much of our thinking. The root of the greatest errors in philosophy lies in projecting our human purposes, criteria and preferences into the objective universe.... *Good* and *bad* are relative to human and often individual tastes and ends, and have no validity for a universe in which individuals are ephemera."

Will Durant
"Spinoza"
The Story of Philosophy
(Simon & Schuster 1953) 133

DETERMINISM vs FREE WILL

"*The fact is that the question of free-will is insoluble on strictly psychological grounds*. After a certain amount of effort of attention has been given to an idea, it is manifestly impossible to tell whether either more or less of it *might* have been given or not. To tell that, we should have to ascend to the antecedents of the effort, and defining them with mathematical exactitude, prove, by laws of which we have not at present even an inkling, that the only amount of sequent effort which could *possibly* comport with them was the precise amount that actually came. Such measurements, whether of psychic or of neural quantities, and such deductive reasoning as this method of proof implies, will surely be forever beyond human reach.... Wherever there are independent variables, there Science stops. So far, then, as our volitions may be independent variables, a scientific psychology must ignore that fact, and treat of them only so far as they are fixed functions.... We can hand the free-will controversy over to metaphysics. Psychology will surely never grow refined enough to discover, in the case of any individual's decision, a discrepancy between her

scientific calculations and the fact. Her prevision will never foretell, whether the effort be completely predestinate or not, the way in which each individual emergency is resolved. ”

William James
Psychology: Briefer Course (1891)

“Once in camp I put a log on the fire and it was full of ants. As it commenced to burn, the ants swarmed out and went first toward the center where the fire was; then turned back and ran toward the end. When there were enough on the end they fell off into the fire. Some got out, their bodies burnt and flattened, and went off not knowing where they were going. But most of them went toward the fire and then back toward the end and swarmed on the cool end and finally fell off into the fire. I remember thinking at the time that it was the end of the world and a splendid chance to be a messiah and lift the log off the fire and throw it out where the ants could get off onto the ground. But I did not do anything but throw a tin cup of water on the log, so that I would have the cup empty to put whiskey in before I added water to it. I think the cup of water on the burning log only steamed the ants.”

Ernest Hemingway
A Farewell to Arms (1929) XLI

DEFINITIONS

“Naturalism...is an excessive form of Realism and is usually considered as possessing the following characteristics. First, it allows a still larger variety of subjects, emphasizing the lower and coarser forms of life; it presents this material in a form which is often revolting; it rejects ideality, it minimizes heart-interest and plot interest in favor of ‘facts’ and notations; it magnifies the study of the industries and seeks to apply to fiction the processes of the natural sciences; from these, taken in their application to heredity and environment, it draws its conception of life--deterministic, fatalistic, essentially pessimistic. ”

William Albert Nitze and Edwin Preston Dargan
A History of French Literature
(Holt 1922)

“From Newton it gains a sense of mechanistic determinism; from Darwin (the single greatest force operative upon it) it gains a sense of biological determinism and the inclusive metaphor of the lawless jungle which it has used perhaps more often than any other; from Marx it gains a view of history as a battleground of vast economic and social forces; from Freud it gains a view of the determinism of the inner and subconscious self; from Taine it gains a view of literature as a product of deterministic forces; from Comte it gains a view of social and environmental determinism. ”

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon
A Handbook to Literature, 6th edition
(Macmillan 1936-92)

