

**Literary Naturalism 1865-1940:  
Its History, Influences and Legacy**

**Laurence J. Marriott**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy according to the  
requirements of the University of Leicester.**

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... ..

Dedicated with affection to the memory of Charles R. Smith (1930-1996)  
“Just a simple farm boy from Alabama”

## **Abstract: Literary Naturalism 1865-1940: Its History, Influences, and Legacy.**

Thesis submitted by Laurence Marriott.

This thesis examines the emergence of literary Naturalism in France from its beginnings in the fiction and letters of the Goncourt brothers, the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte, and the literary criticism of Hippolyte Taine. It then tracks the history and reception of naturalistic fiction in England. The second half concentrates on the rise of Naturalism as an American fictional form, from its beginnings in the 1890s through to critical acceptance and success in the first decade of the twentieth century. It then examines the reasons for the comparative success of American Naturalism at a time when naturalistic writing in Europe had become outdated. Literary criticism has been periodised throughout in order to demonstrate its influence on the canon and on the formation of genre.

Chapter 1 emphasises that the thesis concentrates on literary history rather than on textual criticism. It also suggests a cultural materialist subtext in that the struggles faced by early naturalistic writers were often the result of opposition from reactionary politicians and Church groups rather than from literary critics.

Chapter 2 has two purposes: first, it explicates the genesis of literary Naturalism in nineteenth-century France and puts it into a historical perspective. Second, it explores the way in which genre has influenced the way that critics and readers have perceived Naturalism as a development of the novel. It also examines the way in which Zola perceived genre and how he emphasised the importance of the novel as a social tool.

Chapter 3 demonstrates the ways in which English writers developed their own form of naturalistic fiction, but lost momentum towards the end of the nineteenth century. It explores the difference between French and English attitudes towards fiction and suggests that different aesthetic values may be the key to these differences.

Chapter 4 introduces early reactions to the fledgling American naturalist writers and the reactions of contemporary critics, such as Howells and James. It also emphasises the importance of Frank Norris's theoretical views on the future of the American novel and presents an overview of the influence of journalistic writing on fiction and the conflicts that this entailed.

Chapter 5 focuses on the literary aesthetics found in the works of Norris and Dreiser and presents case studies of *Sister Carrie* and *The Octopus*. This chapter argues that *The Octopus*, in particular, should be read as a novel of aesthetics, and is Norris's most cogent statement of his theoretical stance on literature and criticism.

Chapter 6 explores the growth of Naturalism as an American form. American writers adopted the broad philosophies of European Naturalism, and this chapter examines how they incorporated those ideas into an American cultural matrix that departed from the European model.

The conclusion argues that Progressivism and the general will for reform were catalysts for the success of American literary Naturalism, and that the romantic language of naturalism lent itself to a national literature which dealt with such issues. Naturalistic techniques and perspectives were ideally suited to later novels of protest; therefore, the genre was able to persist in an adapted form well into the 1930s.

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## **Chapter 1 - Introductory**

"Myth is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other" - Northrop Frye.

"Words applied to literary and artistic movements revolutionary in their day have seldom any precise meaning. They are emotive words, slogans, battle-cries to rouse the faithful. Often they come into existence quite by chance as convenient labels. Naturalism, naturalistic are such words." - Walter Allen.

The overall aim of this thesis is to evaluate the impact which the naturalistic novel had on fiction in both England and the United States of America. In addition to bringing modern critical perspectives to bear on the questions of genre and canon in relation to Naturalism, there will be a consideration of contemporary critical reception and a selective survey of evaluations by subsequent generations of critics. By examining remarks and observations made at the time in which naturalistic literature was an emergent form, an understanding may be reached of how and why certain works survive and others have been forgotten or neglected. The reactions of later critics may go some way to explaining modern attitudes to what has always been a controversial and vaguely defined novelistic form.

The principal periods to be studied are the last four decades of the nineteenth century in Europe and the mid-1890s up to World War II in the USA; there will also be passing reference to apparently naturalistic works outside these periods in order to contextualise them. To examine the genesis and development of the naturalistic novel in both England and in the United States of America it is first necessary to take French literature of the nineteenth century as a reference point. English Naturalism and American Naturalism, taken as two separate

manifestations of the same methodological approach to fiction, differ significantly from each other in several ways; this is not to say, however, that the differences between them are greater than the similarities. Despite the apparent or presumed narrowness of the scope of Naturalism, its diversity and adaptability is one aspect which this study will examine. A common ancestry in French literature of the 1860s to 1890s provides an undeniable parentage for both English and American Naturalism, and, whilst there are significant divergences between the two national literatures, there are several features common to both; therefore, their relationship is of special interest to the comparatist. A primary aim of this study will be to examine that relationship, especially in terms of the influence which English Naturalism had on Edwardian and Georgian literature in England, and the much greater influence that American Naturalism had on subsequent fiction in the United States. However, as will be illustrated, American naturalistic fiction and the philosophical and aesthetic rationales which guided American writers were not simply New World adaptations of a French approach to the novel. For example, the works of Taine were relatively well known in America, independently of their influence on French Naturalism. The American literary world, however, did not adopt Taine's theories until some fifteen years after their appearance in France. There are other instances where certain similar influences, such as the theories of Herbert Spencer, were giving rise to parallel developments in the national literatures of several countries; some of these parallels will be discussed in the relevant chapters, in order to avoid an erroneous *post ergo propter* conclusion that locates later American naturalistic writing in a strictly linear chronological relationship to that which came earlier in Europe.

Whilst most American authors writing in the last quarter of the nineteenth century were conversant with French literature, America was eager to establish a literary voice of its own, and one that was not too obviously dependent on Old World literary values. Henry James, H.L. Mencken, and Frank Norris, among many others, have commented on this problem; each of them acknowledges the inevitable dilemma of American cultural history—how to draw on the excellence of the European literary tradition without compromising the uniqueness of a burgeoning American literary tradition. This quest alone was a major preoccupation of much of the literature of those writing in nineteenth-century America, including the early naturalists. The answer to the problem of establishing a uniquely American voice came with the application of a realist aesthetic to the Tainean ideal of writing in a contemporaneous social context and using personal observation and experience to mediate portrayals of locale and the people in that locale—“*race, milieu, et moment*,” in Taine’s terms, with *moment* having the meaning of turning point or fulcrum, rather than the chronological meaning.

Obviously, in a study of the literary output of any given period there are a number of options as to how the works may be evaluated; novels may be read in isolation from their context, merely as text to be construed, interpreted or deconstructed; one may wish to read the works in the light of modern scholarship and theory, comparing older with more recent works of literature; or they may be read as a fragment of literary and social history, using the same approach as to a historical document. This approach, of course, has concomitant difficulties, such as the valid objection that reportage and fiction employ different sets of aesthetics, and the more problematical notion that the methodologies of fiction and



journalism, if not antithetical to, are, in many important ways, dissimilar to those of a historian. Naturalistic fiction is first and foremost a literary endeavour, despite contentious opposition from certain of its practitioners, such as the Goncourts and Zola, but their objections are considered and dismissed in the next chapter. Therefore, for the present purposes, the latter two historical methods are the preferred modes of investigation, primarily for the reason that the historical and social aspects of naturalism in fiction provide the focus for this investigation. In this study, purely literary merits of specific naturalistic works of fiction, or works traditionally designated as naturalistic, will take second place to the social and historical impact which the naturalist movement, with its philosophical implications, had on the development of the novel. In other words, some lesser naturalistic fiction often contained aesthetic statements regarding the putative future of serious fiction, and even if the work itself was flawed, the author may have succeeded in making a definitive statement about the nature of fiction. For this reason, there will be reference to minor works if they help illustrate a larger picture of concerted literary endeavour. Furthermore, it will be shown that the relative success (or otherwise) of fiction written in naturalistic mode depends more on prevalent social conditions than on purely artistic or literary considerations taken out of their socio-historical context, even if such an approach to literary criticism were possible.

When a piece of literature has made its way into a particular canon, there is often the question as to why one work becomes canonical whereas an apparently similar work does not. By the same token, perhaps the literary historian should query the criteria which have played a part in including some works at the expense of others as opposed to being more inclusive. When the

boundaries are delineated between canonical and non-canonical works, are they merely arbitrary or has there been the rigorous and precise application of rules of style, content, form, and literary merit? The emergence of a canon always begs the question as to whose standards are applied and if literary criteria are compromised in the interests of “culture”. The fact that Mudie’s and Smith’s, the two most important circulating libraries of Victorian England, accepted a work of literature implied a widespread acceptance within the literary community, and, more importantly for Victorian society, throughout the “educated” community as a whole. The literary establishment will certainly have its own non-literary agenda or scheme to justify the rationale for promoting certain works to the canon whilst excluding others. Then arises the circular effect that certain books are not in the canon because they are not read and the reason that they are not read is that they are not in the canon and are therefore not considered important enough to be read. The neglect suffered in the early part of the twentieth century by many late-Victorian writers—Arthur Morrison and George Meredith are but two examples of writers successful in their day, but now all but unknown—can in part be ascribed to this very anomaly. Furthermore, as discussion of Modernism began to dominate literature and art, and the First World War became a preoccupation of many writers, those novelists who seemed to represent an earlier age were sidelined and a different value-system seemed to predominate. Naturalistic literature, with its roots in Darwinism, positivism, and French philosophy was not of very great interest to a generation who were looking forward to a revived British spirit and whose larger pre-occupations were the emergence of Soviet power and a re-alignment of European politics.

Whilst realism, in various forms, had ideologically moved further away from its romantic roots, Modernism questioned the artistic values of an emergent world order in which classical values were being overturned. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the basis upon which English class structures had been founded was being re-evaluated; the prosperous entrepreneur was now a more potent political force than the landed gentry and industrial wealth had replaced aristocratic patronage. During the Victorian era, great social changes had taken place, especially relating to the role of women in society; the New Woman was a feature of much late Victorian literature. However, in the world of literature, European Modernism, which can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century, was already displacing Naturalism in Europe; on the other hand, American literary Naturalism was still in its relative infancy and Modernism would not become a significant force in the arts in the New World until the advent of World War I. Following the war, as Europe and America nervously entered the 1920s, literature and art became more self-consciously preoccupied with a need to fulfil a political and social role—art had an obligation to be socially relevant. The example of the importance attached by the Russian authorities to Soviet art was hard to ignore; the Politburo was commissioning paintings and sculpture and directing writers as to how they should be portraying Soviet society.

The study of all art (including novels, poetry, architecture, fashion, design, landscaping, and so on) is essential to the understanding of a given period and an understanding of the culture of that period is essential for historical perspective. There are still those who insist that history consists of “facts,” which may be partially true (some histories may contain things called “facts”), but history also consists of attitudes, emotions and reactions, which can only be

judged qualitatively; these latter three components constitute a large part of the history of the realist and naturalist novel, which as will be shown, provided a template for the development of the twentieth century novel. Decadence, Modernism, the existentialist works of (*inter alia*) Camus and Sartre, the theatre of Brecht and the “angry young men” of British 1950s drama, the American “beat generation,” and so many more, owe a considerable debt to the aesthetic leap forward made by the realists and naturalists. Moreover, the art of a period also shapes and constitutes the history of that period as well as describing it. Thus the publication of, say, George Moore’s novel *Esther Waters* in 1894 not only documents a history of Victorian England, but itself provides another history of Victorian writing, publishing, and reading, and a comment on what the circulating libraries were prepared to distribute. Equally, *The Red Badge of Courage* is not simply an “episode of the American Civil War,” as Crane describes it, but is an important part of the cultural history of America in the 1890s. It also provides testimony of how later generations of Americans are coming to terms with artistic depictions of the Civil War. Historians distinguish between “witting” and “unwitting” testimony regarding historical periods, and it is only to be expected that the literature (or any art) of a period is a mixture of the two; contemporary accounts, when fictionalised, fall into a space between, where historians can argue that fiction, by definition cannot be trusted to give an accurate account, but where authors of fiction can argue that their accounts are as historically valid as those of archivists. However, there is always a problem of acceptance of this version of “history” by those unwilling to accept an artistic portrayal as a truth, or who query its validity as a historical document; for many different reasons, whether religious, scientific, or political, there are always individuals and groups which will resist

validating the attempts of art to depict contemporary society. Art, like any other text, provides both witting and unwitting testimony of a historical period; art, however, frequently presents itself as more self-consciously historicised, in that one of its aims is to be, in simple terms, a sign of the times.

Resistance to certain forms of art also tells us a great deal about the ideologies of those who would resist it; the vocabulary which art employs becomes a dialogic exposé of the period, and controversy is inevitable. Not only do many “sociologists” or “social scientists” dispute the ability of artists to accurately depict society, but politicians and others with a vested interest in the depiction of their society will often wish to dispute the way in which that depiction is interpreted. The literary establishment, too, may have its own reasons for trying to suppress or marginalise certain works; as David Baguley notes:

Beneath the unrelenting opposition to naturalist works may be discerned the fundamental fear that they constituted a threat to the very foundations of the literary institution itself with its ‘discriminations’, its conventions. (218)

“Historians” will further contest the ability of these others to put an accurate gloss on the historical “facts” without recourse to their own particular loaded vocabulary. Naturalism was not immune to vilification by those who disputed its interpretations of society’s ills, and, as with decadence, Victorians queried the validity and desirability of novels, which showed a society riven by immorality, vice, depravity, and poverty. As the popularity of the Victorian novel soared, so its importance as a cultural marker assumed greater significance. As George Gissing stated in his essay “The Place of Realism in Fiction,” “novels

nowadays are not always written for the novel's sake, and fiction cries aloud as the mouthpiece of social reform" (86).

