

Late Nineteenth Century - Naturalism: A Brief Introduction

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

- 1) That it is an extension or continuation of Realism with the addition of pessimistic determinism.
 - "... no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some Realists ... (that position being one of) a pessimistic, materialistic determinism." - George J. Becker
 - It is Realism with a "necessitation ideology." - Richard Chase
- 2) That it is different from Realism.

Subject Matter & Characterization in Naturalistic Fiction

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

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

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

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

2. The concept of a naturalistic character:

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

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

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

Free Will or Determinism -

In Naturalism, characters do not have free will; external and internal forces, environment, or heredity control their behavior. This belief is called determinism. All determinists believe in the

existence of the will, but the will is often enslaved on account of different reasons.



Study Question

Whether in anticipation of or in the general climate of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), sexuality concerns several writers of the 1865-1914 period. Analyze sexual imagery or attitudes toward sexuality in Chopin's works: *The Awakening*, "At the 'Cadian Ball," or "The Storm."

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