

Naturalism and Realism: An Interplay in the Works of Stephen Crane

Jyotika Elhance, University of Delhi, India

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Abstract

All literature is founded on some concept of the nature of man. When any major literary trend appears, it assumes or defines man's place in the universe. The medieval idea of man was that of a fallen creature, living in a dualistic world that was divided between good and bad, moral and immoral, God and Satan, eternal and temporal. Man has been living an accursed life since his fall from the grace. His desires and instincts corrupt his reason and lead him astray. Since literatures are products of physical, social and intellectual environment, they can best be interpreted through their setting. Taine, the French philosopher applied scientific method to the study of art and literature. His theories of race, milieu and moment challenged the traditional concepts of man, who was subjected to the rigidity of determinism. Emile Zola, regarded as proponent of French Naturalism, but it was Frank Norris who introduced it to America where it gained considerable momentum around 1890s. It appeared as a harsher variant of realism with a focus upon the scientific observation of life minus all idealism. The influence of Darwin's Evolution Theory also was equally evident in the objective and frank portrayal of characters who were a sum of heredity and environment.

Keywords: Realism, Naturalism, Determinism

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Introduction

All literature is founded on some concept of the nature of man. When any major literary trend appears, it assumes or defines man's place in the universe. The medieval idea of man was that of a fallen creature, living in a dualistic world that was divided between good and bad, moral and immoral, God and Satan, eternal and temporal. Man has been living an accursed life since his fall from the grace. His desires and instincts corrupt his reason and lead him astray. Since literatures are products of physical, social and intellectual environment, they can best be interpreted through their setting.

In this paper, I shall focus upon Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and *Maggie, A Girl of Streets* that have contributed greatly to the canon of American realism and naturalism. I shall trace the meaning of both the terms, their merger into one another, their points of departure before dealing with the underlying themes, the innovations and scientific discoveries that became the hallmark of the literature of that period. I shall also touch upon the effect of Darwin's Theory of Evolution, the scientific temperament and the pessimistic determinism.

Realism

Realism, a literary and aesthetic movement that emerged in France around the 1840s, was a reaction against the tenets of the-then popular exotic and poetic conventions of romanticism. It made a dramatic shift towards the everyday experiences of the common masses and presented them with photographic fidelity. The realists shunned the prevalent social values, standards and mind-sets of the upper classes, critiquing the exaggerated emotionalism, rejecting the heroic and the supernatural that characterized that period, portraying instead the sordid lives of the people affected by rampant commercialization and industrialization. They were deliberately selective of their subject matter, preferring the mundane over the rarer aspects of contemporary life, describing the stark underbelly of the society under the grip of heredity and environmental forces, thereby setting the stage for a new movement in modern art and literature that would steer clear of various forms of classical or romantic idealism. W.D. Howells (1889), regards realism as "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material" (p. 966). It is a literary technique of "verisimilitude" that is undertaken by various schools of writing to describe the most uninteresting and banal events and characters. It attempts to forge a connection between the ordinary and extraordinary, the apparent and unapparent that lies at the core of human nature. In his article, "The Novel and its Future," in *Atlantic Monthly*, George Parsons Lathrop (1834) summarizes it as, "where we thought nothing worth of notice, it shows everything to be rife with significance." Realism in literature is not "unlimited, ultimate reality but the fragmented, flawed world of quotidian experience" (Slattery 1972: 55 - 62).

In the United States, "realism" encompassed the period from the American Civil War till the end of the century. Its effects were visible both in fiction and popular attitudes. It reflected at once people's faith in science and their doubts about the modern scientific world. The growth of industrialization, urbanization, commercialization, influx of immigrants, coming up of slums, the great divide between affluence and poverty, shift in culture were some of the factors that contributed to its rise. Honoré de Balzac and Gustav Flaubert were the earliest exponents of realism who introduced complex characters and detailed observations of contemporary society.

Naturalism

Naturalism, on the other hand, was an extension or continuation of realism with the addition of pessimistic determinism. It dealt with raw and unpleasant experiences of the poor, uneducated and unsophisticated masses that struggled to survive against all odds. The characters were portrayed as playthings controlled by the intermingling of chance, instincts and hereditary forces. Naturalism embraced and adapted the principles of physical sciences in its ambit, especially Darwin's view of nature, his doctrine about "the theory of evolution" which emphasized the impact of heredity and environment on man's life. The phrases, "survival of the fittest" and "the human beast" (Zola 1890 *The Human Beast*) became catchwords and brought about a massive change in the outlook of many authors and intellectuals, and produced an attitude of all-pervasive gloom and dejection that defined that period. Naturalists sought to apply the sociological and scientific theories to their artistic representations, thereby critiquing the prevalent social organization. The heroic and the adventurous in the violent and desperate acts were brought out without any dehumanization.