A reading of contemporary criticism reveals some crucial differences between the individual critics. There were those who disliked Naturalism's philosophy, but tended to vilify the subject matter rather than the perceived theoretical position taken by the author. At the same time, there were those who, whilst concurring with many of the tenets implicit in Naturalism itself, thought that the novel was not an appropriate vehicle for expressing such views. Those critics who found the writing itself devoid of literary merit were relatively few in number. George Moore's *A Mummer's Wife* was not withheld from circulation by the libraries because it was not good writing in any technical sense, but because it dealt with alcoholism and prostitution, and it was felt that the intended readership was not ready for such matters to be discussed in popular fiction or novels that were meant for mass circulation. David Trotter makes the following point in "The Avoidance of Naturalism":

Naturalism's decline plot was the perfect match to the social narrative articulated by degeneration theory; too perfect a match in fact, since it was itself regarded [...] as a symptom of degeneracy. British writers, then, were not simply competing with a new literary technique, a method and a choice of subject matter. Rather, they had to decide whether to exploit or moderate or deny an anxiety about social decline that was already a habit of mind among their readers. (611)

In this passage, Trotter is referring specifically to Edwin Ray Lankester's *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880) and Max Nordau's *Degeneration*

(1895). A social change is taking place, therefore, and novels were narrating a history which some found distasteful; few disputed the truths contained in naturalist novels; most were not prepared to see those truths laid bare. As Heinrich and Julius Hart so trenchantly note in "For and Against Zola," there was "a body of critics" who ignored Zola's stylistic faults in their reviews; instead of confining themselves to literary matters, they set themselves up as guardians of decency:

They deplore the fact that Zola in portraying men from the depths of society does not first send them through a steam bath, that he does not first dip them in eau-de-cologne and then put them in clean linen and black suits, instead of presenting them as they really are and letting them speak as they no doubt do speak in their miserable holes. (Becker 253)

The Harts were among those German writers and critics who envisaged a development of Naturalism in their own country's literature, but not necessarily based on the model proposed by Zola. They wrote "For and Against Zola" in 1882, when Zola was enjoying considerable success and acclaim, but Naturalism was still in its infancy in Germany. Most significantly, whilst the French naturalists spoke in awed terms of Balzac, the Harts and many of their contemporaries held Goethe in the same reverence. However, they still recognised the need for literature to progress and had this to say about those critics of Zola (and Naturalism) who could not accept that literature should be exploring the sordid and distasteful in the human condition:

This is unquestionably a fundamental error which speaks volumes about the aesthetic theories of such critics, about their confusion

over what is the relation of what is common in actuality to artistic representation, about the validity of decorum as a limit of the poetically allowable. (Becker 254)

It is well documented that much of the adverse criticism of naturalistic literature arises from the professed revulsion of the critics; many of them express a desire to protect the sensibilities of a notionally delicate readership. Naturalistic writers were simply depicting societal truths as they saw them; the fact that they did so, along with their motives for so doing, become irrelevant if the controversy surrounding a particular novel causes it to be withdrawn from circulation or public sale. The novel in question becomes another victim of censorship and a casualty of art versus decorum. The impact of a negative reception by the critics on such grounds will be discussed in a later chapter.

A further aim of this study will be to examine the possibility that there are writers of fiction who use naturalistic perspectives or techniques without subscribing to the theoretical and philosophical prescriptions of Naturalism, and if the end result differs from the fiction of those whose purpose is to promote the cause of naturalistic philosophy or theory as a means to take the novel forward and explore the boundaries of fiction. To this end, this study offers an analysis of the genesis of Naturalism and how the French progenitors initially defined its aims. Furthermore, it would be impossible to study the origins of naturalism without having a clear picture of the upheavals occurring in French literature in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Whilst Balzac was still the acknowledged master of the novel, great changes were taking place, politically, scientifically and socially, and much post-Enlightenment thought, including Romanticism, was being re-examined and re-



evaluated. Realism and Naturalism in French fiction challenged Romanticism on issues which went much deeper than literature: the new literary lions were vying for an ideological usurpation of the Romantics' pre-eminence, and Zola insisted that Romantic writers—Hugo, in particular—were writing from the imagination, rather than from observation. For Zola, observation of the human condition was a pre-requisite for meaningful literature and imagination was counter-productive.

Literary Naturalism, as is well documented, had its beginnings in France in the middle years of the nineteenth-century. Although literary predecessors were publishing what are retrospectively recognised as naturalistic works, the aims of the naturalistic novel were formalised by Emile Zola in 1880, in “Le Roman Expérimental”. However, as early as 1868, in the preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, he was describing himself as one of a “group of naturalist writers” (*Thérèse Raquin* 27). This group of writers, among whose number were Karl-Joris Huysmans, Léon Hennique, Henry Céard, Paul Alexis, and Guy de Maupassant, along with Zola, remained of one mind long enough to pool a collection of six short stories collectively published as the *Soirées de Médan* (1880). A student of French literary history of the period would find the individual contributions both enlightening and provocative, given the later schisms and uneasy relationships which became a feature of the supposedly linked schools of Realism, Naturalism and Decadence. Despite contrary evidence and opinion, Zola was not happy with the idea that Naturalism was a movement or a school. In “Le Roman Expérimental” he describes Naturalism as a progression rather than a genre:

[. . .] I have said many times that naturalism is not a school: that, for example, it is not embodied in the genius of one man, nor in a

moment of collective madness, as was romanticism, that it consists simply of the application of the experimental method of the study of nature and of man.

[. . . j'ai dit tant de fois que le naturalisme n'était pas une école, que par exemple il ne s'incarnait pas dans la génie un homme ni dans le coup de folie d'un groupe, comme le romantisme, qu'il consistait simplement dans l'application de la méthode expérimentale à l'étude de la nature et de l'homme.] (Gershman & Whitworth, 350)\*

However, whilst *Les Soirées de Médan* and the various declarations of collective intent by the French naturalists appeared to signal literary and philosophical consensus, dissent was not long in coming.

Practically all the French writers associated with the realist movement issued manifestos in one form or another. Frequently, these took the form of prefaces to certain editions of their novels or were published as open letters. The most obvious explanation for the publication of manifestos is that they are a means to rationalise, justify, and explain how and why the author would choose to write a novel on a particular subject and what the aim should be. Another explanation is that many authors wished to align themselves with certain schools and to publicly declare their literary aims. In an era before genre studies became part of the critical apparatus, authors would necessarily have to declare their literary intent in order to avert misunderstanding. Whilst British writers were more reluctant to indulge themselves, American realists and naturalists carried on

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\* Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

this tradition: Hamlin Garland published *Crumbling Idols* in 1894, and this collection of essays contains his piece “On Veritism”; wherein he distances himself from the naturalists. As V.L. Parrington notes, barely a generation later, Garland “would not follow the path of Naturalism” and “could not bring himself to accept the major criteria of Naturalism as they were exemplified in the work of Zola and Strindberg and Hauptmann” (Parrington 299). The reason was that the naturalists seemed to offer no hope of betterment: “no impersonal determinism had chilled his belief in man as a free-will agent in a moral universe” (300).

Similarly, Frank Norris published his literary views in a series of articles, later published posthumously as *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* in 1903. Léon Lemonnier’s essay, “A Literary Manifesto: The Populist Novel”(1929), scrutinises and critiques the manifestos issued by the French naturalists: “Are literary manifestos coming back into style? [. . .] It seems to me that these proclamations provided contemporaries with highly diverting news” (Becker 466). Lemonnier, apparently ignoring Zola’s comments in “Le Roman Expérimental,” implies that the naturalists themselves confined the “school” to a period between the publication of two manifestos. “The school was born officially with the publication of *Les Soirées de Médan* (1880) and died shortly after *Le Manifeste des Cinq* (1887)” (Becker 466). The only conclusion, says Lemonnier, is that the naturalists themselves had announced the beginning and end of Naturalism. What he neglects to say in this short piece is that the “Manifesto of the Five” was specifically an attack on Zola, more specifically against *La Terre*, and not against Naturalism as a literary mode or genre. What Lemonnier might also have added is that *Le Manifeste des Cinq*, despite its title, does not bear scrutiny as a manifesto, as such, but is more akin to an unfavourable review. Some authors have used the

publication of a manifesto as a means of creating a “movement” which may or may not have had a lasting significance. Lemonnier certainly seems convinced of this as a motive, and he puts forward a convincing argument to justify his conclusion.

However, Zola, as noted above, states specifically that Naturalism is not a school, it is the only way forward for the novel; Naturalism itself was simply the application of a “method”. He used the preface to *Thérèse Raquin* (1868) and “Le Roman Expérimental” as a declaration of his commitment or a statement of intent, and was hopeful that authors (or potential authors) would follow his prescription as they did, to a greater or lesser extent, in many countries, including England. However, despite an admiration for the French novel, nineteenth century British writers showed little willingness to import French theoretical prescriptiveness and incorporate it into the Victorian novel.

Victorian England was not, as is often implied, a moral and social monolith; neither was it the solipsistic world of Empire and all things British. European philosophy and literature were in wide currency, often in translation, and found a receptive audience; in *The English Novel in Transition* William Frierson notes the following:

There can be no adequate understanding of post-1885 English fiction without a knowledge of French naturalism. A million copies of translated naturalistic works were circulated in Britain before 1890, according to Ernest Vizetelly, whose father was chief publisher of those translations. (Frierson 16)

Thus, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Zola was widely read and discussed both in England and the United States with, as may be expected, wide

divergence of opinion as to his merits as a writer and as to his qualifications to set himself up as a literary pioneer; there were those who admired him and those who reviled him, but few could have doubts as to his sincerity in his wish to establish Naturalism as necessary factor in the progression of the novel.

Translations of his works were plentiful, but often unreliable, and often tailored to the local market or otherwise censored. Many critics found his work salacious rather than scientific; in his own preface to the 1868 edition of *Thérèse Raquin* Zola had an elegant riposte to those taking the moral high ground:

I defy my judges to find one really licentious page put in to cater for readers of those little rose-coloured books, those boudoir and backstage disclosures, which run to ten thousand copies and are warmly welcomed by the very papers that have been nauseated by the truths in *Thérèse Raquin*. (*Thérèse Raquin* 24)

The author, insisted Zola, was merely a disinterested observer, and he took no personal or prurient delight in representations of debauchery or wanton behaviour.

The novel was simply the truth, stripped bare of value judgements. What the novel should depict was the condition of mankind and the reactions of men and women to certain events in their life over which they have no control.

Significantly, events which the characters appear to have instigated could be shown to have an outside cause beyond the characters' control. The rationale for this development of the novel was contained in, or derived from, the works of, among others, Hippolyte Taine, Claude Bernard, and Charles Darwin.

The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the writings of Herbert Spencer, especially his *First Principles* and *Data of Ethics*, had far reaching consequences. The philosophy embodied in Darwin's work is fundamental to the

tenets of naturalism; Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series draws on the principles of heredity for much of its central thesis, which is that characteristics, including genetic flaws, are passed on from generation to generation and may be used to explain behavioural quirks. Although some of the "science" that Zola drew on for his "experimental novels" has now been shown to be less than reliable, critics cannot fail to acknowledge that his literature was undoubtedly a product of the influence of current scientific thought. In fact, his literary philosophy was at the leading edge of an amalgamation of the arts and sciences. As Jeremy Hawthorn notes in *Studying the Novel*:

[. . .] we should not, today, make the mistake of dismissing naturalist (or other) theories and methods as unsound merely because in our own time we believe them to be insufficient as a basis for producing fiction that will encourage readers to see the world in a new manner. We should try, rather, to find out what their force was at the time that they were formulated, and remember that the way we see the world may owe something to the effect that they had on readers in the past. (51)

That is to say, readers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with the benefit of scientific hindsight, should not ignore the very great influence which Darwin, Spencer and their acolytes, such as Edwin Ray Lankester and John Fiske, had on the Victorian psyche, not only in England, but throughout the Western world. Many of the early theories of evolution, heredity, and environment have been refined and revised in the one and a half centuries since their first appearance, and it is easy to forget just how devastating was their initial impact.

The writings of Herbert Spencer and Darwin contain claims about heredity which many continue to dispute, particularly on religious grounds, but in nineteenth-century Europe many readers were keen to embrace these revolutionary ideas. However, those readers who understood the deeper implications of this thinking were not at all happy with certain aspects: were criminals condemned to forever beget more criminals in their image? Were gamblers and alcoholics doomed to repeat their addictions through the generations? Even now, the question of heredity, “nature or nurture,” is still a hotly disputed issue. Dr. Thomas Stuttaford in an article in the *Times* of London in 1999 states (referring to the death of John F Kennedy Jr. in a plane crash):

There is no supernatural curse on the Kennedys, only a potentially rogue gene inherited from Joe and Rose, the founders of the dynasty and grandparents of John F Kennedy Jr. The Kennedys, for all their fame, fortune and ability, cannot defy the laws of nature. . . . For a generation or two it was incorrect to ascribe personality to anything other than nurture. “Psychopathy”, “sociopathy”, antisocial personality disorders or traits were attributed to upbringing. But studies of twins and adoption have convinced even the most sceptical that there is an important genetic component. (The *Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1999)

Thus, the influence of heredity, in the recent past so frequently dismissed as scientifically unsound, plays an important part in twenty-first century thinking and is still a cause of considerable controversy. Scientists claim to have found genes which account for sexuality (including homosexuality), criminality, antisocial behaviour, addiction, and many aspects of personality, good and bad. In other

words, modern scientific theory is somehow vindicating a component of naturalist theory which became an unfashionable doctrine for much of the twentieth century. Much of the earlier scepticism is understandable in view of the fact that the gene and its chemistry have only recently been documented by scientists. Modern readers, that is to say, readers in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first century will be familiar with genetic science in a way which would have seemed unthinkable to readers in the nineteenth century. Well-publicised ventures, such as the Genome Project, will have alerted the modern reader to recent scientific vindication of attention to the importance of inherited behaviour; during the middle decades of the twentieth century, reliance on heredity to provide clues as to behavioural patterns was considered suspect.

From the 1860s onwards, the importance of these Darwinian questions and other controversies soon began to permeate the realist and naturalist literature which was fast becoming a dominant mode in late Victorian England and was about to spread to the United States, where new controversies would arise. Many of these disputes spilled over into censorship issues and gave rise to problems which would be faced by naturalist writers in France, translators who published (or tried to publish) these works in England, and English writers who faced hostility from the press, the church, and groups such as the National Vigilance Association. If the realist novel was a mirror of society, the reflection therein was not one which many Victorians relished. Determinism, social Darwinism, Spencerian theories, and other components of naturalism contained implications for “respectable” society which went beyond scurrilous tales of misdeeds committed below stairs or in the sordid slums of the inner cities. Many contemporary critics, however, described naturalism as dealing in just such



matters, and its fiction was labelled variously as “a literature of the sewer,” “the handling of unclean things,” “Zola and his odious school,” and with other derogatory tags. In order to make further sense of the importance of the literary events of nineteenth-century England, it is important to examine the demographics of the readership and the means of distribution of literature.

From the emergence of the English novel in the seventeenth century and over the next two hundred years, the novel in late Victorian England had taken on a new importance; it was no longer a triviality along the lines of a parlour-game or something to be discussed at a *soirée*; it had become the currency of thought, the barometer of social consciousness. Novels were a societal indicator, but were also the mass media of the time; the circulating libraries, whose commercial and cultural influence was incalculable, expanded the readership beyond those who could afford to buy books. The availability of library books meant that servants and workers could obtain literature; the significance of this was not lost on their masters and mistresses. The importance of placing the novel at the cultural centre of nineteenth century society cannot be overemphasised; novelistic ideas of morality, ethics, sexual politics and so on were rightly taken to mirror the “real” world which existed outside that of the novel. Realism conveyed the message that the characters and events in its literature were not at a remove from Victorian society, but described it; furthermore, by its very consumption and commodification by Victorian readers, the novel itself became a product, a constituent element, a sign of the times.

