

Naturalism is a literary movement beginning in the late nineteenth century, similar to literary realism in its rejection of Romanticism, but distinct in its embrace of determinism, detachment, scientific objectivism, and social commentary. The movement largely traces to the theories of French author Émile Zola.^[1]

Background

Literary Naturalism traces back most directly^{[2][3]} to Émile Zola's "The Experimental Novel" (1880), which details Zola's concept of a naturalistic novel,^[4] which traces philosophically to Auguste Comte's positivism,^[2] but also to physiologist Claude Bernard and historian Hippolyte Taine.^{[1][4]} Comte had proposed a scientific method that "went beyond empiricism, beyond the passive and detached observation of phenomena". The application of this method "called for a scientist to conduct controlled experiments that would either prove or disprove hypotheses regarding those phenomena". Zola took this scientific method and argued that naturalism in literature should be like controlled experiments in which the characters function as the phenomena.^[5] Naturalism began as a branch of literary realism, and realism had favored fact, logic, and impersonality over the imaginative, symbolic, and supernatural. Frank Norris, an American journalist and novelist, whose work was predominantly in the naturalist genre, "placed realism, romanticism, and naturalism in a dialectic, in which realism and romanticism were opposing forces", and naturalism was a mixture of the two. Norris's idea of naturalism differs from Zola's in that "it does not mention materialistic determinism or any other philosophic idea".^[6]

Apart from Zola and Norris' views on the movement, there are various literary critics who have their own separate views on the matter. As said by Paul Civello, these critics can be grouped into four broad, and often overlapping, groups: early theorists, history-of-idea critics, European influence critics, and recent theorists. The early theorists saw naturalism thematically and in terms of literary technique. The history-of-idea critics understood it as an expression of the central ideas to an era. The European influence critics viewed it in much the same way as Zola. And recent theorists have either re-conceptualized naturalism as a narrative form, or denied its existence entirely.^[5]

Some say that naturalism is dead, or that it "may have never lived at all: even in the works of Émile Zola", its founder. "In 1900 an obituary entitled "The Passing of Naturalism" in *The Outlook* officially declared the literary movement deceased", and that Zola's attempt to create a scientific literature was a failure.^[7] This certainly wasn't the first time Zola's novel had been criticized however. After his novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) had been sharply criticized for both contents and language, in a foreword for its second edition (1868), in a mixture of pride and defiance, he wrote: "Le groupe d'écrivains naturalistes auquel j'ai l'honneur d'appartenir a assez de courage et d'activité pour produire des oeuvres fortes, portant en elles leur défense",^[8] which translates as: "The group of naturalist writers I have the honor to belong to have enough courage and activity to produce strong works, carrying within them their defense."

American Naturalism

Naturalism in American literature traces to Frank Norris, whose theories were markedly different from Zola's, particularly to the status of naturalism within the loci of realism and Romanticism; Norris thought of naturalism as being Romantic, and thought Zola as being "a realist of realists".^[3] To Link, while American naturalism had trends, its definition had no unified critical consensus.^[3] Link's examples include Stephen Crane, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris, with William Dean Howells and Henry James being clear markers on the other side of the naturalist/realist divide.

The center of Crane's naturalism is recognized as *The Open Boat*, which portrayed a naturalistic view of man with his depiction of a group of survivors adrift in a boat. The humans with their creation confronted the sea and the world of nature. In the experiences of these men, Crane articulated the illusion of gods and the realization of the universe's indifference.^[9]

William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*, a story about a woman who killed her lover, is considered an example of a narrative within the naturalism category. This story, which also used Gothic elements, presented a tale that highlighted the extraordinary and excessive features in human nature and the social environment that influences them.^[10] The protagonist, Miss Emily, was forced to lead an isolated life, and that - combined with her mental illness - made insanity her inevitable fate. The environment in the forms of a class structure based on slavery^[11] and social change,^[12] together with heredity, represented the forces beyond her control.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalism_\(literature\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalism_(literature))

Another Definition

The term *naturalism* describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Unlike realism, which focuses on literary technique, naturalism implies a philosophical position: for naturalistic writers, since human beings are, in Emile Zola's phrase, "human beasts," characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings. Zola's 1880 description of this method in *Le roman experimental* (*The Experimental Novel*, 1880) follows Claude Bernard's medical model and the historian Hippolyte Taine's observation that "virtue and vice are products like vitriol and sugar"--that is, that human beings as "products" should be studied impartially, without moralizing about their natures. Other influences on American naturalists include Herbert Spencer and Joseph LeConte.