William Harmon and Hugh Holman (1995) bring out the subtle difference between the romanticists, realists and naturalists in their work, *A Handbook to Literature*, when they state, "Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and the naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence" (p. 428).

Both realism and naturalism presented a slice of contemporary life with all its accompanying details without resorting to moral judgements of any kind. Naturalism widened the scope of realism by incorporating and adapting within it the principles of natural sciences, especially Darwin's theory of evolution and the principles of scientific determinism.

This led writers like Stephen Crane to emphasize man's irrational, accidental, physiological nature over his moral or rational side. Individual characters like Maggie, Jimmie, Pete, Henry Fleming were portrayed as helpless, pessimistic creatures at the mercy of social and economic pressures from the outside and strong, instinctual drives from within. The strong, warring emotions of lust, seduction, violence, greed for power, desire to dominate held man in the sway. He sometimes found himself pitted against the gods or against other men or against his own self, struggling hard to maintain his veneer of civilization despite innumerable external pressures that threatened to release the brute within. The universe was sometimes hostile and sometimes indifferent towards him.

"Nature never did betray the heart that loved her" was the romantic vision of William Wordsworth but by the time we reach Stephen Crane, it was:

'A man said to the universe:

"Sir, I exist!"

"However," replied the universe,

"The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation.'" (Poem 21, *War is Kind & Other Poems*)

The cynicism of these lines finds a resonance in the man's plight. "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 (Crane: *The Open Boat*).” He is hit hard by the fact that nature is indifferent to his very plight and that shatters him. “Crane’s fiction plainly reflects the naturalistic concept of man as a helpless animal, driven by instinct and imprisoned in a web of forces entirely deaf to the hopes or purposes of humanity” (Hartwick: 221).

Henry Fleming faces a similar dilemma in *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War* (Crane:1983). He is unable to determine his own destiny and gets tossed around by forces of nature and humanity. Whether it is a story about the American Civil War or whether it is a Christian story of a young man’s redemption or whether it is a tale about a beast with illusions, it could be debated on various premise. But it is definitely the story of a naïve recruit who goes through fire, discovers himself and with the knowledge attained, comes to terms with the imperfections of the world around and attains manhood. It is the journey of trials and tribulations of this young American who enlists himself for war against the advice of his mother. But dreams of Homeric glory occupy him until the war becomes imminent. “He had . . . dreamed of battles all his life—of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire. . . Tales of great movements shook the land. They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them. Henry had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him larger pictures extravagant in color, lucid with breathless deeds” (46).

He finds himself at loss to share his dilemma with his other comrades whether to stay back and face the onslaught or run away. It is a literal baptism by fire for Henry who learns to fight his own inner demons throughout the course. Through him Crane presents the absurdity of war where no one really knows what’s in store for each one. No one knows how they’d behave under the fierce onslaught of any attack. The illusory glamour accorded to the American Civil War gets critiqued and the sentimental falsities attached to it are exposed threadbare.

At the very first opportunity, Henry flees in blind panic and what follows is a series of self-reproaches, self-justifications, a damning sense of guilt and determined rationalization at his own reaction. He sees a commonplace squirrel and throws a commonplace pine cone at it. When it too flees in panic, Henry feels triumphant exhibition in nature that reiterates the need for self-preservation above everything else.

“Nature had given him a sign. The squirrel, immediately upon recognizing the danger, had taken to his legs without ado. He did not stand stolidly baring his furry belly to the missile, and die with an upward glance at the sympathetic skies...He was an ordinary squirrel too—doubtless no philosopher of his race. She reinforced his argument with proofs that lived where the sun shone” (101). The realistic manner in which Crane delineates the scene speaks of Crane’s vision of the true nature of reality that surrounds the naïve young man. The irony too becomes glaringly evident when moments later he enters a place where “arching boughs made a chapel” (101) and finds a decayed corpse sitting upright against a tree, crawling with ants and staring straight at him. He flees in panic only to hear the deafening sounds of battle. He sees the wounded returning from the battle and the field littered with clothes and guns. Battle appeared to him as an immense and terrible grinding machine which was churning out dead bodies. This wasn’t the life that he had dreamt of. It was a far cry from the glorious burial that he had envisaged as a war hero. The simultaneous presentation of the grotesque along with the deterministic forces debunked the popular notions and romantic illusions of heroism in the battlefield.