One of the main problems which emerges from any examination of the period is that “realism” becomes so ubiquitous a description that it becomes virtually meaningless; one hears of the “realism” of Dickens, of Balzac, of George

Eliot, of William Dean Howells, of Sherwood Anderson and so on. Realism appears to have covered a century of literary endeavour, and there is an implication that the moral and social values have remained constant throughout, which is not, of course, a true assessment. It is relevant, in a study of this type, to compare the types of realism that are thought to be ideologically similar, rather than a cross-section of all literature which might be termed realistic. Few critics nowadays would dispute Naturalism's links with realism, and some are happy to conflate the two terms. George Becker, for example, does not distinguish between the origins of Naturalism and those of realism; this contrasts with Lukács' position that realism and Naturalism are quite different, stating that both Modernism and Naturalism are "*as genres* artistic and epistemological failures" (Howard, 25) [Howard's emphasis]. Lukács, as Howard further noted, considered that literary genres are circumscribed by their ideological constraints:

In Lukács's system genres are always defined in opposition to one another, and his theory of naturalism is as inseparable from his theory of realism as Becker's from his assumptions about reality. His preference for realism is constantly implicit in the distinctions he makes between realist narration and naturalist description. (Howard 25)

The considerable political implications of Naturalism for the Marxist critic will be discussed in a later chapter. There are, understandably, several different positions taken by different generations of Marxist critics and they will be examined in some detail. However, most Marxist criticism consistently distinguishes Realism from Naturalism in a generic way, and genre becomes more of an issue when ideological implications are considered. The position taken by

many critics, such as Becker in particular, that Naturalism can be taken to be an offshoot of realism is not, on the whole, disputed. However, the difficulty arises that there are fundamental differences between realist novels and naturalistic novels that cannot be resolved by the simple expedient of explaining them away on a philosophical level. On the question of the interchangeability of the words “realist” and “naturalist,” Becker takes the view that the difference between realism and Naturalism is that Naturalism is merely a form which exists within a realist nexus:

Certainly usage may do what it will with a word, but in essence and in origin naturalism is no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some realists, showing man caught in a net from which there can be no escape and degenerating under those circumstances; that is, it is pessimistic material determinism.  
(Becker 35)

The main problem with this type of assessment is that there are clear divergences between the realist’s depiction of all men and women and that of the naturalist. The questions and issues arising from such a conflation of realism and Naturalism are discussed in a later chapter; such issues can be resolved by adopting the definitions of mode and genre which are set out in Chapter 2. The realist impetus in French literature came from Balzac and, if Becker is correct in his assumptions, French naturalists should have been happy to write Balzacian novels, and adapting the form to accommodate the philosophy to which Becker refers.

Zola, on the other hand, whilst acknowledging and admiring the aims of the realistic movement, saw the naturalists as in the vanguard of literary pursuits,

at the same time insisting that the naturalists, as noted above, were not “une école”. The naturalist writer, as he explains in *Le Roman Expérimental* (1880), has a higher purpose.

This is how we carry on practical sociology, how our labours aid the political and economic sciences. I do not know, I repeat, any work which is more noble or of wider application. To be master of good and evil, to regulate life, to regulate society, in the long run to resolve all the problems of socialism, above all to bring a solid foundation to justice by experimentally resolving questions of criminality, is that not to do the most useful and moral human work? (Becker 177)

Lukács, of course, would find this declaration both overambitious and antithetical to his own ideology. However, Zola reaffirms a belief in the novel as an immensely powerful social tool—to “regulate” life and society is an ambitious responsibility for a writer of fiction, and one which, during this period, was taken extremely seriously. The novel had come of age and could no longer be regarded simply as literary make-believe, and thus detached from “science” or documentary. Fiction was now grounded in real life, a point upon which Frank Norris was later to insist: the novel, he said, should be “life,” not “literature,” a notion which is discussed at length in chapter 5. Zola, too, saw himself as a man with a mission; whether that mission was ever accomplished, however, is open to question. There were many, as noted above, who were convinced that the works of Zola should not even be published, let alone recognised as a means to “regulate”. However, Zola and the naturalistic writers in his mould would take a topic or social issue, such as the woman as consumer (Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*,

Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, Gissing's *Eve's Ransom*), prostitution (Crane's *Maggie - A Girl of the Streets*, Moore's *The Mummer's Wife*, Zola's *Nana* and *L'Assommoir*), or a news item, as did Dreiser with *An American Tragedy*, and turn it into a novel. As the results often read more like reportage than fiction, these novels assumed the appearance of social documents to a greater extent than did romantic and early realist works. Some English slum fiction, notably the works of Arthur Morrison, were based on assiduous research and emerge much like the short journalistic pieces of Stephen Crane—the "Experiments," for example, which are discussed in chapter 4. Jack London's *People of the Abyss* is a similar example: set in the slums of London, it has more similarities with English slum fiction than with the American "romantic" Naturalism of which Norris was a champion. In chapter 6, there is a full discussion of the question of how romanticism is defined and justified in Norris's concept of Naturalism.

The English naturalist movement was a relatively short-lived affair whose most well known protagonists are George Moore and George Gissing, each of whom owes a certain amount to the influence of Emile Zola. (Notwithstanding the statement by Gissing in 1880 that he had not yet read any Zola). There are many other English writers who may be described as having written naturalistically, and some of their works are discussed in chapter 3. However, the fact remains that for the majority of scholars and critics, Moore and Gissing are the names which spring most readily to mind when the subject of English Naturalism arises. George Moore moved to France in 1872, where he remained for ten years, thence to England. In France he discovered the early naturalists and came under the influence of the works of the Goncourts, Mallarmé, and Zola, as well as discovering the decadent poetry of Baudelaire, which became a significant

inspiration when he tried his hand at poetry. Moore, as critics are quick to point out, was a poet *manqué*, and many of his influences were short-lived. His biographer, John Freeman implies that Moore tended to flit from one new hero to another. Although Moore is known primarily as a writer, he had actually gone to Paris with the intention of studying painting; he was enchanted by Degas and Manet. Moore felt that the Impressionists were the visual arts' counterpart to the naturalistic writers in an aesthetic, if not ideological, sense, and Impressionistic visual art held him in its thrall for many years, long after he had abandoned literary Naturalism. Whilst in England, George Moore wrote the introductions to the translated versions of two of Zola's novels, *Pot-Bouille* (*Piping Hot!*) and *La Curée* (*The Rush for the Spoil*), both of which were published in 1885, but Zola refused to reciprocate in the case of an introduction to the French translation of George Moore's *A Mummer's Wife*, which Zola had been requested to contribute sometime during 1888-9. Zola had taken umbrage at some of Moore's remarks in *Confessions of A Young Man* and the disciple, having already become disenchanted with Zola, both personally and artistically, had left the fold. It is of further significance that George Moore is quoted by his biographer, John Freeman as having stated that "a man will never be born who will write more than two, at the most three, naturalistic novels; the naturalistic novel being the essence of a phase of life that the writer has lived in and assimilated..." (115). This statement, echoed by Yves Chevrel in *Le Naturalisme* (1982), has been repeated as much in recent criticism as it was a hundred years ago. Another relatively modern version of this train of thought is Donald Pizer's contentious assertion that Naturalism is a "young man's game" (*Theory and Practice* 155). However, as will be discussed, women writers on both sides of the Atlantic became worthy advocates of the

naturalist cause, as did many writers who continued writing naturalistic fiction well into later life. Zola, of course, is a prime example.

The novels of Zola found widespread currency in England, both in the original and in translation, but often met with adverse criticism. This was most frequently directed at the content more than the writing. In 1888 Henry Vizetelly, the publisher of Zola's translated works, was taken to trial, and pleaded guilty to publishing "immoral literature". In many important respects, Victorian England was not ready for an exposé of life's underbelly; if the realists were unappealing to a certain few Victorian readers, the naturalists were downright offensive. The National Vigilance Association was, as its name implies, a body whose main concern was not literary, but moral. Its target was "pernicious literature," and pernicious meant that which dealt with the seamier side of Victorian society. Henry Vizetelly was successfully prosecuted at the instigation of the worthies of the National Vigilance Association, and he pleaded guilty to publishing an "obscene libel," in this case, the works of Zola. A later chapter will focus on contemporaneous criticism of naturalism on both sides of the Atlantic. The intention is to examine the reactions to the novels in order to understand the cultural effects of the acceptance of the philosophy of naturalism and the ideological ramifications of Naturalism as art. There were obviously many prudes for whom childbirth, illegitimacy, sex outside marriage, and women's sexuality were subjects which should not be discussed in literature, but there were equally those who felt threatened by social Darwinism, socialist realism, and determinism. The prudes probably constituted the lesser threat to the survival of Naturalism in the long term, although the powers of organisations such as the National Vigilance Association and the circulating libraries was sufficient to prevent the large scale

dissemination of any literature deemed unsuitable. Religious bodies, too, wielded considerable influence, and Darwin, of course, had been the target of a vigorous campaign by the church, which sought to discredit his evolutionary theories.

Social Darwinism was not what most greatly offended in the naturalist novel, but that it was “a study of the putrid,” as the *Methodist Times* described Zola’s work (Becker 381). Much of the invective directed at the naturalist novel in Victorian days appears risible when viewed from the present perspective, but at the time was influential in guiding the decisions of the circulating libraries, thus affecting the income of those writers dependent on literary endeavour for their living.

Gissing’s *New Grub Street* is an insightful commentary on these very issues, describing the commodification of literature at the end of the nineteenth century.

What naturalism means to literary critics and to the informed reader in the twenty-first century is a vexed question to which the answer should lie in consensus. As matters stand, there has never been, nor is it likely that there will be, critical consensus as to who was a naturalist, and more importantly, who was not. Once again, very few American authors committed their entire writing career to the naturalist cause and even fewer were prepared to compromise their own literature in order to promote it. (This is not a novelty in naturalistic fiction; it is now widely accepted by critics that in the second half of *Thérèse Raquin*, Zola does not follow the narrow prescriptivism of his own exhortations to writers, but rather allows his artistic and poetic instincts to dominate). The more relevant and significant question is which works are naturalistic, rather than which authors have written from a naturalist perspective or used naturalistic techniques. Perhaps by examining *why* naturalistic techniques and perspectives are used one may be in a better position to define *what* defines Naturalism. In each chapter, the views of



a cross-section of modern critics will be considered. For the purposes of this thesis, “modern” criticism will be taken to refer to critiques written after the Second World War. Lars Åhnebrink was in the vanguard of modern scholarship on American naturalist writing and his seminal work *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction* (1961) is frequently quoted by many modern scholars, right up to the end of the century. Nevertheless, there are still aspects of this important book which may be questioned; Hamlin Garland’s inclusion in the title, for example, would lead us to believe that he was somehow a committed naturalist. This assumption, however, is suspect for the principal reason that Garland described himself as a “veritist,” wishing to dissociate himself from the early realists and later naturalists. In some respects, Åhnebrink’s treatment of Garland is symptomatic of much modern criticism of Naturalism, in that the author’s commitment to a naturalist agenda seems not to be an issue, whereas there are historical reasons why it should be. In Zola’s France, authors who wished to align themselves with the naturalists were expected to declare themselves; by which token, naturalism in novels did not happen accidentally, although, as Charles Child Walcutt puts it, “the forms of naturalism may be assumed without the writer’s caring much about its theoretical basis” (*Divided Stream* 130). The modern critic may detect elements of naturalism in older works which were not originally recognised as naturalistic, but, with the benefit of hindsight, may be compared with a body of naturalistic writing. Of course, if the author leaves no manifesto or other extra-textual information, one can only conjecture as to motivation for writing as a naturalist, although it is possible to make relatively accurate guesses. An example of how one might apply such speculation would apply in the case of Frank Norris; according to Malcolm

Bradbury in his essay "Years of the Modern," Norris was known to have "spent his aesthetic apprenticeship in London and Paris ... and was seen around campus with a 'yellow-paper covered novel of Zola in his hand'" (Cunliffe 361). From this alone the reader is justified in reading the novels of Norris with the foreknowledge that he had some acquaintanceship with the naturalist movement. That he wrote naturalistically, which is incontestable, cannot be ascribed to mere coincidence. In 1947 Malcolm Cowley wrote an incisive essay on Naturalism in which he states:

So far there is not in American literature a single instance in which a writer has remained a naturalist from beginning to end of a long career; even Dreiser before his death became a strange mixture of Communist and mystic. There are, however, a great many works that are predominantly naturalistic; and the time has come to list them in order to give the basis for my generalities. (Becker 447)

He then lists some works which, in his opinion, are canonically naturalistic and the contents of this list will be considered in a later chapter. Cowley's opening statement describes one of the most important aspects of American naturalism; not all writers who have used naturalist perspectives or techniques are necessarily committed to the philosophy. Many commentators describe Stephen Crane, for example, as an example of a naturalist writer; some have cited John Steinbeck. The implication is that these writers spent their career putting forward the naturalist point of view; this is far from the case, of course. Frank Norris is perhaps the most stylistically Zolaesque of the early American naturalist writers, but there can be no justification for describing his fiction as prescriptive or formulaic Naturalism. Furthermore, his theoretical standpoint is directed more to

writing with a definably American voice than to restating a naturalistic philosophy. Donald Pizer famously noted in *The Theory and Practice of American Naturalism*, “naturalism is a young man’s game” (155) with the epithets “young” and “man” carrying equal weight; the argument is that authors, as they mature, move away from naturalism to something else. Pizer’s assertion that women do not embrace naturalism is very much open to question, however. The naturalist canon does not admit a great many women into its pantheon, but that is not to say that they did not exist. In England Sarah Grand, Julia Frankau, and Margaret Harkness were, at the very least, influenced by the early naturalists. In American literature, the novels of Edith Wharton are regarded by many as having a naturalistic perspective. For example, in *The House of Mirth* (1905), Wharton demonstrates that the central character, Lily Bart, is constantly subject to societal pressures which condition her responses to the situation in which she finds herself. Kate Chopin, too, is an example of a woman writer who patently used naturalist techniques, but her work has been usurped by those who would label her feminist or local colourist. Whilst it is true that there is feminism and local colour in her work, there is a great deal which would qualify for inclusion in the naturalist mainstream. It may be equally true that the works of Kate Chopin do not demonstrate a sufficient commitment to the naturalist philosophy to nominate her as a naturalist author. This commitment may become a modern criterion: does the author's body of work demonstrate a willingness, a conscious effort, to contribute to the naturalist cause, as originally defined? The original template was set out by Zola, but then was later disputed repeatedly. Naturalism met opposition in several different quarters: there were those who opposed it on grounds of decency—no doubt supposing literature to have a duty to uphold the moral values

of the dominant ideology and wrongly supposing that naturalism was undermining morality rather than exposing moral shortcomings. As naturalism in literature seemed to dwell on the seedier, baser, less desirable aspects of the human condition, its practitioners, therefore, were similarly tainted.