“Method of literary composition that aims at a detached, scientific objectivity in the treatment of natural man. It is thus more inclusive and less selective than Realism, and holds to the philosophy of determinism. It conceives of man as controlled by his instincts or his passions, or by his social and economic environment and circumstances. Since in this view man has no free will, the Naturalistic writer does not attempt to make moral judgments, and as a determinist he tends toward pessimism. The movement is an outgrowth of 19th-century scientific thought, following in general the biological determinism of Darwin’s theory, or the economic determinism of Marx. It stems from French literature, in which Zola emphasizes biological determinism, and Flaubert economic determinism. The Russian novelists also added their influence to the trend. American leaders of the Naturalistic movement are considered to include Crane, Norris, Herrick, London, and Frederic, and later such significant figures as Dreiser, Dos Passos, and Farrell.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"To the Naturalist, human behavior is a function of its social environment; the individual is the live register of its qualities; he exists in it as animals exist in Nature. Due to this emphasis the Naturalist mode has evolved historically in two main directions. On the one hand it has tended toward passive documentation (milieu-panoramas...), and on the other towards the exposure of socio-economic conditions (muckraking).... I would classify as Naturalistic that type of Realism, in other words, in which the environment displaces its inhabitants in the role of the hero…. The only grandeur Naturalism knows is the grandeur of its own methodological achievement in making available a vast inventory of minutely described phenomena, in assembling an enormous quantity of data and arranging them in a rough figuration of reality…. Dreiser is still unsurpassed so far as American Naturalism goes, though just at present he may well be the least readable…. The Naturalism of Dos Passos is most completely manifested in *U.S.A.*, tagged by the critics as a 'collective' novel recording the 'decline of our business civilization'."

Philip Rahv
"Notes on the Decline of Naturalism"
Image and Idea: Twenty Essays on Literary Themes
(1949,1952; New Directions 1957) 145-46, 148-49

"A literary method and school of the later 19th century, stemming historically from Balzac and developed by the Goncourt brothers and Zola, who formulated its principles and objectives. Its purpose was to dispel superstitions and idealization. Its method was to apply scientific objectivity to literary subjects: to observe closely, to put no limitation on choice of subject, and to be more widely inclusive of details than were the Realists. It wished to 'tell everything,' to show the environment exactly, to present 'a slice of life,' to 'experiment' with the characters as if in a laboratory and trace their development as it is dictated by their heredity and environment, for the basic assumption is a determinism in which free will becomes almost non-existent. The Naturalist stressed the fatalistic, mechanistic aspects of the universe, the materialism of men's motives, the commonplace and coarser forms of their life. Many used the novel as a study in sociology or social problems. As happens with many other writers, their best work often transcends their literary theories."

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, ed.
The Reader's Companion to World Literature
(Dryden/Mentor 1956) 310

"The rise of Naturalistic fiction in the latter half of the 19th century was influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, Marx's historical determinism, and the mechanistic school of philosophy. Although the term is often used synonymously with Realism, Naturalism refers particularly to works in which the author emphasizes the control which the forces of Nature, heredity, and environment exert over human life, and the animalistic and instinctual elements in man. It is similar to Realism primarily in its objectivity and careful attention to detail, but goes beyond Realism in its tendency to take as its subject matter lower-class situations and characters, and particularly in its deterministic philosophy. Human life is pessimistically viewed as being at the mercy of uncontrollable exterior forces—the environment—or of interior drives—fear, hunger, sex. The slum girl crushed by her surroundings, such as Maggie, or the brutal and moronic superman, such as McTeague, are typical characters. Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Frank Norris' *McTeague* (1899), Jack London's *The Son of the Wolf* (1900), and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) are the earliest examples of American Naturalism.

The proletarian literature of the thirties is in some ways an outgrowth of Naturalism and similar to it primarily in its emphasis on the lower class; however, the only truly Naturalistic novel to appear during the thirties was James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932, 1934, 1935)."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Latin *naturalis*, by birth, in accordance with nature. In art or literature, an attempt to achieve complete fidelity to Nature by giving no idealized picture of life. Émile Zola was the chief figure in the French school of Naturalistic fiction…. Zola studied the sordid, more animal side of human life. In his essay, *Le*

Roman Experimental, he said that the novelist should be like the scientist, scrutinizing his subject with dispassionate minuteness."

A. F. Scott
Current Literary Terms
(Macmillan/St. Martin's 1965)

"A variety of Realism, Naturalism refers to both a kind of subject matter and a technique and is based on certain specific philosophical assumptions. The basic assumption is that man, like all other creatures, is part of the great order of brute Nature; therefore, man's fate is to live and die not in imitation of the gods or in the style of the hero but, like every other animal, scrambling for survival and buffeted by an indifferent universe. Accordingly, the writer of Naturalism, says Stephen Crane (*The Red Badge of Courage*), depicts his protagonist in conflict with both his fellow man and the elements (war) and has him emerge from battle with a new-found confidence in his manhood only after behaving consistently with the law of the jungle rather than the laws of society [but he *does* have free will]. Crane's novel, however, ends on an ironic note because the author does not share his young warrior's euphoric philosophical certainty."