By giving the readers an insight into the mind of the protagonist from a third person's point of view, the author brings out humanity's lack of free will. His reaction to flee is a natural instinct. It is not a question of free will. He does not even pretend that it is his free will. He simply abandons his free will to the will of nature. The narrator of the tale reveals that Henry had convinced himself of having taken the right decision when in fact his thought process could not really evaluate the real situation at hand. The entire sequence brings out his flawed thought process instead. Henry is too naïve to believe that nature could be cruel or indifferent for he conceived "nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy" (100). Throughout the work the indifference and apathy of nature is talked about. "It was surprising that nature had gone tranquilly on with "her" golden process in the midst of so much devilment" (89).

Unsigned Review, *Spectator* (1896 June 27) calls the novel "an interesting and painful essay in pathology" which "presents the effects of physical danger, in the thousand forms which danger wears in modern warfare, upon the human nervous system in a youth who is morbid, hypersensitive and over conscious..."

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets & Other Stories (Crane: 1995), is another hard-hitting tale full of bitter irony, seething passions, destructive morality and treacherous sentimentality. It has been referred to as "the first dark flower of American Naturalism" that portrays the fall from grace of a girl "blossomed in a mud puddle" (Knapp: 1). Throughout the novella, Crane exposes the dark and seamy underworld of conflict and violence which his age pretended did not exist. His pen lays bare the gutter slang in its most ferocious form as he describes the vilest exchanges vividly. In a few, brief terse chapters, he pulls the rug from under sentiment and shows all the dirt, squalor, fear, misery and sordidness of much of life that his generation chose to gild with an artificial thing called "good taste."

"The slum-setting and the overpowering effect of the environment, it sounds in synopsis like a perfect bit of sordid determinism – a girl raised in violence and squalor, charmed, seduced and abandoned by her flashy lover, rejected by her family, descends rapidly through street-walking to suicide" (Walcott: 67). Crane himself appeared to supply a naturalistic gloss to the novel when he wrote to friends that *Maggie* was about the effect of environment on human life. (Stallman: 79). He insisted that he had no other purpose in writing *Maggie* than to show people as they seem to him. "If they be evil, make the most of it." This reflected Howell's definition of realism as "truthful treatment of material," which Crane picked up. It does not mean mere photographic reality, but "the novelist be true to himself and to things as he sees them."

Hamlin Garland was quick to recognize the grim picture of Bowery slums that Crane created for he too had explored Boston slums and had written about them in his *Jason Edwards*. He wrote "...It is not written by a dilettante; it is written by one who has lived the life. It gives the dialect of the slums as I have never before seen it written – crisp, direct and terse. It is another locality finding a voice." Hamlin Garland in *Arena* (1893 November) issue reviewed *Maggie* under the heading "A Modest American Story."

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, focuses on the life of slum and slum-dwellers but refrains from moralizing, commenting or offering solutions. The story unfolds through a series of impressionistic scenes wherein the brutal and sordid details are amassed to such an extent that it frequently surpasses Emile Zola's *L'Assomoir* in its cumulative effect. The character delineation is from third person's point of view which makes it thoroughly objective, detached and clinical. Maggie's death in Chapter 17 is a glaring illustration of this authorial

detachment. She is simply referred to as “the girl.” Crane writes, “She went into the blackness of the final block. The shutters of the tall buildings were closed like grim lips...The varied sounds of life, made joyous by distance and seeming unapproachableness, came faintly and died away to a silence” (Crane: 51). Maggie’s death by drowning also comes across as an assumption.

Environment has a terrible power over all human beings in the world and frequently molds lives regardless. This gets amply substantiated through Crane’s writings. Maggie, is a helpless victim of the physical degeneration of the Bowery slum in which she lives, and of the destructive, inflexible rules of a conventional morality shared by rich and poor alike.