Naturalism was not a proselytising movement, but, rather, one which attracted members who were of a like mind; our present-day view tends to homogenise literary schools in a way in which the suggested coherence is exaggerated. If the early naturalists were divided, later critics of naturalism are even more so. Reading the standard college texts on naturalism, the modern student of American literature will find as much dissent as to who was a naturalist as there are texts written on the subject. June Howard, Charles Child Walcott, Walter Benn Michaels, Donald Pizer, and Per Seyersted among many others are all pre-eminent writers on naturalism and realism, yet to find a common core of writers about whom there is agreement would be reductive *ad absurdum*. In the final analysis, it will become evident that it is more productive to look for naturalistic techniques and perspectives among individual works than to label specific authors with the tag of “naturalist”. Authors male and female, young and old, of any nationality or race, however politically inclined, will be found to have written in the naturalist mould. The defining moment, it is hoped, will be when the work contains the elements which can be said to be distinctive of the genre.

One of the more noticeable features of some comparatively recent studies of Naturalism is the discussion of genre. Why the question of genre is so important is not immediately obvious, although both June Howard and David Baguley appear to share a similar approach—that Naturalist fiction had its own codes, strategies, and aesthetic. The early practitioners of Naturalism, such as the

Goncourts and Zola, claimed that “novel,” or even “literature,” were misnomers for the type of work that they were doing, “human documents” being more appropriate: however, as David Baguley points out, there are problems with such a denial:

[...] their works themselves exhibit the essential characteristics of a distinct literary genre, however deceptive their mimetic strategies and however varied their features, for they are [...] subject to, and the product of, the coercive dynamics characteristic of literary genres in their recurrent practices, themes, patterns and pragmatic effects. (54)

Moreover, there are no naturalistic prose texts that do not have all the traditional characteristics of a novel whose form seems to fit a linear pattern of development. Put another way, Naturalism in prose fiction falls into a chronological sequence of fictional works that have been classified as novels; these “human documents” have all the generic hallmarks of the novel. Despite Zola’s antipathy towards the epithet, he had to content himself with “roman,” with all its connotations and cognates, such as “romance,” and “romancier”. In order for fiction to present a new and different world view, as Zola was claiming, the form and content of the novel would have to be different, and quantifying that difference would necessitate a re-evaluation of genre. Although early Naturalism in literature emerged from, or was heavily influenced by, positivist philosophy, and was theoretically following a scientific “method,” the fact remains that naturalistic prose works manifested themselves in novelistic form. Resistance to classification as such, especially on the grounds proposed by Zola was therefore doomed to failure. One of the possible sources of contention is the title of “The

Experimental Novel”; semantically, there is an implication that the proposal relates to an experimental form of the novel, whereas what is actually described is the methodology behind writing a novel that narrates or describes an experiment in human temperaments: the story contained in the novel is itself the experiment. The longer prose works which are categorised as naturalistic, seen in historical context, have all of the characteristics of novels, novellas, or novelettes, depending on what criteria are used to define a “novel-length” book. There is certainly a discernible difference between the extent to which literary Naturalism broke away from tradition, if it did so, and the way in which, say, the *nouveau roman* of Robbe-Grillet established a new form; some of Robbe-Grillet’s works, to take a more obvious example, defy genre in a way which Zola’s did not. Nevertheless, the Naturalists’ conformity to form in no way diminishes the impact of the early naturalistic novel on what was to follow—not only in France, but throughout most of Europe, the Americas and in Australia, too.

Defining any particular literary movement as a genre is to invite a number of different problems, the first of which relates to the very basic formal question of what the term “genre” means to the twenty-first century literary critic. Modern scholarship, whilst deferring in general to some Aristotelian principles, has allowed a greater degree of latitude in the definition of what genre constitutes. Sub-species and offshoots have achieved generic status—cyber fiction, docu-soaps, spaghetti Westerns, sitcoms, and so on, at some time or another have been described as genres, whereas the traditional view is that they are simply versions of a larger form, such as the novel, cinema, or drama. Historically, the novel seems to be a genre because it has arisen from, and largely replaced, the epic as a long narrative form, with both a plot and a story, frequently containing dialogue.

Certainly, the novel's ability to assimilate or incorporate most other genres is a quality common to both epic and novel. However, there are cogent and persuasive arguments as to how the novel itself is omni-generic in the same way as the epic, and that forms, modes, or different manifestations of what might broadly be described as "the novel" are, in fact, distinguishable as genres of literature which have been absorbed by the novel. The novel *qua* genre has now become too loose a term to have any meaning as a definition, as its boundaries cannot be delineated. Older definitions as to what constitute genre are no longer tenable—tragedy has become less definable, and there are types of tragedy which defy Aristotelian conventions: Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, for example, has few features of Greek tragedy—titular irony, perhaps. Nowadays, the word "epic," either as noun or adjective, is frequently applied to a prose form, especially if one considers works such as John Dos Passos' *USA* and James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*. In the nineteenth century, Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* and Zola's *Rougon Macquart* series each contained some novels of epic length and breadth; equally, *War and Peace* and *Crime and Punishment* have epic qualities and proportions. Both Balzac's and Zola's series of novels are referred to as a *roman-fleuve*, whose French definition usually requires the novel to cover several generations of one or more families. There is a point at which the critic must differentiate between a group of novels that are loosely connected, and a clearly defined series which can be divided into volumes. The fact that the epic has to some extent redefined itself as a prose form does not, however, mean that epic poems have to be generically re-assigned: it is the genre which has mutated, not the works which belong to it. Equally, perhaps the modern critic has two forms to deal with: the epic novel and the epic poem. Nevertheless, the re-

assignment of genres over time implies that genre is not transhistorical, but is subject to historical interpretation. Each genre is defined differently at correspondingly different moments in time.

Although several critics seem determined to classify naturalism as a genre, it is equally acceptable that Naturalism is simply a form of the novel, whether a mode or a sub-genre. What finally emerges is that Naturalism can be identified in its own right, having an aesthetic, a plot dynamic, and a logic that is *sui generis*. Zola was overstating the case when he declared that Naturalism as a “method” was beyond genre, that it was not simply a version of the novel; to all intents and purposes Naturalism, if it may be described as a “method,” appears to be a means of operating *within* a genre, not apart from it. If the novel *qua* genre can be said to contain a type of fiction which has its own set of rules, its own ideology, and a world-view which forms part of the contract between author and reader that does not conflict with the generic conventions of the novel, then Naturalist fiction quite simply becomes part of a sub-set of literature which is embraced by the novel. Either way, as long as a set of common features can be found which distinguish Naturalism from other modes or forms, then it becomes a free-standing method of operation within the realm of literature. Following a study of works which do have the characteristics which are usually designated as naturalistic, it becomes apparent that literary Naturalism operates within a specific, self-regulating framework of aesthetic and formal rules. Whether critics use the word “genre,” “mode,” or “form” only has significance if these terms are being used to distinguish certain works from others within that framework.

It cannot be said with any certainty that realism, in the sense of verisimilitude in fiction, was inevitable. However, writers as diverse as George



Eliot and Dostoyevsky enthusiastically embraced it as a mode. The manifestations of realism in literature, however, were even more diverse, finally allowing the emergence of Naturalism. As David Baguley argues, there is a fundamental difference between realism as a “mode” and Realism, the hallmark of Victorian Fiction. The difference, however, is less important in other languages: in English, the word realism, as a mode is used in the way that a Frenchman would use the phrase “le vraisemblable”. Hamlin Garland described his works as “veritism,” which corresponds to the Italian “verismo,” the epithet used for the Italian version of Naturalism. “Naturalism” as a mode, or genre, becomes more relevant when discussing the American novel of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly more contentious.

Frank Norris described Zola as a romantic novelist; this may or may not be true in terms of traditional romantic values, when defined by French critics, or critics of French literature. What Norris did was to re-define romanticism for a twentieth century American readership. In later chapters, there will be an examination of Norris’s definition of romanticism and why his definition was so important to an understanding of American Naturalism and its success as a novelistic mode, when conventional wisdom would find the notion of a literature which minimises the role of the individual as antithetical to the American notion of the individual’s role or how that role should be depicted.

The following chapter will track the emergence of literary Naturalism in France and examine its origins. It emerged from the realistic novels of Balzac, the works of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, and the new, “objective” realism of Gustave Flaubert. However, the impetus to establish literary Naturalism as a major force in novelistic form came from Emile Zola, who encountered—and

countered—opposition and adverse criticism on many fronts, not least from his former colleagues and friends. In *Le Naturalisme* (1929) Léon Deffoux noted that Edmond, the surviving Goncourt brother, was unhappy about the poor reception accorded his novel *Fille Elisa* compared with the acclaim which greeted Zola's *L'Assommoir* in 1877 :

On top of the criticism, subjected there to all sorts of contradictory interpretations, the word *naturalism* was, in the eyes of the public, identified more and more with the name of Emile Zola. It was the same with the expression “school of the human document,” for which Goncourt, irritated, later claimed paternity. This was more than enough for the erstwhile friend to come under suspicion. Even more so, because Zola enjoyed more successes and mass circulation following *L'Assommoir*, and young writers, still not attracted by promises of lasting fame and the Academy, were going to Zola, not to Goncourt...

Au-dessus de la critique, en proie à toutes sortes la [sic] d'interprétations contraires, le mot *naturalisme* s'identifiait, de plus en plus, aux yeux de la foule, avec le nom d'Emile Zola. Il en était de même pour l'expression « l'école du document humain » dont Goncourt, agacé, réclama plus tard la paternité. Il n'en fallait pas tant pour que l'ami d'hier fût considéré en suspect. D'autant plus que, pour Zola, d'autres succès, d'autres gros tirages suivirent *L'Assommoir* et que des jeunes littérateurs, non encore attirés par les promesses de Testament et d'Académie, allaient à Zola plutôt qu'à Goncourt... (Deffoux 41)

Therefore, even while Zola was making his mark as the champion and leading proponent of literary Naturalism, his success was winning him enemies as powerful as Edmond de Goncourt. The younger generation, however, lionised him for a time, until they, too, became disenchanted with his self-promotion. The story of Naturalism begins well before Zola formulated his theories on literature and its place in the critique of society.

## **Chapter 2 - Historical background and a discussion of genre**

"If there is such a thing as improper literature M. Zola has produced it." - *Morning Advertiser*.

In order to arrive at an understanding of how the modern American novel developed from nineteenth century European Realist perspectives through to Modernism and beyond, it is important to examine the emergence and rise of Naturalism in France and to evaluate in both literary and social terms the impact which naturalistic writing had on the novel, especially in the United States. The impetus to consolidate the novel as a meaningful art form and a means of influencing society had its origins in the rapid development of the French Realist novel and the perceptive and prescient realisation that the novel could become an agent for achieving social awareness. In "On True Novels," the preface to Edmond and Jules Goncourt's *Germinie Lacerteux*, there is a plea for the novel to be accepted as a vehicle for the dissemination of scholarly research:

Nowadays, the Novel is broader and weightier and is becoming the great, serious, passionate, living form of literary study and social enquiry. Through its use of analysis and psychological research it has become contemporary moral History. Now that it has taken on the burden of scientific studies and responsibilities, it should be accorded science's freedoms and rights.

Aujourd'hui que le Roman s'élargit et grandit, qu'il commence à être la grande forme sérieuse, passionnée, vivante de l'étude littéraire et de l'enquête sociale, qu'il devient par l'analyse et par la recherche psychologique l'Histoire morale contemporaine; aujourd'hui que le Roman s'est imposé les études et les devoirs de

la science, il peut en revendiquer les libertés et les franchises.

(Gershman and Whitworth 266)

The concept of “science” in the nineteenth century was not, of course, comparable with what it has become in the twentieth and twenty-first. There were no paid professionals working in specialised fields; many “natural scientists” were educated scions of well-off families who went off on expeditions, at their own or their family’s expense, often with no clear idea of what they might find. Darwin is a typical in this respect, but untypical in the purposeful and devastating way in which he used the results of his findings. Such scientists would write up their results and present them to learned societies, who would be composed of a mixture of clerics, academics, philosophers, and fellow-scientists. These learned bodies would not be receptive to the idea of writers of fiction setting themselves up as “fellow-scientists,” but to do so was the aim of those French authors who began to see themselves as something more serious than devisers of romances.

From the middle of the eighteenth century and through the early nineteenth century, it had become increasingly apparent that the “romance,” the “novella,” and the novel, in fact, in all its guises, were no longer ephemeral entertainments of the boudoir or the drawing-room. The Goncourts were emphasising the fact that fictional works with an underlying serious intent were rising to the status of political tracts and pamphlets in terms of socio-political importance whilst simultaneously achieving artistic legitimacy, much as the visual arts had enjoyed the cachet of both artistic worth and political statement. In order to achieve social importance, however, the aesthetics of the novel would have to undergo a drastic remodelling; no longer would it be enough that fiction reflected contemporary mores, it would have to examine, and, if necessary, undermine the myths which

supported them. Content and form were re-defining the evolutionary path which works of fiction would follow, and the result would be what the modern reader still recognises and identifies as the Novel. From earliest times, the visual arts, poetry, and drama had occupied the artistic high ground; in the nineteenth century, prose, and more particularly, prose fiction, was about to raise more hackles, eyebrows and temperatures than hitherto, especially in Europe, as it came to dominate intellectual discussion. In France, Balzac had taken the novel to new heights and established a novelistic form for the nineteenth century.

Virtually all French writers of the latter part of the nineteenth century acknowledged Balzac's pre-eminence in establishing a basis for the realistic novel, particularly in terms of plot, characterisation, and dialogue. The lionised successor to Balzac would be Flaubert, who became elder statesman to many of the Naturalists, much to his dismay; Flaubert was not, like Zola, an empire-builder. Moreover, Flaubert did not appear to have a natural successor who would become a new literary icon, nor would he have wished for one. Whilst the new generation of novelists, including the up-and-coming Naturalists were vocal in their admiration for Flaubert, the master himself, as will be illustrated below, was not eager to associate himself with that or any other movement. Hence, although Zola has retrospectively been described as following in a great tradition and creating a new one, this was by no means a universal opinion at the time. In fact, it was not until Zola's "rehabilitation" in the modern era, that he became considered worthy of study as a serious author.