M. M. Liberman & Edward E. Foster
A Modern Lexicon of Literary Terms
(Scott, Foresman 1968)

"Another vagueness is the way 'Naturalism' is used interchangeably with 'Realism,' especially in French and Italian. (In art history neither term has much of a connection with philosophers' usage of the same terms.) In modern German, this vagueness is somewhat mitigated using 'Realism' for the more general meaning of any sort of fidelity to Nature—including the subject matter of works of art—reserving 'Naturalism' for works in which 'Realism' is carried to extreme, for example, in the treatment of detail….

As a term designating a recognized stylistic movement, 'Naturalism' is only used in connection with literature, not with the visual arts. It refers to a type of narrative and dramatic writing that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, primarily in Germany…in France (Émile Zola), and occasionally also in Russian and Scandinavian literature…. Only with the development of a 'total' Naturalism in the course of the nineteenth century was Western art at last secularized, and antagonism expressed in quarrels between 'idealists' and 'Realists'—ultimately between 'idealists' and 'Naturalists.'… What has made it so hard to be fair to Naturalistic art is this: that in it the material or content always threatens to overpower our sense of the artist's mastery of it…. Naturalistic works of art seemingly or actually distract attention from the artistic accomplishment as such."

Philip P. Wiener, Editor in Chief
Dictionary of the History of Ideas III
(Scribner's 1973) 339, 342, 346

CRITICS DISCUSS

"All things hang together: it is necessary to start from the determination of inanimate bodies in order to arrive at the determination of living beings; and since savants like Claude Bernard demonstrate now that fixed laws govern the human body, we can easily proclaim...the hour in which the laws of thought and passion will be formulated in their turn. "

Émile Zola
The Experimental Novel (1880)

"The recent school of novel writers forget in their insistence on life, and nothing but life, in a plain slice, that a story must be worth the telling, that a good deal of life is not worth any such thing, and that they must not occupy the reader's time with what he can get at first hand anywhere around him."

Thomas Hardy (c.1890)

"Let Realism do the entertaining with its meticulous presentation of teacups, rag carpets, wallpaper and haircloth sofas, stopping with these, going no deeper than it sees, choosing the ordinary, the untroubled, the commonplace... To Romance [his form of Naturalism] belongs the wide world for range, and the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man."

Frank Norris
The Responsibilities of the Novelist
(Doubleday 1903)

"Naturalistic books are almost inevitably tragedies, but the philosophy of Naturalism that underlies them has played havoc with the Aristotelian conception of tragedy.... According to the Aristotelian tradition, tragedy results when an essentially noble character of heroic proportions transgresses an immutable moral law by a self-originating [free] will and suffers the punishment dealt by poetic justice.... But this assumes two things: (1) an eternally changeless moral law; (2) the existence of a purposive [free] will. Both of these the Naturalist refuses to accept. The tragedy of Naturalism lies in the disintegration of character and the pity or irony with which we contemplate man and his fate in the world."

Vernon L. Parrington
Main Currents in American Thought III
(Harcourt 1927)

"It was the surrender to Naturalism on the part of so many vigorous young novelists in the thirties that gave the new social novel its basic character. In America, as one saw the type emerging in Dreiser, there had appeared after 1900 a succession of Naturalists who had almost nothing in common with Zola's classic desire to impose the mechanism of nineteenth-century science upon the novel, but who had at least remembered the origins of Naturalism and preserved some feeling for its philosophical design. After Dos Passos, perhaps the last Naturalist in American prose who had a conscious conception of Naturalism as a philosophy of life, Naturalism was no longer a creed or even a method: it became a reflex. The typical young Naturalist of the thirties, whatever his personal experience—it was usually bitter enough—liked to think that he had been born tough and without 'literary' pretensions… He believed in determinism well enough…but it was the determinism of the class struggle… In novelists like these the classic hardness of Naturalism was instinctive, for they all saw life as an experience in oppression."

