American Literary Naturalism: A Passage to Modernity

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As the 19th century gave way to the 20th century in the U.S.A., American writers drew their inspiration from a variety of sources. European ideas of human nature were in favor. New scientific discoveries found their way into literary expression. This paper will explore the roots of the new literature, called naturalism. It will be shown that modern literature had its beginning in the naturalist fiction of the late 19th century.

In 1898, two American war correspondents met on a ship bound for Cuba during the Spanish-American War. It was the first and only time these two young men would ever meet. Although they had similar backgrounds in education and experience, they were, on the surface, very different in temperament and appearance. Stephen Crane neglected to change out of his pajamas, he discarded his razor and went about unshaven, and he lounged around *The Three Friends* drinking beer. Frank Norris, on the other hand, projected himself as “Ivy League”, stood aloof from his shipmate, and presented himself as too good for the likes of Crane.

Neither of the two men could have predicted that their names would become figureheads of the American literary movement known as naturalism. Crane had by then published *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), and Norris had read it. He considered Crane’s writing to have contradictions, vis-à-vis the style in which the characters were depicted. Norris himself would not publish his first novel until a year later. If they had met again, when their literary reputations were firmly established, they most likely would have disagreed on whether they were truly “naturalists”.

Naturalism had been circulating in U.S. literary markets since the 1880s,

when the French author Emile Zola's novels began appearing in English. (Lawlor 59) Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels tell the story of two families during the period of Napoloan III. His characters inevitably descend into degradation–poverty, insanity, alcoholism, infidelity, suicide. Zola's emphasis on the tawdry had a great influence on American writers. For example, Crane's Maggie became a prostitute.

This paper will explore the basic foundations of naturalism, briefly summarize a few of the most notable works of the naturalists, and seek to find a common thread by which to define the literary movement. As with Zola, American naturalist writers reacted to historical and social phenomena in a way that brought their characters, generally, towards a lower, more natural condition.

A simple definition of naturalism is "the idea that art and literature should present the world and people just as science shows they really are." (High 87) This would seem to coincide with the definition of a previous, overlapping school of literature, that of realism. "Some writers are classified as realist on one hand, as naturalist on the other. Theodore Dreisser, Stephen Crane and Willa Cather are in this group. The main criteria for naturalism is the idea of determinism, that humans (and animals) are capable of acting only within pre-determined environments." (Binford 72)

The key word in High's definition that distinguishes realist from naturalist literature is science. Naturalism followed upon the heels of various scientific theories and ideas. Charles Darwin had published his work on the evolution of species. Sigmund Freud plumbed the depths of human consciousness. Karl Marx had rewritten the laws of economics. New inventions were filling the landscape–electricity, the telephone, automobiles, the phonograph. In the workplace, individual craftsmanship gave way to assembly lines and mass production. The science, therefore, includes a wide range of social, physical and psychological disciplines. Cumulatively, the effects of science completely transformed the day-to-day activities of

Americans. The naturalists looked at the world around them and concluded that free will, actions initiated by the self, the personal accomplishment of goals, had been overwhelmed by the forces of economics, unconscious desires, natural selection.

Naturalist writers concluded that, in the course of deterministic forces out of the control of the individual, humans are often primitive, brutish, animalistic. A good example is the description of the central character in Norris's *McTeague* (1899), published the year after his meeting with Crane on *The Three Friends*.

> For McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes of muscle, slowly, ponderously. His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vices, the hands of the old-time car-boy. Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and finger. His head was square-cut, angular; the jaw salient, like that of the carnivora.
>
> McTeague's mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man. Altogether he suggested the draught horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient. (5)

McTeague was a dentist, which explains his need to extract a "refractory tooth." A cursory look at the physical description reveals that McTeague resembles a creature somewhere between a gorilla and a sloth. He's "giant", moving about "slowly, ponderously." His hands are covered with "stiff yellow hair." His head is "square-cut," bringing to mind "carnivora." Norris even goes so far as to liken him to a horse, presumably a non-violent horse, as he makes it clear that there is "nothing vicious about the man." However, the description is a foreshadowing of events to come.

One of McTeague's patients is an attractive woman named Trina. McTeague gives her a dose of ether for an anesthetic, and seeing her helpless in his dental chair creates a crisis for McTeague. "Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that in him were so

close to the surface leaped to life, shouting and clamoring."