To establish a chronological sequence for the vicissitudes of Naturalism it is essential to analyse critically what the writers of the period were doing and to relate the analysis to how the critics were assessing these events. When

Naturalism was in its infancy, the critics were often authors themselves; in the nineteenth century, there was no such thing as a professional, specialist literary critic. However, the views that authors expressed in journalistic or lettristic pronouncements did not necessarily coincide with the results of their literary endeavours. Flaubert, for example, felt uneasy at being cast in the role of leader of the realist movement, yet his writing clearly puts him in its vanguard, and his influence on literature was phenomenal. Huysmans and others believed that *L'Education Sentimentale* was the epitome of the naturalist novel, and that Naturalism was the ideal form of the novel. In his 1903 preface to *A Rebours*, which had originally been published in 1884, Huysmans displaces Zola's *L'Assommoir* as a literary model:

In its own way, this ideal was realised in a masterpiece which was much more the paragon of naturalism than *L'Assommoir*: it was in *L'Education Sentimentale* by Gustave Flaubert. This novel was for all of us [. . .] a veritable bible.

Cet idéal s'était, en son genre, réalisé dans un chef d'oeuvre qui a été beaucoup plus que *L'Assommoir* le parangon du naturalisme, *L'Education Sentimentale* de Gustave Flaubert; ce roman était pour nous tous . . . une véritable bible. (Gershman & Whitworth 408)

What this suggests nowadays, perhaps, is that Huysmans was playing down Zola's role as a literary leader, although it was Zola who had expressed a similarly favourable opinion on Flaubert's work some thirty years previously. The fact remains that Huysmans himself was responsible for a novel which became the "bible" for at least some Decadents when he wrote *A Rebours* and his break with Zola was complete. Zola is well known as Naturalism's most vociferous

champion, but, as noted above, dissent was frequent, and Zola, rightly or wrongly, took most of the criticism for its failings, as well as any credit for its triumphs.

Rather than attempting a critical study of the individual works themselves, this chapter will first focus on a variety of initial critical reactions to literary Naturalism and the struggles which faced its early practitioners whilst they fought for public acceptance of their works. It is intended that an evaluation of the influence of the pioneers of Naturalism on the American naturalistic novel, which came later, may be achieved by means of a selective history of the development of the novel in England and France. Such an exercise is intended to be to be productive; however, opponents of such an approach can only further fuel the debate on the merits of literary historicism. In fact, if the American model can be shown to be a further development of the European novel, a cautious and considered linear approach seems to be the most useful and appropriate.

However, as will be demonstrated, American thinkers were already aware of European attitudes to the philosophical role of literature long before the American writers used such perspectives in their own writing. There have been criticisms of the methodology in taking the linear approach, the most scathing of which is that found in the introduction to David Baguley's thorough and highly original treatment of French and English naturalistic writing in *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision*. Baguley decries the commonplace in naturalist studies whereby the author expounds a brief history of Naturalism and its origins. After an ironic opening paragraph consisting of a one-and-a-half page potted biography of the genesis of Naturalism, Baguley makes the point that:

Traditional studies of Naturalism have been excessively anecdotal and biographical to the detriment of an understanding of the



literature that they often purport to explain. Furthermore, they have almost invariably been limited to a single national tradition such that recent surveys of research have emphatically deplored the lack of studies from a more international perspective. (Baguley 2)

Whilst Baguley's point is well taken, most authors on the subject of Naturalism narrate a slightly different history, frequently from a different perspective and often with a different emphasis. Moreover, Baguley seems to be stating that to concentrate on one aspect will necessarily produce a reductive view of the whole subject; such a view is an unreasonably harsh judgement on the diversity which ought to be the result of an aggregation of tightly focused works. Baguley deplores the clichés which abound in so many studies of literary Naturalism; for example, many studies of Naturalism quote the message from Paul Alexis which states tersely: "Naturalism not dead. Letter follows." ("Naturalisme pas mort. Lettre suit.") followed by Catulle Mendès' response that this was Alexis' best literary effort. However, Alexis's apparently throwaway statement has been used repeatedly as an example of the persistence of Naturalism in the literary arts. Nevertheless, the history of Naturalism, and the way in which this history is shown to have a relationship with society in general, inevitably locates any scholarly study within a certain tradition of analytic literary history, mainly because the history of naturalistic fiction has to deal with issues of aesthetics, philosophy, morality, and censorship. Furthermore, the impulse for the adoption of the philosophy associated with naturalistic writing as a literary mode with its own specificity, unlike most "schools" or "movements," can be ascribed to one person, Emile Zola; Zola's name, therefore, crops up in the study of the naturalistic fiction of every national literature.

Chapter 1 of *Naturalist Fiction - The Entropic Vision* consists of a neat and comprehensive history which manages to be effectively analytic as well as anecdotal. One of the key conclusions reached in this chapter is that Naturalism becomes a genre in its own right; furthermore, that some novels within a genre will transgress the boundaries of that genre, transforming the genre with their emergence and acceptance. The critic may thus regard the naturalist novel as following certain broad patterns, but as David Baguley puts it:

[. . .] with a complex set of features and inherited codes that relate works to one another and form a tradition, but a tradition that is constantly subject to the conscious modifications and the accidents of reproduction that broaden the scope of the genre and bring about, eventually its assimilation into other strains. (39)

In other words, the genre itself is subject to change, mutation, and modification from within, but retains its integrity. Mutability within a genre, especially Naturalism, becomes an increasingly important issue as naturalistic writing is adopted and adapted in other literatures. Charles Child Walcutt in *American Literary Naturalism - A Divided Stream* refers to the difficulty faced by genre students when faced with the diversity of naturalistic novels and how Naturalism is to be recognised:

Shocking, bestial, scientific, messianic—no sooner does its outline seem to grow clear than, like Proteus, it slips through the fingers and reappears in another shape. [. . .] Whereas one authority describes it as an extreme form of romanticism, another counters that it is the rigorous application of scientific method to the novel. [. . .] But if it may not be caught and held in a single form, it may

be observed in enough of its forms so that we can finally mark the varieties and the limits of its changes. (Walcutt 3-4)

Walcutt is warning that the “Protean beast” of Naturalism is, indeed, a polymorphic entity, and he may be optimistic in suggesting that we can effectively mark the limits of its changes. Much the same view as Walcutt’s is taken by Joyce Hamilton Rochat in an essay quoted by David Baguley: “Naturalism is not a single form that can be grasped and examined at leisure, but a constantly changing, sometimes shapeless shape” (Baguley 42). Nonetheless, over the last hundred years or so critics have tried to circumscribe what has become a recognisable and definable mode of American literary fiction. June Howard issues a caveat in her *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*: “The present study is a detailed reading of a single literary genre, American literary naturalism. [. . .] I may not mean what the reader expects when I speak of genre,” and she explains that literary Naturalism, in her opinion, is not a mode of writing that reflects an ideology, but “*is* an immanent ideology. It is a way of imagining the world [. . .]” (Howard ix). Baguley analyses this point in more detail:

[. . .] it is important to emphasise that ‘realism’ is an essential and permanent feature of several narrative genres, indeed of all genres which require for their particular effects that the reader be engaged in the mimetic illusion. [. . .] Naturalist literature is, therefore, only one of several such representational genres, though the degree to which it exploits the strategies of the realist *mode* (as well as some of the thematic features of the realist *genre*) is such that critics have tended to assimilate the genres of naturalism and

realism or to interpret the former as an outlandish outgrowth of the latter. It would be much more accurate to say that naturalist literature fully exploits the mimetic procedures of the realist *mode* and has a close historical link with the realist *genre* in a number of thematic characteristics, but enjoys its own particular combinations of themes and procedures. (Baguley 48) [Original emphasis]

From the foregoing, it may rightly be assumed that there have been problems along the way with regard to defining Naturalism as a genre, rather than a mode or a variation, even a temporary aberration, within the novelistic form. In the course of this thesis there will be examples given of critics who fail to distinguish between Realism and Naturalism, regarding Naturalism as an offshoot or variant of Realism. Naturalism, in fact uses a realistic mode, but has its own generic specificity.

In order to simplify matters, “realism” and “Realism,” “naturalism” and “Naturalism” exist side by side; Realism and Naturalism exist as historically located genres, whereas realism is used to offer the illusion of verisimilitude, at the same time offering a fixed set of social principles or a moral code. In this context, Naturalism, as Baguley notes above, is one genre of literature which uses the realistic mode to convey to the reader that the plot refers to a set of events, characters and locations which may be objectively verified as having some basis in events from the real world, in the same way in which realistic literature uses the real world as a setting for fictional events. Taking Zola at his word, any moral injunctions or precepts which are thrown up by the text are simply observations of immanent societal morality, not a reflection of the author’s moral agenda. In other words, the author is not setting out to make a moral judgement, but reporting

on what society has produced; the moral judgement becomes something that the reader makes—both on society and on the characters in the novel. In modern criticism, taking this argument to its logical conclusion entails questioning the author's motives for writing about society's ills, and asking if the fiction itself is one of them. It becomes apparent that the mere fact of writing about sensational events or about ordinary people who do extraordinary things, pre-supposes that the author has made a certain judgement before committing pen to paper.

Expanding the argument, it could be said that if society were perfect, the author could only write about perfection; likewise, if society is decadent, then society will produce decadent novels. The author might well respond that objectively observing society is not the same thing as participating in the society depicted. How this quite works in practice is not at all clear, as total objectivity on the part of any writer is an impossibility, if only that it denies artistic individuality, as Flaubert discovered, when he tried to "remove himself" from the text. Realism has to be an artistic mode, and cannot be a simple matter of detachment and lack of poetic involvement.

There are, of course, those critics who would prefer the Novel itself to be the genre, arguing that, say, Romantic or Naturalist novels have more in common with each other than they do with Romantic or Naturalist poetry or drama. Nevertheless, the weight of evidence from critics who specialise in what has become a more tightly focused field of study, such as that of the Naturalist novel, tips the balance in favour of discussing Naturalism as a genre. That is not to say, however, that all naturalistic novels are the product of writers who adhere to the generic tradition, if one can accept that such a writers "adhere" to traditions, and if genres are traditionally definable. In fact, it is much more likely that the term

“Naturalist” is more readily applicable to the work than to the author. In other words, the critic can justifiably take the view that naturalistic novels exist independently of their authors, whose philosophical motives have become less important than the resultant literature, and that in hindsight, the works may be judged alongside other works and examined comparatively. This subject will be discussed at greater length in a later chapter, as will the differences between the American Naturalists and their European counterparts.

A close study of American Naturalism or what is generally considered to be so, shows that it is probably one of the most adaptable (and hence adapted) examples of the genre. On the one hand, Stephen Crane’s *Maggie* exemplifies one technique, whereas Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901) achieves its result from a different perspective. *Maggie* is undoubtedly Zolaesque in both plot and aesthetic, whereas Norris, by the time of embarking on his proposed trilogy, is very much moving towards the tradition of the “big” American novel. Epic in both its breadth and its plot, *The Octopus* prefigures the approach of writers such as James T. Farrell and John Dos Passos, each of whom wrote his magnum opus, *Studs Lonigan* and *U.S.A.* respectively, in the nineteen-thirties. One of the aims in a later chapter is to analyse the diversity of American Naturalism and attempt to mark the boundaries of the forms which Naturalism takes in American literature in particular. Some of the commuted forms of American literary Naturalism may be so unrecognisable as such as to require a re-definition of how far the genre will tolerate transgression. Whether there is any need to define the changes is, of course another matter; it may be that for the majority of scholars an acceptance that such changes take place as a simple evolutionary transaction (whilst allowing generic coherence) is sufficient. What is seen to occur is that naturalistic

techniques and perspectives are used in a great variety of literary works; the influence is immediately obvious, but the final result is not that Naturalism is effected, rather that the literary result incorporates a naturalistic mode which emerges unselfconsciously from the writing. Baguley's principal problem with traditional studies is not, however with the question of genre.

The answer to Baguley's main concern—that writers of studies of Naturalism take too parochial an approach—may be that such an approach is the result of specialisation or that critics view Naturalism across national boundaries as too vast a subject to tackle in any one work, and certainly in a monograph. Comparative studies certainly appear to be more productive in terms of an understanding of the movement in broad philosophical terms, but the discrete units which make up national literatures can only be explained in local ideologies. To put the underlying problematic another way, national literature inevitably relies on a national consciousness which is community bound, formally, linguistically and ideologically. Therefore, the critic cannot be comparing like with like when drawing parallels between literatures from different national cultures. Furthermore, the different conventions in each art form mean that naturalistic works are subject to different rationales across the varying media of their expression, be they drama, verse, novel, or short story. For this reason among others, Naturalism has often been qualified by a geographical adjective, French or American or Northern European Naturalism, for example, or other such boundary marker: similarly, literary Naturalism is usually discussed separately from dramatic Naturalism, and so on. However, naturalistic writings which have emerged from different cultural traditions should have more in common than do naturalistic and non-naturalistic written works from the same culture. To take a

simple example, and keeping to a uniform chronology, *McTeague* (1899) is more similar in form and content to *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) than it is to, say, *Elsie Venner* (1861) by Oliver Wendell Holmes. Similarly, *Thérèse Raquin* has more in common with *McTeague* than it does with *Eugénie Grandet*, written in 1833. To explain the example, each of these novels is based in “reality” and is a close personal portrait of the main character(s). In other words, although *Elsie Venner* was written in the same decade as *Thérèse Raquin*, there are few similarities, despite the fact that both authors have been described as realists. Balzac was the realist model for French authors, but Zola’s novel could never be described as Balzacian, whereas Norris’s novel can be, and usually is, described as Zolaesque. The two American novels are poles apart, both formally and aesthetically. There is an immeasurable distance between Holmes’ study of a schizophrenic woman, which includes Calvinist theology and original sin as related themes; on the other hand, *McTeague* and *Thérèse Raquin* are inextricably linked, both thematically and stylistically, and by Naturalism, rather than realism. Incidentally, these latter two novels are based on true events drawn from newspaper stories, and the influence of reportage on the Naturalist novel and on the American novel in general will be discussed in a later chapter.