Through this objective study of human beings, naturalistic writers believed that the laws behind the forces that govern human lives might be studied and understood. Naturalistic writers thus used a version of the scientific method to write their novels; they studied human beings governed by their instincts and passions as well as the ways in which the characters' lives were governed by forces of heredity and environment. Although they used the techniques of accumulating detail pioneered by

the realists, the naturalists thus had a specific object in mind when they chose the segment of reality that they wished to convey.

In George Becker's famous and much-annotated and contested phrase, naturalism's philosophical framework can be simply described as "pessimistic materialistic determinism." Another such concise definition appears in the introduction to *American Realism: New Essays*. In that piece, "The Country of the Blue," Eric Sundquist comments, "Revelling in the extraordinary, the excessive, and the grotesque in order to reveal the immutable bestiality of Man in Nature, naturalism dramatizes the loss of individuality at a physiological level by making a Calvinism without God its determining order and violent death its utopia" (13).

A modified definition appears in Donald Pizer's *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*, Revised Edition (1984):

[T]he naturalistic novel usually contains two tensions or contradictions, and . . . 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 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, 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 enterprise. (10-11)

For further definitions, see also *The Cambridge Guide to American Realism and Naturalism*, Charles Child Walcutt's *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream*, June Howard's *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Lee Clark Mitchell's *Determined Fictions*, Mark Selzer's *Bodies and Machines*, and other works from the naturalism bibliography. See Lars Ahnebrink, Richard Lehan, and Louis J.

Budd for information on the intellectual European and American backgrounds of naturalism.

Characters. Frequently but not invariably ill-educated or lower-class characters whose lives are governed by the forces of heredity, instinct, and passion. Their attempts at exercising free will or choice are hamstrung by forces beyond their control; social Darwinism and other theories help to explain their fates to the reader. See June Howard's *Form and History* for information on the spectator in naturalism.

Setting. Frequently an urban setting, as in Norris's *McTeague*. See Lee Clark Mitchell's *Determined Fictions*, Philip Fisher's *Hard Facts*, and James R. Giles's *The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America*.

Techniques and plots. Walcutt says that the naturalistic novel offers "clinical, panoramic, slice-of-life" drama that is often a "chronicle of despair" (21). The novel of degeneration--Zola's *L'Assommoir* and Norris's *Vandover and the Brute*, for example--is also a common type.

1. Walcutt identifies survival, determinism, violence, and taboo as key themes.
2. The "brute within" each individual, composed of strong and often warring emotions: passions, such as lust, greed, or the desire for dominance or pleasure; and the fight for survival in an amoral, indifferent universe. The conflict in naturalistic novels is often "man against nature" or "man against himself" as characters struggle to retain a "veneer of civilization" despite external pressures that threaten to release the "brute within."
3. Nature as an indifferent force acting on the lives of human beings. The romantic vision of Wordsworth--that "nature never did betray the heart that loved her"--here becomes Stephen Crane's view in "The Open Boat": "This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual--nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent."
4. The forces of heredity and environment as they affect--and afflict--individual lives.
5. An indifferent, deterministic universe. Naturalistic texts often describe the futile attempts of human beings to exercise free will, often ironically presented, in this universe that reveals free will as an illusion.

Authors identified as naturalists, by era

(Before 1895)

Joseph Kirkland, *Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1887)

Rebecca Harding Davis

E. W. Howe, *The Story of a Country Town*

Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master*

Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896)

1895-1920 and beyond

Frank Norris

Theodore Dreiser

Jack London

Stephen Crane

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905)

Ellen Glasgow, *Barren Ground* (1925)

Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902)

Henry Blake Fuller, *The Cliff-Dwellers* (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1893)

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

Hamlin Garland, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895)

Ambrose Bierce

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

David Graham Phillips, *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1917)

Robert Herrick, *The Memoirs of an American Citizen* (1905)

Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917)

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919)

1920s-1959

John Dos Passos (1896-1970), *U.S.A.* trilogy (1938): *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936)

James T. Farrell (1904-1979), *Studs Lonigan* (1934)

John Steinbeck (1902-1968), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939); *The Winter of Our Discontent*

Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945)

Norman Mailer (1923-2007), *The Naked and the Dead* (1948)

William Styron, *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951)

Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953)

Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm*

Harriet Arnow, *The Dollmaker* (1954)

1960s-

William Faulkner

Ernest Hemingway

Joyce Carol Oates, *them*

Hubert Selby, Jr., *Last Exit to Brooklyn*

Don DeLillo

Cormac McCarthy

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no

temples.

--Stephen Crane, "The Open Boat"

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 (1894, 1899)

<https://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/natural.htm>