Alfred Kazin
On Native Grounds
(Doubleday/Anchor 1942, 1956) 290-91

"Naturalism—an old word for these new ways of thinking—could not take root here as quickly or as firmly as it could in the richer soil of Europe. Zola had demanded in 1880 that 'a novelist must be only a scientist, an analyst, an anatomist, and his work must have the certainty, the solidity, and the practical application of a work of science,' but until Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (suppressed in 1900), no American novelist took this prescription seriously and produced a wholly original work of pure Naturalism. In the closing years of the nineteenth century the influences of Darwin and Spencer, of Zola and Turgenev, took no single form. One can discover many phases of Naturalism in American fiction—in the moral confusion and dismay of Mark Twain and Harold Frederic, in the harsher forms of Realism of E. W. Howe and Hamlin Garland, in the robust action tales of Frank Norris and Jack London, or in the bold miniatures of Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane. But there was no single writer who could be described as a Naturalist, no one wholly devoted, before Dreiser, to the philosophy, the material, and the method of Zola.

The writers who came nearest to practicing the formula of Naturalism at the turn of the century are four: Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London. Each of these in his way made a significant break with the literal Realism of Howells… Each attempted to apply to art some part of the method or the meaning of the physical and biological sciences. Mainly in the work of these four the technique and the philosophy of serious modern American fiction took shape."

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1016-17

"The very label *Naturalism* often seems erroneously convincing, and leads critics and literary historians to classify indiscriminately. Some critics apparently feel that, as American fiction proceeded to the mid-century mark, there was a 'good' Naturalism and a 'bad' one: that some novelists had rescued their characters from the Naturalist impasse, while others had delighted in meaningless horror. The novelists writing what is roughly called Naturalist fiction have contributed to the modern novel an opportunity, or a number of opportunities.

They have been largely instrumental in discrediting (perhaps with greater effectiveness than Howells) the falsification of human nature provided in the romances of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century fiction. They have given a precedent for a documentary style, which, in all its crudity may be utilized in any way an author chooses. They have also encouraged a great democracy of subject—the acceptance of matter which Howells' 'Young Girl' could not tastefully allow in the fiction she permitted herself to read; in short they have, in Philip Rahv's words, successfully fought 'the long-standing inhibitions against dealing with the underside of life, with those inescapable day-by-day actualities traditionally regarded as too "sordid" and "ugly" for inclusion within an aesthetic framework'….

Whatever symbols are used in Naturalist fiction strike one as having been arbitrarily chosen and not essentially relevant projections of the material. Once decided upon, they are often repeated with a clumsy insistence. The art of condensation should be a fundamental requisite of the novel. However, Naturalists have generally preferred expansion: to add to an event details not needed for a grasp of it does not always lead to sharper insight into it. Finally and primarily, because the Naturalists did not or could not often submit to any discipline (or because they sought the wrong disciplines), most of their novels are extraordinarily weak where a novel ought to be genuinely strong—at the crucial point where event, motive, decision have all to be unified in language and structure.

For those writers who, at the turn of the century, provided America with 'Naturalist fiction,' the philosophic and scientific condition of the late nineteenth century seemed of first and all-consuming importance. Even so, one has always to keep in mind a warning often given, as in this statement by Charles Walcutt: 'All Naturalistic novels have meanings and effects which are not even implied by the philosophical or scientific theories of Naturalism.' These meanings and effects are in part the result of the novelist's rejection of, in part the result of his imperfect understanding of, the theories. The novelist's interest in his characters and the assumptions accepted from the theories often run at cross-purposes. Novelists are willing to violate the strict view, if not at will, at least when convenience dictates. It is one thing to accept a world view with all its arbitrary effects and consequences for the description of human nature, quite another to follow through consistently in documenting the fate and fortune of a character within the restrictive limits of a novel. Haphazard popular interest in scientific theories—and the fundamental ignorance underlying the use made of them—plays well into the hands of such a novelist, who finds it possible in one place to postpone, in another to abandon, Naturalist conclusions as he proceeds in his work.