Although both Balzac and Zola set their novels in suburban France, with its *petit bourgeois* values, the similarity really ends there. In broad terms, the four works are linked only by the *vraisemblable* or verisimilitude which they contain. In other words, their mimetic values are perhaps the only constant, and their sole similarity is, as Northrop Frye states “the transmutation of experience into mimesis, of life into art” (Frye 93). In October 1902 an article entitled “The Novel Of Misery” appeared in the *Quarterly Review*; unattributed at the time, it is



now known to have been written by a “Warren Wright,” about whom little is known. In this article he states:

In regard to method of construction and style, there is little or no similarity between Balzac, Flaubert, the De Goncourt [*sic*], Zola, Maupassant and Huysmans. The main point of their agreement is their theory of materialism, of which Balzac’s novels are the most complete, and Zola’s novels, the most extreme, expression. (393)

It could, of course, be argued that to compare any one novel with another is not to compare like with like, except in broad formal terms. Even if it is argued that the human condition varies from culture to culture, Naturalism’s aim is still purported to be a study of temperaments, and not a polemic on social inequities, even though many naturalistic works deal with social issues. The broader social issues dealt with in, say, Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* series, brought with them a different type of critique—a much more politicised perspective as befitted the subject.

The aim of each chapter in this study is to provide not only a chronological summary of the origins and development of literary Naturalism, but also to track the history of the criticism of, and responses to, naturalistic literature. Much of the early criticism comes from the practitioners themselves, as they noted each other’s efforts and tried to place them in the context of a novelistic evolution. In other words, they defined the direction in which they thought the novel should develop and insisted that novelists should concentrate their energies into ensuring that the novel maintain and increase its importance as a social barometer. This self-criticism defined and described a self-conscious impetus to take the novel to new heights of realism and redefine the novel’s social worth or, in Zola’s words

“to regulate life, to regulate society” (Becker 177). However, one of the most counterproductive results of this introspection was the amount of energy expended in theorising, intellectualising, and analysing, which more frequently led to squabbles, strife and dissent rather than actually leading to what may have amounted to a profitable *esprit de corps*, kinship, or unity among the writers. From the present perspective, the pioneers of Naturalism give the impression that more energy could have been devoted to honing their craft and producing novels which might have provided tangible exemplars of the mode; this impression is that which is gleaned from the anecdotal evidence, and the truth may be that there was less time devoted to soirées and discussions than anecdote relates. One of the writers who deemed it undignified to enter the debate with anything more than derision was the author who in many eyes was seen as the father of naturalistic writing (always assuming that Balzac was the grandfather), Gustave Flaubert. Right up to his death in 1880 Flaubert resisted the terms “Realism” and “Naturalism,” finding the latter word particularly offensive. Léon Deffoux describes how Flaubert became increasingly upset by its pervasiveness; “he judged it devoid of sense” (“il le jugea dépourvu de sens”); he saw in it an ineptitude of the same calibre as Realism, or “rather the same ineptitude” (“plutôt la même ineptie”). The noisier the “school” became, the more he railed against it. “Do not talk to me about realism, Naturalism, or the experimental” (“ne me parlez pas du réalisme, du naturalisme, de l’expérimental”) he wrote in a letter to Maupassant a few weeks before his death (Deffoux 23).

Even at the “Flaubert dinner,” a frequent literary forum at which were gathered Flaubert, Turgenev, Alphonse Daudet, Edmond de Goncourt, and Zola, sometimes called the “Dinner of the Five,” Flaubert launched an attack on Zola’s

championing of the naturalist cause in his prefaces and other writing. Zola, nonplussed, replied that he also laughed at the word “Naturalism,” but continued to use it “because things need to be christened in order for the public to believe them to be new” (“parce qu’il faut un baptême aux choses pour que le public les croie neuves”) (Deffoux 37). However, Flaubert was attacking the Naturalist label, not the writing, as Goncourt noted to Jules Huret; at the same time he remarked to Huret that Flaubert and Zola were the only two of the group whom Turgenev really admired:

In our circle, only Flaubert and Zola entirely pleased him, Zola above all. A strange thing I have noticed is that this man, so fine, so delicate, so feminine, (I am speaking about Turgenev) most enjoyed being in the company of crude people.

Il n’y avait, de notre monde, que Flaubert et Zola qui lui plaisaient entièrement, Zola surtout... Chose singulière et que j’ai notée, cet homme, si fin, si délicat, si féminin (c’est de Tourgueneff que je parle) se plaisait surtout en la compagnie de gens grossiers.

(Deffoux 37)

In the 1850s, Turgenev became not only a writer of renown in Russia, but throughout the world of letters he acquired the reputation as one of the greatest realist writers of all time; significantly, he was admired by Moore, Gissing, Norris, Dreiser, and London. He appealed, in fact, to all of the significant naturalist writers, as well as those who appreciated the technical craft of authorship. Turgenev’s seal of approval, therefore, was not lightly won. In Russia, he was later active in promoting Zola as an important novelist whose works dealt with social problems, in other words, as a purveyor of social realism.

As noted elsewhere, many of the negative comments levelled at naturalistic writing arose from an antipathy to the subject matter and the more salacious elements of Naturalism—the quality of the writing as literature (in the majority of cases) was less of an issue. On the other hand, many of the supporters of Naturalism, especially those of Zola, were probably more attracted by the quality of the author's writing, his poetic ability, and his commercial success than by the prescriptive formulae he was laying down. Later twentieth-century criticism of Zola's poetics has been revisionist to the extent that earlier critics often found his style less than attractive. Benedetto Croce, for example, admires Zola and puts him in a chapter with Daudet in *European Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1925). In the twenty-first century, a typical reaction might be bewilderment; Daudet is little read and it would be unusual to find anything of his on a school syllabus. In his day, however, Alphonse Daudet was a highly respected literary figure. Frederick Davies, who translated *Letters from my Windmill* in 1978 states in his introduction:

Between 1875 and 1890, Daudet was the most successful novelist in France. Furthermore, in the opinion of Edmund Gosse and other men of letters, he was then the leading novelist in the world. He has become one of the casualties of literature. (Davies, 9)

Croce finds a curious similarity between Daudet and Zola as writers, but a key difference in critical reception: Zola, he notes, “had a powerful character both as a man and a writer, even if he were destitute of poetical gifts, but towards Alphonse Daudet, on the contrary [the critics] show themselves full of tenderness and obsequiousness” (Croce 322). Croce originally entitled this work *Poetry and Non-Poetry* and his thesis is that prose and verse are to be considered as one; there

exists, he maintains, only a presence or absence of poetry, which may be for technical reasons, such as the “practical or logical,” as translator Douglas Ainslie states in his Introduction (Croce vii). Croce, therefore, does not imply adverse criticism when he remarks, in his comparison of Zola and Daudet, that “[Daudet’s] artistic method is just the same as Zola’s and that the one is at bottom as little a poet as the other” (322). Thus in 1925, Zola was being rediscovered in Italy, as he would later be revived in the 1950s. Like many authors of the period, Zola has been subject to canonical exigencies; his works were rarely taught in schools until the early nineteen-fifties, but then underwent a revival in interest. J.S. Wood notes in his introduction to *Contes Choisis* (1969) that “it was not until about 1950 that the real value and the real complexity of Zola’s literary work began to be appreciated” (9). Likewise, Colin Smethurst remarks in *Zola: Germinal* (1974) that

Until about twenty years ago Zola was rarely regarded as ‘serious’ study. The novels were read, indeed widely read, as a sort of relaxation literature, and to confess to liking them was much like confessing to a passion for horror films or a taste for jelly-babies, just a little this side of guilt or vulgarity, and in any case not too important one way or the other. (7)

It becomes more apparent that writers as controversial as Zola are subject to the vagaries of fashion. In 1912, for example, Lafcadio Hearn was extolling the virtues of Anatole France, largely based on France’s cosiness and sentimentality:

The works of fiction that will live are not the creations of men who have blasphemed the human heart, but of men who, like Anatole France, have risen above the literary tendencies of their

generation,—never doubting humanity, and keeping their pages irreproachably pure. In the art of Anatole France there is no sensuousness: his study is altogether of the nobler emotions. What the pessimistic coarseness of self-called “Naturalism” has proven itself totally unable to feel, he paints for us truthfully, simply, and touchingly,—the charm of age, in all its gentleness, loveliness, and indulgent wisdom. (Hearn vii)

Hearn is therefore decrying Naturalism because of its “sensuousness” and failure to concern itself with the “nobler emotions”; he prefers the kindliness and comforting sentimentality which exists uncomfortably alongside the less savoury aspects of the reality of life. Anatole France, unsurprisingly, did not appreciate Zola’s worth as a novelist for many years. However, he later revised his opinions and was amongst those who gave a eulogy at Zola’s funeral, by which time there was more agreement amongst fellow-authors and critics that Zola could be considered to be a French literary figure of note.

The most significant collective endeavour of French naturalistic writers was the anthology of short stories known as *Les Soirées de Médan*, named after the location where Zola had his country house. Evidence for the genesis of this important publication is largely anecdotal, but whether or not the collection of short stories was planned in Paris or Médan is of less importance than the fact that six stories, with the common background theme of the Franco-Prussian war, were published in 1880 and can be shown to have a common literary design. There were two levels of significance: first, the mere fact that five authors, Léon Hennique, Henry Céard, Paul Alexis, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Guy de Maupassant, had pooled their resources in the anthology and were thus seen to be

throwing in their lot with Zola. Secondly, the outward appearance that there was a collective endorsement of Zola's statements on the theoretical or philosophical implications of the naturalistic novel, and, moreover, that the other members of the clique were submitting themselves to Zola's editorial will. The appearance of a shared philosophy is not, however, all that it seems. As noted by David Baguley "*Les Soirées de Médan* is a significant work precisely because it represents a collective effort with a shared sense of *literary* purpose, instead of being a theoretical statement, a programme, or a manifesto [. . .]" (23). In hindsight, it is glaringly apparent that there was indeed more literary than philosophical unity. The preface would have the reader believe that there was, in fact, more philosophical unity than subsequent events would reveal. The overriding effect of the publication was to bring to the attention of a larger audience that something significant was happening in the world of letters. The gatherings at Médan were rather more like tutorials, with the new generation sat at the feet of the master, than a meeting of equals plotting a campaign. This is not to say that the "pupils" were all submissive to the will of the master. There were those who would very soon apostatise: the most important losses to the Médan group in terms of literary success would be Guy de Maupassant, closely followed by J.-K. Huysmans. Huysmans refutation of the naturalist aesthetic, however, was probably the most significant, as he quickly followed up his departure from the Zola coterie with a forthright novelistic response. However, Furst and Skrine offer a different explanation as to why Huysmans left the fold; their assessment is that Huysmans had a "genuine inability to distinguish between [realism and naturalism]," although it would not be unreasonable to expect that someone so closely connected with the French naturalist movement to be capable of making such a

distinction. In the preface (1904) to *A Rebours* Huysmans gives a different account, justifying his break with Zola and naturalism:

At the time when *A Rebours* appeared, that is in 1884, the situation was thus: naturalism was running out of steam by grinding around and around in a circle. The mass of observations of themselves, and of others, that everyone had stored away, was beginning to become exhausted. Zola, with his great eye for theatrical design, escaped by painting canvasses which were more or less precise; he suggested very well the illusion of movement and of life; his heroes were stripped of soul, driven solely by impulse and instinct; all this simplified the job of analysis. [. . .] But Zola was Zola; that is to say, a slightly massive artist, but one who had the gift of powerful lungs and big fists.

Au moment où parut *A Rebours*, c'est-à-dire en 1884, la situation était donc celle-ci: le naturalisme s'essouffait à tourner la meule dans le même cercle. La somme d'observations que chacun avait emmagasinée, en les prenant sur soi-même et sur les autres, commençait à s'épuiser. Zola, qui était un beau décorateur de théâtre, s'en tirait en brossant des toiles plus ou moins précises; il suggérait très bien du mouvement et de la vie; ses héros étaient dénués d'âme, régis tout bonnement par des impulsions et des instincts, ce qui simplifiait le travail de l'analyse. [. . .] mais Zola était Zola, c'est-à-dire un artiste un peu massif, mais doué de puissants poumons et de gros poings. (Gershman and Whitworth 411)



With the publication of *A Rebours* in 1884 and the impact it had both in France and overseas, Huysmans became a power to be reckoned with, and naturalistic fiction suddenly seemed old hat. Furthermore, the critics were recognising more complex divisions within the movement and sensed, perhaps, that Zola's grip on the younger generation of novelists was beginning to become less sure.

The critics of this period may be divided into two major groups: those working from a literary standpoint and those who were examining the social and socio-political issues arising from literary Naturalism. When Zola published the first part of *L'Assommoir* in 1876, there was a general cry of outrage. Léon Deffoux describes the reaction of non-literary critics:

The novelist was branded a slanderer. One politician, Arthur Ranc, cried: "I protest from nausea and disgust"; another, Charles Floquet, gave a speech, denouncing Zola as a "calumniator of the people, public demoraliser with his unwholesome and foul work, author of a ridiculous pamphlet directed against the working-class and thus arming the forces of reaction".

On traita le romancier de diffamateur. Un homme politique, Arthur Ranc, s'écria: « Je proteste par des nausées et des haut-le-cœur » ; un autre, Charles Floquet, prononça un discours flétrissant Zola « calomniateur du peuple, démoralisateur public par son oeuvre malsaine et ordurière, auteur d'un pamphlet ridicule dirigé contre les travailleurs et forgeant ainsi des armes pour la réaction. » (Deffoux 39).

This is, therefore, a two-pronged attack: on the one hand, attacking the "unwholesomeness" of *L'Assommoir*, but more significantly in social terms,

deploring the supposed literary assault on the failings, shortcomings, and general wretchedness of the working-class. Naturalistic novels contained, embraced, or put forward elements of Social Darwinism, positivism, and determinism; opponents of these theories would understandably disregard the literary value of the novels in order to discredit the rationale behind them.