> . . . It was the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world–the sudden panther leap of the animal, lips drawn, fangs aflash, hideous, monstrous, not to be resisted, and the simultaneous arousing of the other man, the better self that cries, "Down, down," without knowing why; that grips the monster; that fights to strangle it, to thrust it down and back. (34)

The "draught horse" has transformed into a monster. The biological components of nature, as explained by Darwin, have surfaced in the form of the dentist McTeague. McTeague's character includes a few more complications than his simple animal urges. He has within him not only the animal impulse to "leap," but also the economic urge to aquire money, which takes the form of an obsession with gold. I will return to that later, as it is another facet of naturalism; many characters are fascinated and/or controlled by the desire for money and the things it will buy. First I will explore a bit further the connection between naturalism and the atavistic animal impulse.

The primitive, Darwinian instincts develop similarly in Jack London's novel *The Call of the Wild*, but the character is a personified dog. It may seem that the dog is moving towards becoming human, yet London's literary device is to identify the dog, Buck, with the savagery inherent in the human race. Whether London intended it or not, *The Call of the Wild* is viewed as an allegorical tale of the human condition.

Buck is taken from his comfortable California home by unscrupulous men who sell him to a broker, who ships the dogs to the gold fields in the wilderness of northwest Canada. There, the dogs are beaten with clubs, trained to pull sleds, and exposed to a primeval world. Buck hears "the call of the wild," the howling of a pack of wild wolves, and escapes from the gold miners to join them. He therefore regresses from human civilization to the primordial, much as McTeague does through the course of Norris's novel. *The Call of the Wild*, by the way, was lavishly praised by critics in both

the U.S. and in Europe and propelled London onto the international literary scene.

Norris's companion on *The Three Friends*, Stephen Crane, was likewise inclined to write of characters in decline. He varied his settings, from a civil war battlefield (*The Red Badge of Courage*, 1895) to a frontier town (*The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*, 1894) to an urban environment (*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*). Maggie is based on Crane's experience when he lived in the New York slum called the Bowery, as well as on the novels of Zola. (Pizer 41)

The story begins with a day in the life of the Johnson family. Maggie abuses her infant brother, Maggie's brother Jimmie pounds on Maggie, then he is pounded by Mrs. Johnson. Mr. Johnson comes home drunk, hits Jimmie with an empty beer pail, then fights with Mrs. Johnson. They somehow manage to sit down to eat dinner, and

> Crane's description of the Johnson children eating combines the warfare and cave images into a single metaphor of primitive competition for food: "The babe sat with his feet dangling high from a precarious infant chair and gorged his small stomach. Jimmie forced, with feverish rapidity, the grease-enveloped pieces between his wounded lips. Maggie, with side glances of fear of interruption, ate like a small pursued tigress." (41–2)

Maggie divides her time between a home damaged by strife and drunkenness, her job at a clothing factory, and in the audience of popular Bowery melodramas. She sees in the melodramas a consistent theme, that young maidens are to be rescued by a gentlemanly suitor. She decides that her rescuer is to be a handsome bartender named Pete. Pete, of course, takes advantage of Maggie, discards her, whereupon Maggie is banished from her home by her mother. Forced to live on the mean streets, she turns to prostitution. Her standards decline, she is seen soliciting men lower and lower on the social scale. The book ends with her suicide.

Maggie shares with her brother Jimmie a common perception of the world. Neither character has an understanding of the world outside of the

Bowery, and "neither has the will or intelligence to make any sense of their life beyond a response to the immediacies of Bowery conditions." (42) As Crane wrote in his inscription to *Maggie*, the novel "tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless." (130)

Crane's effort "to show" the effects of the environment, London's transformation of Buck from civilized to wild, Norris's depiction of McTeague, complete with his brutish nature, are examples of naturalism's dependence on Darwin's biological determinism. Darwin concluded that innate biological forces, in tandem with the environment, allowed for very limited freedom of choice. According to High, naturalist writers

> . . . were greatly influenced by Zola's scientific study of man, by Darwin's theory of evolution and by the ideas of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Writers at the turn of the century were beginning to think about traditional social morality in a new way. Traditional values had been based on the idea of individual responsibility: the individual can and must choose between good and evil. but now writers were asking whether the individual could really make such a choice. When they looked at the many forces influencing a person, the area of individual choice and responsibility seemed quite small. (98)

