19th Century American Literature

Professor Carrier

DongA University English Department

Lecture Notes: **Realism and Naturalism**

Comparing the two concepts: Realism and Naturalism are often used to describe the same writers. However, there is continued debate among scholars about their relationship and some scholars even think they are opposing ideas.

The concept of Realism (big “R”) is in many ways a reaction against Romanticism. In this sense, Realism is a “literary movement,” a recognizable change in artistic creation across multiple cultures. Realist writers sought to describe “reality” as carefully as possible without focusing on the character’s emotional reaction to the events. We will discuss some of the characteristics of this literary movement below.

Naturalism, which is one of many Realistic “styles” of writing (my interpretation of their relationship), was particularly popular in America during the late 19th Century. In Naturalist writings, man is often caught in a struggle with nature, a struggle which nature usually wins. The underlying idea, or philosophy, of Naturalism is sometimes called “pessimistic determinism”: the events of the world are pre-determined and humans are helplessly “tossed around” by fate until they inevitably die.

Realism

Historical Background

The Civil War. The horrors of the Civil War made people question the importance of Romantic ideals. Reality seemed strange enough. Many writers no longer felt the need to rely on imagination for subject matter.

Middle Class and the failure of the American Dream. A rapidly growing middle class was awed by the fabulous wealth of a small, Eastern super-elite. Many wanted to break through to the upper-class and found their way blocked by class prejudice and economic repression.

Main Ideas

Realism focuses on literary technique: how can the writer use language to “write reality”?

A general definition is sometimes given as “verisimilitude” or “a faithful representation of reality.”

Bierce said it was “the art of depicting nature as seen by toads.”

Howells said it was “…nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material.”

The “internal life” of the characters is the most important thing. The action and plot of the stories are often secondary to the thoughts and words of the characters.

Characters have complex relationships with other characters, with society and history, with the natural world, and with themselves.

Realist literature often focuses on the relationship between people of different social classes. Poor people interact with wealthy people and sometimes become wealthy themselves, thus achieving the “American Dream.” Often, the desire to become wealthy destroys the character’s family, health, morality, etc.

The language of Realism attempts to capture a natural voice, or “vernacular.” Poetic language is usually absent. Comedic, satiric, or plainspoken language is preferred.

The authorial voice is diminished. The author attempts to disappear from the text and allow the reader to become fully involved imaginatively.

Moralization, or telling the reader what to think about the characters, is rejected. Readers are encouraged to form their own opinion about the characters. Of course, the writer is clearly directing them to a specific opinion, which is the paradox of Realistic fiction.

Important Literary Figures

Mark Twain (1835-1910) Used vernacular voice and satirical exaggeration to show the situation of previously unheard voices, like slaves and poor white Americans. His novel *Huckleberry Finn* is considered by many to be the most important work of fiction in American history.

William Dean Howells (1837-1920) The “Father of American Realism” wrote works critical of the “American Dream.” He was an important critic and editor. He befriended Mark Twain and helped to launch his literary career.

Henry James (1843-1916) Creator of “Psychological realism,” works in which he attempted to reveal the secret motivation of human action. His characters are often faced with complex social problems that they attempt to solve. Many writers were critical of the “genteel” subjects of his writing.

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) Described in careful detail the lives and problems of New York upper-class society members, applying the laws of Darwinian survival and thus moving toward Naturalism.

Naturalism

Historical Background

The Civil War. Stories about the war were very important to the following generation of writers. Many of them were affected by the “deterministic” nature of the fighting, where heroism was impossible.

Darwin’s theory of natural selection. The theories of Darwin caused people to question the benefits of living a life of morality. Many of the stories focus on doing what must be done to survive rather than doing the “right” thing. If Darwin is correct, and only the strong survive, then we are doomed if we can’t fight.

Freudian theories of the subconscious. Freud’s theories indicated that our subconscious desires or “animal” appetites determine our personal choices. For Naturalist writers, these animalistic tendencies are very dangerous, and must be carefully controlled. Nature is sometimes a metaphor for these desires.

Main Ideas

Scientific Point of View. As seen above, the emerging scientific theories of the late-19th century had a profound effect on these writers. In addition, the author attempts to become an “objective” observer, philosophically detached from the subject.

Pessimistic determinism. Humans are merely animals in a hostile world. Survival is the most important thing in a world that is trying to kill you. The critic Eric Sundquist wrote: "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." ( from *American Realism: New Essays*).

Animalistic urges destroy men. Often it is the subconscious, “animalistic” desires of a man or woman that destroys them. People who are able to control their animal nature and use their mind are often victors.

Naturalist writers may seem very dark, however, underlying their fiction is the very powerful idea that it is possible to study and even to understand human actions.

Characters are often very poor or uneducated whose lives are controlled by their family history (genetically and economically), animal instincts, and irrational “passions.” The characters are designed to cause the reader to question their motivation: why do I do the things that I do?

Nature is shown as an indifferent or uncaring power in the world. This is possibly the most important difference between Naturalism and Romanticism/Transcendentalism, where nature is a source of inspiration.

Important Literary Figures.

Ambrose Bierce (1842-1913?) Motto: “Nothing Matters.” Bierce was a critic of American society and his fiction was very innovative, including his use of the subconscious to explain motivation.

Frank Norris (1870-1902) One of the only Naturalist writers to also write criticism, Norris was one of the few writers to explain the difference between Naturalism and Realism. He was especially critical of the “everyday life” that the Realists Henry James and W.D. Howells wrote about in their novels. He said “…terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale.”

Stephen Crane (1871-1900) Crane, who died at the age of 28, was obsessed with the psychological violence of war. His most famous work, *The Red Badge of Courage*, is an examination of fear and social responsibility in the face of death.

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) Dreiser’s fiction often depicts characters who do bad things but who feel no remorse for their actions. His novel *Sister Carrie* dealt with a country girl who goes to the city, where she becomes sexually involved with a series of men. She uses sex to survive and eventually become successful in society, a topic that was taboo at the time.

Jack London (1876-1916) One of the first great American writers to come out of the Wild West, London lived the wild life that he wrote about in his many stories. Although he was an alcoholic and was not respected as a writer by critics, he was America’s best selling author when he died of a possible suicide.

Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) Sinclair’s most enduring work, *The Jungle*, dealt with the horrible working conditions at the Chicago Stockyards, the source at the time of a majority of America’s fresh meat. His writing focused on the lives of the poor laborers in the American heartland.