There are literary scholars, such as Léon Lemonnier in “A Literary Manifesto: The Populist Novel” (1929), who are content to date the beginning of Naturalism from the appearance of *Les Soirées de Médan* in 1880 or from the famous Trapp dinner in 1877, as do many others, (including David Baguley). However, it seems more accurate to go back to the 1860s and the point where Zola describes himself, in the 1868 preface to *Thérèse Raquin* as “one of a group of naturalist writers”. This statement in itself implies an earlier commitment to naturalistic ideals and makes historical sense. Firstly, because it is unlikely that a movement as influential as that of French literary Naturalism should be granted a life of only seven years, as Lemonnier would have it. He states that the movement “died shortly after *Le Manifeste des Cinq* (1887)” (Becker 466). Secondly, the Goncourt brothers, Edmond and Jules, and philosopher-critic Hippolyte Taine were exploring areas later to be designated as naturalistic, at least in broad terms, as early as the 1850s. Other commentators on realism and Naturalism would be more than happy to date the naturalist novel from the success of *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864), written by the brothers Goncourt. Jules and Edmond Goncourt were each passionately involved in the development of the French novel, both as critics and as writers. In many ways they were prime influences on the young Zola, even though he later became a figurehead for the movement in which they took a prominent but historically less recognised part. Zola’s correspondence with

the brothers bears this out, as do various entries in their *Journal des Goncourt*; during one meeting, according to Deffoux, among other things, Zola acknowledged that Flaubert and the Goncourts had created the precedent for the young naturalists. “We know that you are our elders, Flaubert and yourselves” (“Nous savons que vous êtes nos aînés, vous et Flaubert) (Deffoux 22).

In 1868, when the above statement was made, Zola had yet to make his name and at the age of twenty-eight seemed to be effusive in his praise and respect for those already established as writers and keen to put himself on record as a “friend” who would help them against their “enemies”. The Goncourts and Zola finally met face to face on the 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1868 and, as Deffoux remarks (with all the wisdom of hindsight), that at this meeting “two forms of art, basically very different and subject to very diverse actions, were meeting, and would fortuitously conclude a treaty of alliance with all the possibilities of disunity that this would suppose” (“deux formes d’art, au fond très différentes, soumises à des actions très diverses se recontraient et allaient fortuitement conclure un traité d’alliance avec toutes les possibilités de désaccord que cela suppose” (Deffoux 21). The “two forms of art” which Deffoux refers to seem to be an allusion to the different approaches taken by the Goncourts, on the one hand, and Zola, on the other. George Becker remarks that the Goncourts took a somewhat different approach to literature from that of their predecessors and contemporaries:

More psychological in content, more impressionistic in technique, their novels did not evoke the solid social situations of a Flaubert or a Zola. They were always interested in what they called “écriture artiste,” asserting that “The idea of the novel is to give,

with art, the liveliest impression of human truth, whatever it may be.” (Becker 117)

Notwithstanding Zola’s junior status, the formalisation of the origins of Naturalism lies inevitably with him, despite the fact that French groundbreakers such as the Goncourts and Flaubert were influential, even critically or literarily more successful at different times. By the end of the 1870s Zola would rise to pre-eminence, which eventually rankled with Edmund (Jules died in 1870); it has often been suggested that he was one of the instigators of the “Manifeste des Cinq”. Zola had become the leading voice in the theorising of a naturalist aesthetic and arguably the most successful in its praxis. Whilst it is accepted that he was not able to fully formulate his own ideas on the subject until Henri Céard had lent him the Claude Bernard *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, sometime in the 1870s, Zola’s fellow naturalists likewise had not yet consolidated their own manifesto on the subject. The 1864 preface to the Goncourts’ *Germinie Lacerteux* is a beginning, but has the ring of an apologia, rather than a manifesto, simply emphasising the novel’s truthfulness, and offering an explanation for the subject matter—a working class woman:

We must beg the public’s pardon for giving them this book, and warn them about what they will find in it.

The public loves false novels; this is a true novel.

They love books that pretend to go out into society; this book comes from the streets.

Il nous faut demander pardon au public de lui donner ce livre, et l’avertir, de ce qu’il y trouvera.

Le public aime les romans faux: ce roman est un roman vrai.

Il aime les livres qui font semblant d'aller dans le monde: ce livre vient de la rue. (Deffoux 143)

A point to note here is that the Goncourts are begging the public's pardon for the subject matter, pre-empting the outraged reaction anticipated. "The public likes false novels: this one is true" could be saying two things; firstly, that the public does not like the truth, especially if the truth is presented as a literary work. Secondly, they could be emphasising that the public want fiction to be unreal, and that unpleasant truth has no place in entertainments, if that is what the novel is perceived to be. The Goncourts, by setting out their intentions in this manner, are manipulating the intended reader's horizons of expectation; this has important implications for Naturalism's generic evolution.

At this early stage in the history of Naturalism, Zola's preface to the 1868 edition of *Thérèse Raquin* is a more thorough statement of the naturalist view, whilst similarly defending the "unsavoury" subject matter. Philip Walker suggests that the criticism to which Zola was responding, contained in an article in *Le Figaro* entitled "Putrid Literature," may have been instigated by Zola himself, in order to create some controversy and boost sales. The writer was Louis Ulbach, (using the pen name "Ferragus"), who was a friend of Zola's and had business dealings with Lacroix, Zola's publisher (Walker 81). Naturalistic writers had little to fear from purely literary critics, as already noted, but were constantly on their guard against attacks from moralists, even in later years when, during the Dreyfus affair, the author of "J'Accuse..." was frequently referred to as "the traitor and pornographer Zola". Once again, the adverse criticism seems more *ad hominem* than literary.

At least a decade separates “Le Roman Expérimental” from the earlier novelistic efforts in Naturalism, making Lemonnier’s calculations of French Naturalism’s longevity inaccurate, to say the least, despite his acceptance that Naturalism lived on in spirit. Lemonnier also insists on describing the Naturalists as a school, which is precisely what Zola was trying to avoid. In “Le Roman Expérimental” he states categorically that Naturalism should be a progression of the novel:

[. . .] I have said many times that Naturalism is not a school: that, for example, it was not born of the genius of one man, nor of a fit of madness amongst a group, as was romanticism, that it consists simply of the application of the experimental method of the study of nature and of man.

[. . .] j’ai dit tant de fois que le naturalisme n’était pas une école, que par exemple il ne s’incarnait pas dans le génie d’un homme ni dans le coup de folie d’un groupe, comme le romantisme, qu’il consistait simplement dans l’application de la méthode expérimentale à l’étude de la nature et de l’homme. (Gershman and Whitworth 350)

In other words, Zola is stating that Naturalism is a methodology used in fiction and is not confined to any one specific school of writing. Nevertheless, more recent critics do not accept this definition any more than did those earlier critics such as Lemonnier, nor the contemporaries of Zola and the Médan group who assumed, with some justification, that there was a school of writing which included some and excluded others.

Undeniably, the production of *Les Soirées de Médan* has about it an air of exclusivity, implying that the authors invited to submit a story are members of a literary coterie, which they were, albeit temporarily, but not in the single-minded unified sense that is often implied. Nevertheless, Zola had insisted that “we are not a school” which Lemonnier chooses to ignore, in all likelihood because he wanted Populism to become a school with a “leader” and a “manifesto” and perhaps thought that this was the way to validate a literary movement. The opinions expressed in “A Literary Manifesto: The Populist Novel” seem to justify such a view of Lemonnier as critic. One salient feature of the discussions which Lemonnier had with his collaborator, André Thérive, is that Naturalism was still a live issue. Both writers still admired aspects of Naturalism; Thérive perhaps more so than Lemonnier, but each felt that the novel should reflect changes in society and language:

We are opposed, in a certain sense, to the naturalists. Their language is out of date, and it is important to imitate neither the bizarre neologisms of which some of them are guilty nor their way of using the vocabulary and slang of all occupations. (Becker 467)

It is difficult to speculate as to whom Lemonnier might be referring, as he has already stated that Naturalism has been officially pronounced dead, and that its influence continues only in the sense that truth in literature is now judged more rigorously. It is furthermore enormously significant that these sentiments are being expressed in 1929, more than sixty years after both the Goncourts and Zola had embodied their respective manifestos in prefaces to novels. It is more than likely that Lemonnier is referring to writers such as Roger Martin du Gard, who, apart from having written a novel about the Dreyfus case, *Jean Barois* (1913), was

engaged on a Zolaesque *roman-fleuve* called *Les Thibault* (*The Thibaults*), which was published in seven parts between 1922 and 1940. Harry T. Moore notes the following in *Twentieth Century French Literature*:

In its detailed observation of behavior and in its motivated determinism, *The Thibaults* is in the tradition of the naturalistic novels of Zola. This is particularly true of the medical passages [ . . . ] Similarly, the death of Antoine's brother, Jacques, is faithfully gruesome [ . . . ]. (Moore, H.T. 57)

There is a strong possibility, therefore, that Lemonnier has such novels in mind when he distances himself from those to whom he refers as "the naturalists," especially given the continuing tendency of admirers of Zola to perpetuate his style and subject-matter. The reference to "neologisms," however, would be more appropriately applied to the works of Huysmans and the Goncourts, who were renowned and frequently criticised, for their coinings. Léon Deffoux describes the Goncourt aesthetic as "subtle, highly refined, full of neologistic affectations and of artifices which were both seductive and irritating at the same time ("subtile, alambiquée, pleine de néologismes précieux et d'artifices tour à tour séduisants ou irritants") (Deffoux 21). André Thérive, in fact, had denied that "le style Goncourt" was displeasing, "it is their imitators that have made it unacceptable" (Deffoux 25).

The impartial observer might be tempted to conclude that Lemonnier and Thérive are being over-cautious with their timid approach to innovation and their remarks regarding Naturalism's outdatedness. Jules Huret published a series of articles called *Evolution littéraire* in the *Echo de Paris* from March to July 1891 in which



he chronicled the rise of the Symbolists and Decadents and declared that Naturalism had had its day. Anatole France agreed:

Anatole France was announcing the death of the naturalistic novel and its replacement by the psychological novel. The naturalists had alienated their female readership by their excessively marked taste for the baseness and the foulness of life.

Anatole France annonçait la mort du roman naturaliste et son remplacement par le roman psychologue, les naturalistes s'étant aliéné la clientèle féminine à cause de leur goût trop marqué pour les bassesses et les immondices de la vie. (Deffoux 59)

The French literary scene has long been renowned for its willingness to explore new forms and modes, and to experiment and take the novel forward would have been expected. Decadence and Modernism had already surfaced and made their mark in the intervening years. Indeed, Flaubert, Maupassant, Zola, and many others would have been disappointed had their successors in the vanguard of French literature not explored every means within their grasp to take the novel even further forward; the one essential criterion was always the “truthfulness” upon which Zola had insisted. Throughout the early days of Naturalism, beginning with the Goncourts, veracity and verisimilitude had been a site of struggle. It is probably for this reason, more than any other, that Zola so disdained romantic fiction, with its leanings towards the fantastic and the fanciful; Zola always insisted that true artistic greatness was achieved through observation rather than through imagination. Another matter upon which naturalists concurred was that literature could or should, narrate the lives of “ordinary” people, even if the

plot dealt with the extraordinary. In *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach explicates the Goncourt position on the future of serious literature:

We live, say the Goncourts, in an age of universal suffrage, democracy, and liberalism [. . .] Hence it is not just to exclude from literary treatment the so-called lower classes of the population, as is still being done, and to preserve in literature an aristocraticism of subject matter which is no longer in keeping with our social picture. (496)

The Goncourts in 1864, therefore, were anticipating, and possibly inspiring Taine's exhortations to writers to concern themselves with the social issues of the day. Herbert Spencer, too, would later make the same demands of authors, but on different grounds. However, Auerbach points out that the works of the first great realist authors—Stendhal, Balzac, and the early Flaubert—did not concern themselves with the doings of the lower classes, which would have been to the detriment of realism. Acknowledging the benefit of hindsight, Auerbach continues:

Realism had to embrace the whole reality of contemporary civilization, in which to be sure the bourgeoisie played a dominant role, but in which the masses were beginning to press threateningly ahead as they became ever more conscious of their own function and power. The common people in all its ramifications had to be taken into the subject matter of serious realism: the Goncourts were right and they were borne out in it. The development of realistic art has proved it. (497)

If the appeal of the novel was to the educated middle-class, at least its subject matter could encompass all classes. Whether or not the bourgeoisie would relish tales of the lower-classes was another matter; however, this is not the artistic concern of the novelist. On the other hand, if the novelist is to function in a societal role, the intended reader is of obvious importance, and a large readership entails more than simple economic success. Auerbach is making the point that the novel of social realism must have a reality which is relevant to society as a whole, that literary topics cannot be stratified, any more than reality only applies in a relativistic way; the real world is the world in which everyone is subject to the same morality and the same determinants. The morality which realism and naturalism recognises or incorporates, however, is not dependent on religious dogma, but is grounded in liberal humanism.

Religious opposition to Naturalism was stern and uncompromising; this is not at all surprising, as the central philosophical thesis of Naturalism was a sophisticated form of Darwinism, which also embraced positivism: religious anathema on both counts. Comte's account of positivism privileges empirical observation above both theology and metaphysics in what he posits as the three stages of human belief. The double thrust of social Darwinism allied with Naturalism is that naturalistic writing emphasised that mankind is essentially animal and, moreover, that observation would bear this out. To add salt to the Christian wound, salvation lay not in any metaphysical world, but was only achievable, if at all, by overcoming the pressures of heredity and environment. If the novel, as Zola propounded, represented verifiable truths, art would be equally capable of subverting European religion in the nineteenth century, as it had glorified it during the Renaissance and subsequently. The Church may have had

good reason to be concerned: Darwinism had discredited accounts of the Creation, and now Naturalism was subverting many of the fundamentals of Christian doctrine, such as salvation coming through prayer and good works. The despair and pessimism inherent in naturalistic writing ran counter to the very core of Christian teachings.

Apart from the constant assaults on Naturalism from non-literary critics such as the Church and the politicians, not all was harmonious in the naturalist camp itself. Whilst it has been frequently observed that artists of any kind are eager to compete with one another, the French writers of the nineteenth century seemed to have been particularly keen on pointing out each other's shortcomings. Once again, the arguments were rarely about potential literary ability, but more concerned with epistemology or the representations of truth in the novel. Edmond de Goncourt and Alphonse Daudet were instrumental in encouraging the "Manifesto of the Five against *La Terre*" for no other reason than their resentment of the fact that Zola had become so powerful and flaunted his wealth and fame so ostentatiously. His lavish dinners and weekend gatherings at Médan, where a growing number of acolytes bore witness to his power and influence, provoked his former allies to rebellion.

In England, translations of French texts became the target of much vituperation. Henry Vizetelly, a stalwart champion of the French novel, and translator as well as publisher of quite a number was hounded into prison and debt for his pains. There were enemies of Naturalism on all sides, and pressure was put on the circulating libraries to become guardians of public morality by refusing to circulate the offending texts. The power of Mudie's cannot be overestimated, and George Moore published several articles directed against the library's misuse

of that power. During this time, Moore was in frequent communication with Zola, whose cause he felt he was championing, which is in many respects true. The next chapter offers an exploration of the way in which British writers responded to the overwhelming influence of the French novel on British writing, which includes attempts to resist, as well as conform to, the Continental model.