Nevertheless, these theories were there, and they were respected, as convenient (and sometimes imperative) explanations of human nature. The philosophic imperative led for one thing to a subordination of character, a withdrawal from immediate and intimate perception, and at the same time to a passive documentation, which imposed upon a character (in the hope of explaining him) an abundance of minutiae. In each separate case, the Naturalist view of man and of his relationship with the universe is altered, violated, redirected, in accordance with the formal and aesthetic need of the novel in question. In general, Naturalist theory argued for determinism, demonstrable in several ways, with varying emphasis upon heredity and environment as the determinants.

Social determinism, or man-made evil, was often given as one explanation. The times in which these novels were written were those of industrial expansion, of endless violations of democratic principle, and of apparently inevitable brutalities committed against humanity. On the one hand, inferences from science (especially those made by Herbert Spencer) seemed to explain and often to condone these conditions. On the other, they were seen as peculiarly American, as a part of the American socio-economic history, hence at least eligible for correction and amelioration, the first and most important step of which was exposure. In some of these records—Crane's *Maggie* (1893), for example—there is a quality of indecision regarding

the conditions described; the first inference is that they are inevitable and irremediable; the second, that the characters are in themselves so weak and morally so passive that they deserve what happens to them."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern novel in America
(Regnery/Gateway 1951, 1956, 1963) 31-34

"Just as the line between some local color fiction and some Realism is hard to draw, it is difficult to distinguish clearly and surely between Realism and some 'Naturalism,' another 'ism' about which there was, in this period, a great deal of discussion. In general, the American Naturalists—Crane, Norris, Dreiser, and others—took at least some of their cues from a group of authors, led by Émile Zola (1840-1902), who were important in France after 1880…. For the Naturalistic writers, 'actuality' is located not merely in life itself but also in the philosophical interpretation of life. For Zola, art was Nature, yes, but Nature as it was interpreted by the artist.

In a fashion comparable to that of the scientist, theoretically, the Naturalist exposed his sensibility to life and then 'scientifically' worked with characters and actions known through his experience. But the vast difference between the artist and the scientist whom he thought he was imitating was that the artist, unable really to prove his hypotheses in the laboratory, took them for granted and merely illustrated them from his experience. American Naturalists resembled their French prototypes in treating subjects barred even from realistic writings, in treating lower forms of life—thus differing from Realists in their details. Also each American Naturalist, on the basis of his own reading and his own thinking, created characters and plots illustrative of his own peculiar 'scientific' convictions.

Thus Dreiser, believing that men's actions were 'chemical compulsions,' pictured situations and happenings which made clear that characters had no control over their actions. Believing, further, that 'the race was to the swift and the battle to the strong,' he devised plots which showed weak characters conquered by ruthless and mighty opponents. Norris, excitedly perceiving both unconquerable forces of Nature and the relentless man-made power of the soulless railroad, devised in *The Octopus* a plot which showed Force at work…. And Stephen Crane showed the hero of *The Red Badge of Courage* discovering Naturalistic truths on the blood-drenched field of battle, or showed the correspondent in 'The Open Boat' becoming aware of the complete indifference of nature to puny men."

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953, 1966) 39-40

"To this new literary belief the Realistic novelists contributed their emphasis on accuracy in depicting character, setting, and situation. But Naturalism aimed at more than the scrupulous and objective recording of facts. It wanted facts organized and studied in relation to scientific propositions and sociological concepts so as to show that individuals are molded by forces over which they have no control. To the American writers who believed in Naturalism, Darwin and Marx (and their popularizers)—and later Freud—brilliantly explained what man really was, and European novelists, such as Zola, Flaubert, and Tolstoy, captured this essence in their fiction. From these theorists and artists the American Naturalists came to see man as an animal somewhat cleverer than other beasts but entirely explicable within the framework of natural sciences. Man's destiny, the Naturalists contended, is no different from that of any other species. He has no freedom; his course is rigidly charted by his biological inheritance, his societal environment, his unconscious urges.

These views of the Naturalists were far more extreme than those of even the most closely related Realists, such as Edward Eggleston, who conceived of his characters in *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* 'as parts of society—as in some sense the logical result of environment.' They went beyond the ideas of Howells and his followers who simply took pains to show that people are products of a given society or region. Such middle-of-the-road realists were moderate in their theorizing: they did not insist that man is wholly at the mercy of instincts and passions within and social and economic pressures without."