Not only were the naturalists interested in the biological determinism taught by Darwin, they were likewise affected by the economic ideas of Karl Marx. Previously noted in this paper, the dentist in Norris's McTeague was not only pre-disposed to animalistic behavior, he was also obsessed with acquiring gold. Gold has always been a standard of wealth and upward social mobility. McTeague's story continues, as he marries the girl in his dentist chair who arouses his animal instincts. The marriage, in a social sense, sets him on the road of economic, evolutionary progress. He "gives up steam beer and learns to enjoy consumer recreations like window-shopping. He starts wearing a silk hat and commences to have opinions."

(Levenson 172) He receives a gift from Trina, a large gold tooth which he displays outside his "Dental Parlors." The gold tooth symbolizes, to McTeague, his rise from obscurity and poverty to the middle class. Norris, therefore, "plays off two types of (naturalistic) discourse of origins–Darwinian atavism and, on the other hand, the discourse of gold, which traces an economic genealogy . . ." (Tandt 134)

At the end of the story, the obsession with gold destroys McTeague. On a quest for a gold mine in a California desert, corrupted by his obsession, he reverts to his animal brutishness and kills his partner, who had somehow managed to manacle himself to McTeague in the course of the struggle. Left in the desert with no water, handcuffed to a corpse, McTeague takes a last desperate look at the terrain. "All about him, vast, interminable, stretched the measureless leagues of Death Valley." (485)

In another novel, Norris refers to an actual historical incident in Mussel Shoals, California. *The Octopus* was the first of a proposed trilogy (the third novel was never written) in which Norris uses wheat as a metaphor for the economic reality of America in the late 19th century. The "octopus" of the title refers to the expanding system of railroads. Along with railroads came ownership of the land, powerful financial interests, and conflicts with other tenants of the land. In Mussel Shoals, the battle was fought between the wheat farmers and the Southern Pacific Railroad. Norris's sympathies clearly lie with the farmers. Yet, like McTeague, they were overwhelmed by economic determinism. In *The Octopus*, Norris shows:

> . . . how the ranchers were also corrupted by money, how they exploited the land for immediate gain, and how they were also leaving a legacy of greed, bribery, and deceitful influence. There were no innocents in this economic progress–only the working wheat, embodying the great force of nature itself. (Lehan 63)

The sympathy for the farmers stems from the American tradition of

Jeffersonian agrarianism, in which the farmer's "freedom and independence are based on the ownership and the proper husbanding of the land." (Tandt 89) The attitude of the protaganist, the Farmer's League, towards the land is anything but "proper." They

> . . . resorted to thoroughly mechanized forms of organization. Holdings were huge and machines were numerous and powerful. The farmers are characterized by a toughness and recklessness that fits their industrial methods . . . To get all there was out of the land, to squeeze it dry, to exhaust it, seemed their policy. (73–4)

Tandt further notes that in the midst of the struggle, ostensibly between the forces of industrialism and the agrarian tradition, the farmers themselves "have already joined the new order of industries and trusts." (74)

The new order is the result of the evolutionary concept of "survival of the fittest." The railroad trust had more money than the farmers, therefore they had more power and influence. The "new order" had little sympathy for nostalgiac traditions of Jeffersonian agrarianism.

The notion of "survival of the fittest" works as a connector between two strains of conflict that drive naturalist literature. On the one hand it is internal: the conflict of primitive biological drives with modern civilized behavior. On the other hand it is external, the power of the economic machinery versus the individual. McTeague, though in possession of brute strength, was overcome by the obsession with gold, the desire to further his economic status. The Farmers League, though part of the "new order," was overwhelmed by the greater power of the railroad trust. Naturalist literature decrees that the one consistent rule is that the world is determined by survival of the fittest.

