

definition of naturalism in literature

Naturalism in literature is a philosophical and literary movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, characterized by a focus on realism and a deterministic view of human behavior. It extends the principles of realism by applying the scientific method and theories of evolution to the portrayal of characters and their environments. Naturalism suggests that human beings are shaped by their environment, heredity, and social conditions, often leading to a depiction of life that is stark and unembellished. This article delves into the various aspects of naturalism in literature, its historical context, key characteristics, prominent authors, and its influence on modern literature.

Historical Context of Naturalism

Naturalism was a reaction to the romanticism of the early 19th century, which emphasized emotion, individualism, and the sublime aspects of nature. As the industrial revolution progressed, society began to experience significant changes, including urbanization, scientific advancements, and a growing interest in psychology and sociology. These changes set the stage for naturalism, which sought to depict life with a scientific lens.

Influence of Science and Philosophy

Naturalism draws heavily from various scientific and philosophical ideas:

1. **Darwinism:** Charles Darwin's theory of evolution influenced naturalists to consider how heredity and environment shape human behavior.
2. **Determinism:** The belief that all events, including human actions, are determined by preceding events and natural laws, led writers to portray characters as products of their circumstances.
3. **Sociology:** The emergence of sociology as a science provided insights into social structures and influences, prompting naturalist writers to reflect these elements in their narratives.

Key Characteristics of Naturalism

Naturalism is distinguished by several defining characteristics that shape its narratives and themes:

1. **Focus on the Ordinary:** Naturalist writers often concentrate on the lives of everyday people, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. They portray the struggles and challenges faced by these characters in a harsh and unforgiving world.
2. **Deterministic Universe:** Characters are often depicted as being at the mercy of their environment, heredity, and social conditions. Free will is often minimized, suggesting that individuals have little control over their destinies.
3. **Scientific Approach:** Naturalist writers employ a methodical, observational style. They often provide detailed descriptions of settings, behaviors, and social contexts, similar to how a scientist might

document an experiment.

4. Pessimism and Realism: Naturalism tends to adopt a pessimistic view of life. The narratives often reveal the darker aspects of existence, including poverty, addiction, and violence.

5. Influence of Environment: The surroundings of characters significantly impact their actions and thoughts. Naturalism emphasizes how environmental factors such as geography, social class, and family background influence individual choices.

Prominent Naturalist Authors

Several authors are recognized for their contributions to naturalism in literature. Their works exemplify the movement's key characteristics and themes.

Émile Zola

Émile Zola is often regarded as the father of naturalism. His series of novels, "Les Rougon-Macquart," explores the effects of heredity and environment on a single family across different generations. Zola's meticulous research and vivid descriptions make his work a cornerstone of naturalist literature.

Stephen Crane

Stephen Crane's "Maggie: A Girl of the Streets" is a seminal naturalist text that portrays the struggles of a young woman in a harsh urban environment. Crane's exploration of poverty, violence, and the impact of social conditions on individual lives aligns closely with naturalist principles.

Theodore Dreiser

Theodore Dreiser's novels, particularly "Sister Carrie," showcase characters who are influenced by their environment and circumstances. Dreiser's work often highlights the tension between personal desires and societal constraints, illustrating the deterministic themes central to naturalism.

Frank Norris

Frank Norris's "McTeague" delves into the lives of working-class characters, exploring themes of greed and the primal instincts that drive human behavior. Norris's narrative style and focus on the darker aspects of life exemplify naturalistic literature.

Naturalism vs. Realism

While naturalism is often associated with realism, there are key differences between the two movements:

1. **Philosophical Underpinnings:** Realism focuses on the depiction of everyday life without idealization, while naturalism incorporates a deterministic philosophy that stresses the influence of environment and heredity.
2. **Characterization:** In realism, characters have more agency and can make conscious choices. In contrast, naturalist characters often feel trapped by their circumstances, leading to a sense of inevitability in their fates.
3. **Subject Matter:** Realism often highlights a broad spectrum of human experiences, while naturalism tends to concentrate on the more sordid and challenging aspects of life, particularly those of the lower classes.

The Legacy of Naturalism in Modern Literature

Naturalism has left a lasting impact on literature and continues to influence contemporary writers. Its emphasis on the interplay between environment, society, and individual behavior remains relevant in modern storytelling.

Contemporary Themes

1. **Social Issues:** Many modern authors explore social issues such as poverty, addiction, and systemic inequality, reflecting the naturalist tradition of addressing the struggles of marginalized individuals.
2. **Psychological Depth:** Contemporary literature often delves into the psychological complexities of characters, echoing the naturalist focus on how environment and heredity shape behavior.
3. **Realism in Style:** The detailed, observational style of naturalism is evident in current literary works, where authors strive to present authentic portrayals of life, often drawing on personal experiences and societal observations.

Influence on Other Genres

Naturalism has also impacted various literary genres, including:

- **Crime Fiction:** Many crime novels incorporate naturalistic elements by highlighting the societal factors that contribute to criminal behavior.
- **Gothic Literature:** The exploration of human nature's darker sides in gothic fiction can be traced back to naturalist themes.
- **Drama:** Playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller reflect naturalist influences in their

examinations of human struggles within oppressive environments.

Conclusion

In summary, naturalism in literature represents a significant movement that seeks to portray life with a scientific and deterministic lens. By emphasizing the influence of environment, heredity, and social conditions, naturalist writers have created compelling narratives that explore the complexities of human existence. The legacy of naturalism continues to resonate in modern literature, making it an enduring and relevant framework for understanding the human experience. Through its exploration of the struggles faced by individuals in an often unyielding world, naturalism remains a vital lens through which we can examine our own lives and societies.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the definition of naturalism in literature?

Naturalism in literature is a movement that suggests that environment, heredity, and social conditions shape human character and behavior, emphasizing a realistic portrayal of life.

How does naturalism differ from realism?

While both naturalism and realism aim to depict life accurately, naturalism goes further by incorporating a deterministic view of human behavior, suggesting that individuals are largely shaped by external forces beyond their control.

Who are some notable authors associated with naturalism?

Notable authors associated with naturalism include Émile Zola, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris, all of whom explored the influence of environment and heredity in their works.

What are common themes found in naturalistic literature?

Common themes in naturalistic literature include survival, fate, the impact of social conditions, and the struggle against nature and society.

Can you provide an example of a naturalistic novel?

One example of a naturalistic novel is 'The Grapes of Wrath' by John Steinbeck, which illustrates the harsh realities faced by displaced farmers during the Great Depression.

What role does environment play in naturalism?

In naturalism, the environment plays a crucial role as it is seen as a determining factor in shaping characters' lives and choices, often influencing their outcomes.

How does naturalism reflect the scientific advancements of its time?

Naturalism reflects scientific advancements by incorporating theories from biology and psychology, emphasizing the idea that human behavior is influenced by biological and environmental factors.

Is naturalism still relevant in contemporary literature?

Yes, naturalism remains relevant in contemporary literature, as many authors continue to explore themes of determinism and the impact of societal and environmental factors on individuals.

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