James D. Hart & Clarence Gohdes, eds.

America's Literature
(Holt 1955, 1965) 600-01

"Like Norris himself, the American Naturalist movement ostensibly takes its departure from the attempt of Zola and his contemporaries to write an new kind of scientific fiction. In the theory of the French school, the ideal was to exercise a free 'experimental' method--to place one's characters in a certain environment, as one places specimens in a laboratory experiment, and to observe without fear or favor how they acted according to natural laws.... Zola's shocking and highly imaginative novels, however, are only loosely 'scientific,' and as Philip Rahv has said, the invocation of science by the French Naturalists came primarily out of a desire to attach to the novel the prestige rather than the method of science. But the French Naturalistic novel--the American less so--had a genuine relation to science in the sense that it did often succeed by means of a massive and careful research, by a ruthless, 'experimental' truth-telling, and by attention to forces, principles of behavior, and the influence of the environment and of heredity. Also, like nineteenth-century science, the Naturalistic novel took a bleakly pessimistic view when considering the ability of the individual to control his fate.... In aesthetic terms this ideology becomes a metaphor of fate and of man's situation in the universe, and so, although Naturalism begins as a special emphasis within the limits of Realism, it culminates in a form of poetry."

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 186-87

"The essence of Naturalism as a literary attitude—that which enlisted Dreiser's intellectual sympathies without necessarily requiring adherence to a deliberate 'school'—was the conviction that society must now be seen entirely as a force of Nature. The most gifted of the Realists, Henry James, had been concerned with society entirely as a human construction… The Naturalists, however, did not see society as a flexible and human network of relationships; they saw it as men in the age of Darwin had learned to see Nature—gross, beyond human decision, a growth out of dark animal origins, a force that created men in all their weakness but was never responsive to their wishes. Dreiser, the young newspaperman of the nineties, did not consciously become an adherent of 'literary' Naturalism; he had only to correlate his reading in Darwin, Haeckel, Huxley, with his daily observations of life in the big American cities to form the essential equation: society is as impersonal as Nature, as primitive as Nature, as merciless as Nature. As man is only a biological accident in the great and still barely deciphered force of Nature, so modern society exerts upon the individual the same crushing force and elicits from him the same helpless submission.

Yet in addition to this 'scientific' equation of society with Nature, there remained in the thinking of young writers like Dreiser a curious kind of religious questioning, a half-articulated mystical veneration of 'life' in all its creative evolution that would have been as strange to earlier novelists like Henry James as the crudity of Dreiser's lower-class characters and their clumsy and inarticulate thought. For Naturalism, though in America never a literary 'school' as it had been in France under the leadership of Zola, was certainly a deliberate and even aggressive rejection of all existing theologies—to writers like Dreiser and Crane (both of whom had grown up in religious orthodoxy), these seemed false when they proclaimed God's concern with man. Yet Naturalism, by the very bitterness with which it proclaimed the lack of purpose and of transcendent meaning in man's existence, showed itself to be sensitive to the life force in a way that was foreign to American novelists of manners, who studied the daily round of social relationships, not an abstraction called the 'universe.' These fierce partnerships and intellectual prejudices of Naturalism were to be embodied in Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900)."

Alfred Kazin
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 462-63

"Disguised as social analysis or statistical, scientific investigation, the muckraking movement became the literary outlet of American Naturalism. If Crane's *Maggie* was unacceptable in fiction, Jane Addams' *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (1912) and G. K. Turner's influential article, 'The Daughters of the Poor' (1909) were widely praised and influential in provoking legislation…. The Naturalistic techniques which James and Howells had developed and sponsored in fiction were used by the muckrakers, then, to make vivid and sensational their portrayals of metropolitan degradation…. From 1905 to 1912, with Crane

and Norris dead and Howells and James ignored, the muckrakers cornered the techniques of literary Naturalism to polarize good and evil, the simple and complex, the country and the city."