How then, are we to explain the victory of the protaganist in another naturalist novel, Theodore Dreisser's *Sister Carrie* (1900)? In brief, the story tells of a young woman, Carrie Meeber, who moves from her country home to Chicago. She brings with her an eagerness to acquire the finer things

of life, the fashionable objects like clothes, the intangible desire for social status, the respectability of being associated with powerful men. Carrie starts out looking for a job and ends up in a department store, where she compares her drab country attire with the high fashion worn by ladies who rudely brush past her. She "begins to want what she sees other woman have–their clothes, and something more, incorporated in contemporary definitions of consumerism; the self that is delineated by acquisition. In Carrie's mind, clothes make the woman." (Gelfant 182)

Carrie believes that clothes make the man as well. The book was banned in the U.S. until 1912, mainly because Carrie passes quite effortlessly from one relationship to another, in an era when such promiscuity was viewed as sinful. Eventually she settles on Hurstwood, whom "she evaluates according to his worth–his wealth, position, and sexuality–by his "rich plaid vest, mother-of-pearl buttons, and soft black shoes." (182)

The novel details the decline of Hurstwood, who ends up reduced to nothing; "he has no money, no clothes, no one, and, dangerously in a market economy, no exchange value." (183) He finds the door open to a safe, steals the money, gets caught, and commits suicide. In the meantime, Carrie has risen from playing a bit part in a Chicago melodrama to being a famous actress. She has acquired the things she wanted–money, fame, fashion, social status.

How to explain the contradiction here from naturalism's point of view that the strong survive, the weak perish? Carrie has transformed herself from a penniless waif, naïve to the ways of the city, overwhelmed by the necessities of urban struggle, to a member of the upper tier of society. Hurstwood, whom one might predict would be victorious in the struggle, ends up saying "What's the use?" and dying a pauper's death.

Chiefly, it's because Carrie identified herself with "the class of people who owned America" (Tandt 58) that she not only survived, but excelled at the game. She managed to turn the complexities of urban life to her own

advantage by focussing on the one thing she started out with, a desire to consume. She identifies with the values of the market place, and becomes, in the shape of a stage actress, a high-priced commodity. She has joined the new order of things, the same new order that defeated the wheat farmers in *The Octopus*.

Yet, if the new order is represented by survival of the fittest, if Hurstwood and the Farmer's League were also members of the new order, why then did Carrie succeed while the others failed? It is another characteristic of naturalism that one character's tragedy is just as accidental as another's success. Dreiser himself does not try to explain how events unfold in this way. He puts it this way: "the individual doesn't count much in the situation. We are moved about like chessmen. We have no control. It is a most terrible truth that the purposes of nature have no relation to the purposes of men." (High 114)

Conspicuously absent from this paper is an analysis of anything written by women. There are plenty of female characters in naturalist literature, written about by men. However, there were few women who wrote in the naturalist genre. Before reviewing women authors, it is necessary to point out that in the 19th to early 20th centuries, women were not supposed to write. These were times when morality was dictated by Victorian, puritanical norms. Women were expected to stay home, and perhaps read, but never write. Some women authors contrived a male pen-name in order to get published. When naturalist novels took center stage in American literature, the themes of brute conflict, inner primitive struggles, quests for power and wealth, were all clearly in the masculine domain.

One of the prominent authors of the time, Edith Wharton, explained that "professional authorship was socially dubious–particularly indelicate in a female." Wharton wrote in her autobiography that her literary ambitions encountered disapproval within her family and throughout her social world. (Hochman 211–12)

Up to a point, Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* (1905), "neatly exemplifies the naturalist plot of individual decline, with its concern for the pressures of environment and circumstance, and its focus on forces (both inner and outer) beyond the control of the characters." (212) The heroine, Lily Bart, has been brought up to see herself as a bit of decoration for men of wealth and power. She hates it, deciding that if she allows herself to become the property of one of these men, she will be bored to death. When she tries to exercise her freedom and choose a man more to her liking, she is ostracized as immoral and commits suicide.

What separates Wharton's writing, and that of another naturalist author, Kate Chopin (*The Awakening*, 1899), from their male counterparts was their use of chronological time in their stories of decline.

