GENERAL

what is naturalism in literature

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Introduction

When you think of literary movements, terms like Romanticism, Modernism, or Post Colonialism often come to mind. Yet one of the most influential yet frequently misunderstood schools of thought is **naturalism in literature**. This literary approach, rooted in the late 19th century, sought to portray life with an almost scientific lens, emphasizing determinism, environment, and the often harsh realities of human existence. In this article we will explore what naturalism truly is, trace its historical roots, examine its defining characteristics, spotlight key writers, compare it with realism, and discuss its lasting impact on contemporary literature.

Historical Roots of Naturalism

From Romanticism to Realism

The transition from Romanticism to Realism set the stage for naturalism. Romantic writers celebrated emotion, imagination, and the sublime aspects of nature. By the mid 1800s, however, a growing desire for objectivity and an increasing influence of scientific thought pushed writers toward a more factual representation of life.

Realism emerged as a reaction against the idealized narratives of Romanticism. It aimed to depict everyday life with accuracy and detail. Naturalism built on this foundation, taking the commitment to realism a step further by incorporating scientific principles such as heredity and environment into its storytelling.

Influence of Darwin and Social Science

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, published in 1859, introduced the idea that organisms evolve through natural selection. Writers like Émile Zola embraced this concept, viewing society itself as subject to similar forces. Additionally, the burgeoning fields of sociology, psychology, and anthropology offered new tools for analyzing human behavior, further shaping naturalist narratives.

European Origins and Global Spread

Naturalism began in France with authors such as Zola, whose novels explored the lives of the working class in the city of Paris. The movement quickly spread across Europe, reaching Italy, Germany, and England. In the United States, naturalism found fertile ground in the rugged landscapes of the American West and the industrial boom of the Northeast.

Defining Naturalism in Literature

Key Characteristics

- Determinism: Characters are often portrayed as products of their heredity and environment, with limited agency.
- Scientific Observation: Naturalist writers adopt a detached, almost clinical perspective, focusing on precise detail and cause effect relationships.
- Social Critique: Works frequently highlight class disparities, poverty, and social injustices.
- Realistic Settings: Settings are meticulously described to reinforce the influence of surroundings on the protagonist.

- Emphasis on the Unpleasant: Naturalism does not shy away from depicting violence, disease, or moral ambiguity.

Philosophical Foundations

Naturalism is grounded in the belief that human behavior is largely shaped by external forces. This perspective aligns with the scientific method: observe, hypothesize, and explain. Writers adopt a narrator who remains objective, avoiding moral judgments or sentimental sentimentality. The result is a narrative that feels like a documentary of human life, stripped of romantic idealization.

Major Naturalist Writers and Works

Émile Zola – The Foundation of French Naturalism

Zola's *Les Rougon Malherbe*series, especially *Germinal* and *Nana*, exemplify naturalist principles. His famous declaration, "I am not a writer. I am a scientist," encapsulates the movement's ethos. Zola's meticulous research and vivid descriptions bring the harsh realities of coal miners and Parisian society to life.

Stephen Crane – American Naturalism in the Wild West

Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Monster*capture the psychological turmoil of soldiers and the brutality of frontier life. Crane's use of terse, unembellished prose mirrors the starkness of his subjects.

William Faulkner – Southern Naturalism

Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*showcase the complex interplay of family lineage, social decay, and environmental determinism in the American South. His experimental narrative techniques underscore the chaotic nature of human existence.

Jack London – Survival and Environment

London's *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*explore the influence of environment on both humans and animals. Though often considered adventure tales, these works carry strong naturalist themes of adaptation and survival.

Anton Chekhov – Russian Naturalism

Chekhov's short stories, such as *The Lady with the Dog* and *The Bet*, focus on the inner lives of ordinary people, exposing the subtle forces that shape their decisions. His subtle, almost detached storytelling style aligns with naturalist ideals.

Naturalism vs. Realism

While naturalism shares many traits with realism, there are distinct differences:

- Determinism vs. Free Will: Realism often leaves characters with a degree of autonomy, whereas naturalism emphasizes external determinism.
- Scientific Approach: Naturalism explicitly applies scientific methodology, treating narrative as an observation of life.
- Emotional Tone: Realist works can be more emotionally open, whereas naturalist pieces tend to adopt a detached tone.
- Focus on Social Issues: Naturalist literature frequently highlights systemic problems, whereas realism may simply depict them without explicit critique.

Naturalism in Modern Literature

Although the movement peaked in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, its influence persists. Contemporary authors continue to explore deterministic themes, environmental influences, and the darker aspects of human nature.

Haruki Murakami – Subtle Naturalism in Japanese Fiction

Murakami's novels, such as *Kafka on the Shore* and *1Q84*, weave surreal elements with realistic settings, hinting at forces beyond human control.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Postcolonial Naturalism

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie portrays how war and colonial legacy shape individual destinies, reflecting naturalist concerns about environment and heredity.

James Baldwin – Social Determinism in American Narrative

Baldwin's essays and novels, including *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, examine how race and society dictate personal trajectories, echoing naturalist determinism.

Criticisms and Legacy

Naturalism has faced criticism for its perceived pessimism and reductionism. Critics argue that its focus on determinism can strip characters of complexity and agency. Others claim that the movement's scientific veneer oversimplifies the nuances of human experience.

Despite these critiques, naturalism's legacy is undeniable. It paved the way for modern literary realism, influenced the development of the short story, and contributed to a broader cultural acceptance of socially conscious narratives. The movement's emphasis on setting and environment also informed the rise of environmental literature and eco criticism.

How to Identify Naturalist Texts

1. Look for a Detached Narrator: The narrator often maintains objectivity, presenting facts without moralizing.
2. Check for Emphasis on Environment: The setting is not merely a backdrop but a force shaping the plot.
3. Observe Character Determinism: Characters' actions appear heavily influenced by heredity or socioeconomic conditions.
4. Identify Social Critique: The narrative often highlights systemic inequalities or injustices.
5. Notice Realistic Detail: The prose includes precise, often gritty descriptions of everyday life.

Conclusion

Naturalism in literature offers a compelling lens through which to view human existence. By treating life as a product of environmental and hereditary forces, naturalist writers provide a stark, unvarnished portrayal of society. While the movement's deterministic worldview may seem bleak, its insistence on rigorous observation and social critique has left an indelible mark on literary history. Whether you're a student, a writer, or a casual reader, understanding naturalism enriches your appreciation of the intricate forces that shape stories and the people within them.

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