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 247-48

"Realism, Naturalism, and symbolism, three styles or moods in the arts and literature, coincide roughly with three generations of European history from 1848 to 1914. Realism can be said to have lasted from 1848 to 1871, Naturalism from 1871 to 1890, symbolism from 1890 to 1914. The dates are approximations, as is always the case in establishing historical periods; there is some overlap and there are many exceptions…. It is possible to read modern Western history as a record of the breakdown of order leading toward disintegration…. Realism and subsequently Naturalism in literature aimed at describing unflinchingly the horrors of modern civilization as seen in the lives of the poor wretches who labored in mines or factories, of prostitutes, degenerates, and criminals… Idealist philosophy like Romanticism was rejected by these men of the 1850's because its abstract concepts seemed arid and irrelevant to real life. They thirsted for something more concrete and human, something nearer the lives of actual men and women in actual situations….

At the end of Zola's era, writers like Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf accused the so-called Realists and Naturalists of ignoring true reality, that of the interior mind. They said the Naturalists only described externals. Proust, Woolf and other psychological Realists turned for their subject matter to the subtle dissection of mental states, and wrote in an entirely different way from their predecessors. Proust wrote about an aristocratic, highly restricted, and artificial social milieu, presumably because psychological nuances are more easily studied in such circles. Here again the term Realism hardly defines the difference between the social or externalistic novel and the psychological or interior one, because both concern different manifestations of that protean universal, 'reality'….

Zola's novels are held together by a vision that has nothing to do with science. This has become a classic comment on his 'Naturalism.' He could approximate the scientific method in collection of 'facts'; he could remain morally neutral toward his facts by overtly neither praising nor blaming. But his treatment of his material was another matter. Here, no doubt unconsciously, he used many criteria of selection not drawn from his facts. Underneath the trappings of scientific objectivity, Zola structured his tales much as novelists always have done, using myths, archetypes, value judgments. He faced and made moral choices which no amount of fact could resolve for him….

Naturalism and Realism, especially the former, may be said to reflect a collapse of the traditional value-structure of Western Civilization…. Lacking such a framework of values, or unable to discover one, one may resort to a vivid Impressionism that presents random samples of material, seeking to convey these 'slices of life' with a feeling for 'Realism.'… 'Naturalism' was often regarded as a subdivision or offshoot of Realism, sometimes as a separate and rather different school. Naturalism tended to become important at a somewhat later date than Realism: beginning in the 1860's, it dominated the 1870's, but in the 1880's confronted a sharp challenge from the symbolists. Impressionism in painting is a parallel phenomenon, and the closeness of the two movements is underlined by the friendship of Émile Zola, the founder and leader of Naturalism, with the Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, and by Zola's keen interest in painting….

The materialism or Naturalism of Zola's school was its philosophical belief that man is a creature determined by physical laws and is subject to scientific investigation exactly as material objects and animals are. Writing somewhat later of the American novelist Theodore Dreiser, the critic Stuart Sherman declared the difference between Realism and Naturalism to be that the former is based upon a theory of human conduct and the latter upon a theory of animal behavior. The shadow of Darwin had intervened between the 1850's and the 1870's. Many people now felt that men were the creatures of instinct, Nature an amoral struggle for power. Zola was more directly influenced by the French medical scientist Claude Bernard than by Darwin, yet his works help prove that a spirit of aggressive 'scientism' was in the air claiming for the methods of physical science an application to human beings. Naturalism also carried insinuations of a godless universe. To be 'Naturalistic' meant, in one important sense, to explain all things without recourse to supernatural power. Traditional religion came under attack not only from Darwinism

but from other directions, most notably the so-called 'higher criticism' which used modern methods of scholarship to study the Bible….

On the whole the Naturalists' final position was pessimistic. In the 1890's, with Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and such profoundly important non-literary figures as Sigmund Freud, we are presented with a bleak universe, deterministic but ruled by blind or evil forces, godless, full of pain and tragedy, where man is helplessly trapped. Perhaps this mood only reflected the condition of civilization, which was becoming increasingly mechanized and dehumanized."