“A very little boy stood on a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley” (Crane:1). The opening line of the novel sets the theme in motion wherein man uses conventional but abstract values such as honor, justice, love, respect, responsibility etc. as weapons of disguises behind which he can take refuge. In the light of this statement, it would be worth exploring the lives of the principal characters, the moral values that control their thinking. Their lives are a perpetual battleground. The novel opens with Jimmie fighting the children of Devil’s Row and then with one of his own gangs. His father separates them with a blow, Maggie mistreats the babe Tommie, Jimmie strikes Maggie, Mrs. Johnson beats Jimmie for fighting. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson quarrel. Mrs. Johnson beats Maggie for breaking a plate, Mr. Johnson strikes Jimmie with an empty beer pail. Mr. Johnson comes home drunk and he and Mrs. Jonson fight – all this in three short chapters.

Crane fuses elements of poverty, ignorance and intolerance in a context of violence and cruelty to create a nightmarish world wavering between hallucination and hysteria. This is established through violent verbs, distorted vignettes and sensory transfers. A sampling of the first few pages of the novel would take the reader through a horrendous roller-coaster ride with words and phrases like, “lurid altercations,” “dreaming blood red dreams,” “a worm of yellow convicts came from the shadow of a grey ominous building” so on and so forth.

A dominant idea that grows from this landscape of hysteria is that these people are victimized by their idea of moral propriety which is so utterly inapplicable to their lives that they constitute a social insanity.

Home is no longer a safe haven from the struggles of the hostile world of the outside. It becomes a battleground for even more intense fights and violence with no holds barred. Both Maggie and her brother are petrified of their parents who were hardcore drunkards, veritable beasts under the influence of alcohol. When Jimmie, Maggie’s brother, comes in bloody from the fighting... “the mother’s massive shoulders heaved with anger. Grasping the urchin by the neck and shoulder, she shook him until he rattled...The babe sat on the floor watching the scene, his face in contortions like that of women at a tragedy. The father...bellowed at his wife...” (Crane: 5). The hereditary propensity for consuming alcohol so strong in Jimmie did not come to fore in Maggie but both fall prey to it.

Through the food imagery in the narrative, “The babe with his feet dangling...gorged his small stomach. Jimmie, forced with feverish rapidity, the grease-enveloped pieces between his wounded lips. Maggie, with side glances of fear of interruption, ate like a small pursued tigress” (Crane: 6), Crane suggests that Johnson’s world is one of fear, fury and darkness, that it is a world in which no moral laws are applicable, since the Johnson’s fundamental

guide to conduct is instinctive amorality, a need to feed and to protect themselves (Pizer: 124).

The image of the amoral, animal world is maintained throughout the novel. It had hardened Jimmie who had studied human nature in the gutter believing that this world is composed of despicable creatures. The only possible outcome of a life so crippled from the beginning by heredity and environment is utter degeneration and degradation.

The Johnsons display their high moral ground which brings approbation and satisfaction when displayed before others. It accords them gratification and self-justification. Maggie's abandonment and ouster from her own household was a corollary to that. Pete, her seducer, also rejects her pleas of help because she threatens the respectability of the bar where he works. Secure in their moral stance, it is they and their false priorities that push Maggie towards her doom. She is destroyed not so much by the reality of the slum life as by the middle-class morality imposed on them – a morality which allows its users to both judge and to divorce themselves from the responsibility of those they judge. Like most of the naturalistic characters both Jimmie and Maggie are not merely products but helpless victims of the hostile environment. Their life is a never-ending series of struggles, hardships and insults. They have no free will and whatever freedom that they think they have is also circumscribed by their own conventional belief systems. The real malaise behind the tragedy is the moral duplicity that has the society in its grips rather than any inherent evil in Maggie's character.

Conclusion

Jean Jacques Rousseau in his book *The Social contract* says "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains," holds true of naturalistic literature which deal with the struggle between the fiercely deterministic forces operating in the world and the individual's desire to exert his free will. Man's freedom has its own limitations but he is not devoid of all values. Crane's fiction takes us away from the idealism and romanticism of literature towards a portrayal of greater fidelity of contemporary life caught in the throes of deterministic forces where man's raw passions are exposed. The violent and vulgar language lifts the veil from many a seamy aspect of their lived reality of slums. Stephen Crane stands out as a realist, naturalist, social chronicler who has painted the contemporary life in his fiction with all its changing flux, unredeemed toil, breakneck competition, ceaseless struggles, skepticism, darkness and despondency and moral anarchy that had gripped not just America but the entire world. As such, their all-time relevance will never go out of vogue.

Note: In this paper, I shall focus upon Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and *Maggie, A Girl of Streets* that have contributed greatly to the canon of American Naturalism.

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Contact email: elhancejyotika@gmail.com