> By employing a "naturalist" structure, Wharton and Chopin also sought authorial status beyond the confines of "women's" writing. It would be difficult to find a late-nineteenth century fictional model more clearly associated with male authorship and virile fiction than the naturalist plot of decline. However, in adapting the naturalist plot to their purposes, Wharton and Chopin made some original changes. Through their handling of narrative time, in particular, they complicated the sense of downward slide typical of most naturalist texts–that relentless descent with its few landings or level places. (212–13)

The handling of the "narrative time" represents a departure from the sequence of events presented in a chronological order by London, Crane, Dreiser and other male naturalists. Flashbacks, dream sequences, the telling of a story within a story, are all employed by Wharton and Chopin to manipulate the narrative time. The stories are not so much a sequence of events, but rather a "seductive enclosure into which she would invite the reader." (224)

It would seem from these brief summaries of naturalist literature that there is nothing to be gained from the reading, of any of them, except

for a morose, pessimistic, almost perverse view of human nature. In fact, most naturalists were idealistic. London, for example, was a renowned socialist. Norris wrote, in an essay titled "Zola as a Romantic Writer" (1896), regarding the redeeming characteristics of naturalism.

> These great, terrible dramas no longer happen among the personnel of a feudal nobility, those who are in the forefront of the marching world, but among the lower–almost the lowest–classes; those who have been thrust or wrenched from the ranks, 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. (Pizer 122)

Pizer makes a case for the humanistic value of naturalism, starting with the grandfather of the movement, Emile Zola. Earlier I wrote that science, both physical and social, provided a foundation for the naturalist writers. Zola believed that fiction "should above all be truthful rather than polite, amusing, or ennobling, and truth was achieved by depicting life in accord with scientific laws and methods." (38)

Naturalism and its close cousin realism have in common a reaction to previous writers, generally classified as romantic, who agreed "neither to see nor record" (38) that part of human and natural experience that is limiting and inadequate. The work of Crane, Norris, Dreiser, and London has many of the characteristics of Zola's naturalism; they too "find man limited by the violent and irrational within himself and by the oppressively restrictive within society." (39)

However, American writers did not subscribe carte blanche to Zola.

> Each explores a different aspect of American life out of his own imaginative response to his world rather than in accord with a pattern and philosophy established by Zola. Each responds, in other words, . . . to the broad-based contemporary belief that the novel was a literary form especially capable of exploring neglected areas of the interaction between social real-

> ity and the inner life, and that Zola was not the model for this effort but rather merely the leading wedge in a progressive literary movement. (39)

The "leading wedge" might be paraphrased as the gospel according to a European prophet. The American writers found themselves able to express truth through the lives of slum dwellers, young women who slid into unsanctioned behavior, men who were consumed by their biological impulses, the daily grind of the impoverished. They likewise felt it was their duty to expose the dark underside, to cut through the veneer of what was widely publicized as the Gilded Age of the 1890s, in which technological advancements were proclaimed as beneficial to all humanity. The target was not so much the weakness of the protaganist in the naturalistic novel, it was rather the "neglected areas of the interaction between social reality and the inner life." (39)

Each writer entered the opening created by Zola's "wedge" in a way that allowed him or her to explore the changing nature of the American experience. It does require of the reader an ability to read between the lines, to follow the intent of the writer and see the "compassion for the fallen, hope of betterment for the lot of the oppressed, of bitterness toward the remediable that lies unremedied." (40) There is a response by the naturalists to the urbanization and industrialization of the American landscape. In this response, their tragic view of the human condition represents a link between naturalism and humanism.

Earlier in this paper, I wrote that I would try to find a common thread by which to define the literary movement of naturalism. I found that there is no solid thread connecting all of the works. As Dreiser pointed out, events happen by chance; there is no explaining why a man in his prime might suffer decline and failure, while a naive country girl would adapt so easily and successfully to a new and competitive environment. Meanwhile, Darwin pointed out that every living creature exists according

to pre-determined characteristics, therefore life is simplified to survival of the fittest. A case could be made that naturalism is an exploration of this contradiction.

It may also be said that the naturalists were primarily driven by the economic theories of Karl Marx, or the atheistic philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, or the maneuverings of the subconscious explained by Sigmund Freud. There are characteristics of these scientific frameworks in each of the naturalistic novels, yet no discovery dominates the whole body of naturalist literature.

By virtue of the size of the shift in American literature, away from the romantic and towards a scientific approach, naturalist writers made a path along which modern literature would follow. In tandem with realism, naturalism has proven adaptable to new social and scientific structures. A modern reader can expect to find recent literature similar to the early naturalists, in theme, style, the depiction of characters and their tragic downfall. A thread that began with Zola and wove itself into the fabric of American literature continues into the present day.

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