Roland N. Stromberg, ed.
Realism, Naturalism, and Symbolism:
Modes of Thought and Expression in Europe, 1848-1914
(Harper 1968) ix, xv-xxii

DEFENSE OF NATURALISM

Donald Pizer

"Most literary critics and historians who attempt definitions are aware of the dangers and advantages inherent in this enterprise. But few, I believe, recognize that many literary genres and modes have their barriers of established terms and ideas to overcome or outflank. The writer who seeks to define tragedy usually finds that his definition takes shape around such traditional guideposts as the tragic hero, the tragic flaw, recognition and catharsis, and so on. American Naturalism, as a concept, has two such channeled approaches to its definition. The first is that since Naturalism comes after Realism, and since it seems to take literature in the same direction as Realism, it is primarily an 'extension' or continuation of Realism--only a little different. The second almost inevitable approach involves this difference. The major distinction between Realism and Naturalism, most critics agree, is the particular philosophical orientation of the Naturalists. A traditional and widely accepted concept of American Naturalism, therefore, is that it is essentially Realism infused with a pessimistic determinism.

Richard Chase argues that American Naturalism is Realism with a 'necessitarian ideology,' and George J. Becker (defining all Naturalism, including American) considers it as 'no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some Realists,' the position being a 'pessimistic materialistic determinism.' The common belief is that the Naturalists were like the Realists in their fidelity to the details of contemporary life, but that they depicted everyday life with a greater sense of the role of such causal forces as heredity and environment in determining behavior and belief. This traditional approach to Naturalism through Realism and through philosophical determinism is historically justifiable and has served a useful purpose, but it has also handicapped thinking both about the movement as a whole and about individual works within the movement. It has resulted in much condescension toward those writers who are supposed to be Naturalists yet whose fictional sensationalism (an aspect of Romanticism) and moral ambiguity (a quality inconsistent with the absolutes of determinism) appear to make their work flawed specimens of the mode.

I would like, therefore, to propose a modified definition of late nineteenth-century American Naturalism. For the time being, let this be a working definition, to be amplified and made more concrete by the illustrations from which it has been drawn. I suggest that the Naturalistic novel usually contains two tensions or contradictions, and that the two in conjunction comprise both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience. In other words, the two constitute the theme and form of the Naturalistic novel. The first tension is that between the subject matter of the Naturalistic novel and the concept of man which emerges from this subject matter.

The Naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. His characters are the poor, the uneducated, the unsophisticated. 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 involve sexual adventure or bodily strength and which culminate in desperate moments and violent death. A Naturalistic

novel is thus an extension of Realism only in the sense that both modes often deal with the local and contemporary. The Naturalist, however, discovers in this material the extraordinary and excessive in human nature.

The second tension involves the theme of the Naturalistic novel. 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, discomforting 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 enterprise. The Naturalist appears to say that although the individual may be a cipher in a world made amoral by man's lack of responsibility for his fate, the imagination refuses to accept this formula as the total meaning of life and so seeks a new basis for man's sense of his own dignity and importance.

The Naturalistic novel is therefore not so superficial or reductive as it implicitly appears to be in its conventional definition. It involves a belief that life on its lowest levels is not so simple as it seems to be from higher levels. It suggests that even the least significant human being can feel and strive powerfully and can suffer the extraordinary consequences of his emotions, and that no range of human experience is free of the moral complexities and ambiguities which Milton set his fallen angels to debating. Naturalism reflects an affirmative ethical conception of life, for it asserts the value of all life by endowing the lowest character with emotion and defeat and with moral ambiguity, no matter how poor or ignoble he may seem. The Naturalistic novel derives much of its aesthetic effect from these contrasts. It involves us in the experience of a life both commonplace and extraordinary, both familiar and strange, both simple and complex. It pleases us with its sensationalism without affronting our sense of probability. It discovers the 'romance of the commonplace,' as Frank Norris put it. Thus, the melodramatic sensationalism and moral 'confusion' which are often attacked in the Naturalistic novel should really be incorporated into a normative definition of the mode and be recognized as its essential constituents."

Donald Pizer, ed.
"Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism"
McTeague by Frank Norris
(Norton Critical Edition 1977, 1997) 306-08

Michael Hollister (2015)