### **Chapter 3 - Naturalism in Victorian and Edwardian England**

"The white sanctity of Lady Britannia's garments had been ruffled and no gentleman could publicly condone the offense." - William Frierson.

"Go to, let us picture things as they are." - George Gissing

The primary aim of this chapter is to present an overview of the history of Naturalism in England in the period during which it became an important part of British literature and to show that the naturalistic novel, although flourishing for only a short period, played a significant part in the history of English fiction, especially as regards readers' expectations of the novel. More important than its short-lived success is that the adoption of naturalistic perspectives by certain authors had an undeniable influence on the development of the novel in England, sometimes in an overt way and at others, more obliquely. In other words, one of the objectives of this chapter is to dispel the notion that Naturalism, as it occurred in British fiction, was in some way a "failure," as has often been suggested. There will also be an examination of the possible reasons why to the present day the perception remains that Naturalism was no more than a marginal phase, even an aberration, in late Victorian and early Edwardian literature. Authors whose names are most usually associated with British naturalistic fiction (such as George Gissing, George Moore, and Arthur Morrison) were no less worthy than many others of the period, yet they have been, and even in early twenty-first-century literary criticism continue to be considered by some as

rating a mere footnote in the history of Victorian letters. George Gissing, it should be noted, is being rediscovered and is now less neglected than others. Such mention as the early critics made of naturalistic authors often skirted the question of their literary lineage and leanings, often vaguely referring to them as “realists” of some ill-defined sort or another, but frequently allowing that there were “French influences,” and this critical neglect or misinterpretation will be discussed in this chapter. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, one notable exception was Warren Wright, the writer of the unsigned article “The Novel of Misery”. In the article, he discusses and compares, among others, the slum fiction of Gissing, Morrison, Kipling, and Somerset Maugham, as well as mentioning George Moore in the context of his French influences. Even so, Wright is notable in that he does not conflate the motives of the various writers, nor describe them as of a kind. However, he does not make a clear distinction between realism and Naturalism, nor does he attempt to categorise the English writers as either realist or naturalist.

Naturalism in British literature has been relatively neglected by literary historians, but was a much more potent force than is generally acknowledged. The first explanation for its neglect is that Naturalism was sandwiched between two distinct phases of Victorian literature. The naturalistic novel was preceded by the social satires of Trollope and Thackeray, the realism of George Eliot and George Meredith, the “condition of England” novels of Gaskell and Dickens, and the varied literature of the Brontës; later came the broad sweep of literature represented by

figures such as H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and Oscar Wilde, most of whom, at some time or another, included naturalistic ideas and techniques in their work.\* Following the success of the most popular writers in the late Victorian period came Modernism, consideration of which eclipsed most other literary discussion. It is not surprising, therefore, that works whose aesthetic and philosophic leanings were heavily influenced by late nineteenth century Spencerian and Darwinian thought appeared too anachronistic, even depressing, for twentieth century tastes. In the twenty-first century, there are relatively few readers of Arthur Morrison, Hubert Crackanthorpe, Julia Frankau (who wrote under the name of Frank Danby), W.E. Tirebuck, Margaret Harkness (“John Law”), or Richard Whiteing, yet all had notable, but varying degrees of literary success in the decade prior to the turn of the twentieth century. Critic Jane Findlater wrote an article in the *National Review* of May 1900 in which she reviews slum fiction from Dickens and Kingsley through to Somerset Maugham and Pett Ridge. The article, “The Slum Movement in Fiction,” is an interesting historical document in that the reader is informed that “*5 John Street* [by Richard Whiteing] sells at an amazing rate” (Findlater 451); however, it would be unusual to find a mention of Richard Whiteing in any but the most specialised bibliography. The works and reputations of George Gissing, George Moore, and

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\* Much of the success of these authors must be attributable to the fact that their work was adapted for Radio, TV, and film, thus reaching a wider twentieth-century audience.



Sarah Grand have achieved comparatively longer-lasting celebrity, but these authors, or their estates, have not enjoyed the commercial success of many of their contemporaries. There has recently been a renewed interest in the Gissing's life and work, but *New Grub Street* (1891) is, as far as current research shows, his only novel which receives regular attention on undergraduate courses. There is one practical reason, which is that tutors can never rely on the consistent availability of texts. Many of Gissing's works have been periodically in and out of print in the United Kingdom for a number of years, although there are now some recent paperback editions available. This is by no means a recent problem: George Orwell notes in his essay "George Gissing" (1948) that "the books by which he ought to be remembered are and have been for years completely unprocurable" (Orwell 36)\*. In fact, research shows that there is such an interest in Gissing overseas that there is as much of his work regularly available in Italy and Japan as there is in England.

Moore and Gissing, however, do receive attention from modern literary critics who are actively engaged on researching various aspects of Victorian literature, particularly from the standpoint of "new readings". One such is a collection of essays edited by Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer, published in 1996 under the title *The New Nineteenth Century. Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*.

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\* Pierre Coustillas, however, is of the opinion that Orwell "could not have searched very hard" and that there were "copies available in many bookshops." – Conversation with the author: 9-11-2001.

These readings do not, as might be inferred, reconstruct and re-present the authors concerned, but they contextualise the works in a more up-to-date critical matrix, which has a broader interdisciplinary base and benefits from an historic distance. Judith Mitchell, for example, in “Naturalism in George Moore’s *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885)” comments on Moore’s position as “a focal point for the various aesthetic cross-currents influencing the course of English art and literature at the end of the nineteenth century” and assesses Moore’s work both as an influence and as partially “influenced by naturalism, symbolism, decadence, Impressionism, Russian literature, the Irish revival, and Wagnerian opera” (Harman 159). She also reviews a wide range of criticism of both Moore and Naturalism in general over the intervening century or so. One of the most noticeable features of the critical survey is that modern critics are less inclined to condemn what had been considered to be salacious subject matter, whereas many early critics of naturalistic fiction denigrated the fiction for its tendency to deal with the more scurrilous aspects of the human condition. Oscar Wilde’s famous dictum that “a book is either well-written or badly written. That is all” was not a moral or political view shared by many of the naturalists’ contemporary critics. For example, in the context of modern literary criticism, it would be anachronistic to portray Zola as a purveyor of prurient fiction, except with reference to criticism levelled at him at the time in which he was writing. More recent criticism would tend to regard those who dealt with similar subject matter as following more in a particular literary tradition, that of writing novels of social importance and discussing the

problems faced by the less privileged classes: if those problems happen to be sexual, alcohol-related, or simply sociological, then that is grist to the socially-aware novelist's mill.

Happily, Gissing and Moore are still under active critical or scholarly gaze, as is Sarah Grand, who is the subject of a number of courses on women's writing, if not on Naturalism: many other British naturalists and realists, successful in their day, have long since gone out of fashion. Writers such as Hubert Crackanthorpe, whom David Trotter describes as "the young writer most likely to further the cause of naturalism in England" ("The Avoidance of Naturalism" 616), are nowadays almost entirely forgotten. Arthur Morrison, too, is often referred to in the context of other, more celebrated writers of slum fiction. The reasons that these writers should be neglected, of course, are manifold, and, given the recent re-evaluations of the Victorian heritage, there is no reason to suppose that works by hitherto underread writers will not be revived and rediscovered. It is furthermore true that there has been a tendency for interest in certain periods of literature to wax and wane, and for certain authors to go in and out of fashion. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that the canon is from time to time revised, but given the pre-eminence enjoyed by a certain number of canonical works from the Victorian period, it is unlikely that little known works by forgotten authors will displace them. Nevertheless, it is possible that in some later re-evaluation of Victorian literature, that more importance will be placed

on writers who, although not achieving lasting success, are worth studying for their contribution to the body of literature of their period.

In attempting to describe the great leap from Victorian Realism to Modernism, critics and public alike have often overlooked certain works by a large group of published novelists writing if not as naturalists, then certainly in the same tradition as Zola, whose individual influence on a significant number of British writers in the latter part of the nineteenth century is often underestimated. Somerset Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), Arthur Morrison's *Tales of Mean Streets* and *A Child of the Jago* (1896), Walter Besant's *Children of Gibeon* (1886) all demonstrate, to a greater or lesser extent, a naturalistic influence in execution or tone, whether by accident or design. H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) draws on degeneration and the decline plot, as well as other nineteenth-century scientific theories, to depict social deterioration. However, it was not general practice among writers of this period to acknowledge the extent to which Zola had influenced their work, however subtly or incidentally, but translations of his novels were extremely popular in England in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and were frequently discussed by English authors and critics. In 1885 and 1886 alone, Vizetelly & Co. published three Zola novels, *Nana*, *L'Assommoir*, and *Pot-Bouille*, and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in translation; in 1886 they published a new, more expensive edition of *Pot-Bouille* (*Piping Hot!*) in a Large Paper illustrated edition with over one hundred engraved pages. Despite censorship problems, there was patently a wide and affluent

readership for French realism and Naturalism, although it has frequently been noted that many of the translations were bowdlerised versions tailored for the more delicate tastes of the English readership. Clarence Decker, in *The Victorian Conscience* (1952), states quite categorically that “it is clear that practically all of the important English writers of the late nineteenth century were, in one way or another, influenced by foreign Naturalism” (33), which begs the question of there being any other kind of literary Naturalism pre-existing in English fiction.

Many earlier critics shied away from describing British works of fiction as naturalistic, when to the modern comparatist the influences are quite evident. Historically, British naturalistic writing has often been described as something else, such as “realist,” “novel of social realism,” “French school,” and so on. This tendency among earlier critics may be in part attributable to an unwillingness to ascribe “foreign” characteristics to English fiction, especially if they were to accept that Henry Morley, writing in 1864, was correct in his assertion that a history of literature would be the “national biography” and “the story of the English mind” (qtd. in Wellek 252). Whilst Clarence Decker’s statement above may be rather sweeping, there is adequate evidence to show that a certain number of Victorian writers were, in fact, heavily influenced by Zola and the French naturalists; however, these writers did not necessarily subscribe to the theorising and philosophy that so dominated French literature of the period. In his convincing essay “The Avoidance of Naturalism” David Trotter analyses the reluctance of British authors to embrace Naturalism in any

theoretical sense. This essay goes some way to show that whilst British novelists admired Zola, and, more broadly, French realist literature, they were unwilling to subscribe to a commitment to any sort of theoretical prescriptive stance with regard to their fiction and were indifferent to whether their work was defined in any generic way. In “The Novel of Misery” Warren Wright uncharacteristically praises the theoretical advances made in France and decries the corresponding lack of English interest in literary theory:

Magnificent developments, it seems, keep occurring in France in the art of novel-writing, while English authors, such as Mr. George Meredith and Mr. Thomas Hardy, still continue to describe men and women and natural scenery from an obsolete, unscientific point of view. The fault of the mind, as Mr. Wells has pointed out, is its dislike of ideas, its love of mere fact. It cannot accept a theory for the theory's sake. Even in the matter of literary art, what can we show against all the new principles that the French writers of late years have exemplified and exhausted? Realism, impressionism, idealism, symbolism, satanism, neo-catholicism, and twenty more! What have we to compare with such ideas? True we have had the aesthetic movement and the Celtic Renaissance, but even these have obtained little support from the general reading public. (398-99)

Although many British novels bore the hallmarks of naturalistic fiction, such as determinism, scientific detachment, and an implicit desire for social reform, the writers of these novels did not necessarily incorporate naturalistic characteristics into their fiction in the way in which they had been defined by the French writers who subscribed to the movement. Certainly, there was little formal mention of—or deference to—positivism, Zola’s theories, or, surprisingly, to Spencerian relativism. The “surprising” fact is that Spencerian theories were accepted with more alacrity in the literature of the United States than in that of Britain, despite Herbert Spencer’s apparent Englishness. (The willingness with which American writers appear to have embraced Spencerian theories is a phenomenon that will be discussed in a later chapter). Whilst British authors were content to introduce naturalistic techniques and perspectives into their work, they still preferred to write novels of social importance without overt reference to any particular brand of philosophy. Pelham Edgar, anticipating Trotter by some sixty years, stated in *The Art of the Novel*, that “our English writers are not prone like the French to formulate doctrines, and to govern their art by the set prescriptions of a school” (229). On this, most critics are of one mind. Nevertheless, there was a noteworthy display of naturalistic writing in the 1880s and 1890s, even if there was no coterie of authors who collected in restaurants to discuss their aims and objectives, as did the French. This fact is remarked upon in “The Novel of Misery”:

About the appearance of 'Liza of Lambeth' [1897] the English writers of the same kind of novel were sufficiently numerous to constitute a school of fiction feebly imitating the French naturalistic movement in the eighties [. . .] The English authors, however, did not combine under the influence of any theory of philosophy or aesthetics. Their movement was purely commercial in its origin. (410)

There are two important points to be made here: firstly, that it is debatable that the authors who might have been of this number would have considered themselves similarly-minded enough to constitute a "school". Secondly, several of the authors would have resented the accusation of having purely commercial interests at heart. Any meaningful study of the period will show that the majority of authors who contributed to this body of writing were primarily concerned with social and economic conditions; Arthur Morrison, for example, was rigorous in his research of slum life and, as Michael Krzak notes, "followed a path leading from fact to fiction, from a factual account to a more elaborate description of city life, from journalism to naturalism and realism" (Hulin 148-9). Commercial considerations appear to have been secondary to truthful reportage, even though philosophical theorising on the resulting texts was not a major issue.

Without dwelling unduly on national differences, it would be fair to say that French authors have always been more self-consciously aware of their philosophical leanings than have the English. In England, philosophy has traditionally been left to



philosophers and academics, whereas in France, many authors regard themselves as presenting philosophy through their writing—typical examples over the years would be Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Camus, Stendhal, Proust, and so on. Amongst English writers, J.B. Priestley and Aldous Huxley stand out, but few fiction writers are considered as having presented philosophical stances as pivotal or central to their novels. Authors such as George Orwell were more political than philosophical in their writing, and the politics of Naturalism are far more aesthetic than pragmatic. Gissing, nonetheless, did take a great interest in philosophy and was for some time an active member of the Positivist Society. He was also influenced by Schopenhauer, whose pessimism attracted him as an artist, as Schopenhauer believed that the only way in which man could rise above his misery was through artistic endeavour. As Coustillas notes in his introduction to a collection of Gissing's essays and short fiction:

Schopenhauer's comments on the privileged position of the artist helped Gissing to clarify his own position regarding his art. It is largely through this influence that he turned from socialist lecturer to a novelist who kept his distance from all political and philosophical movements, endeavoring to record without passion the life around him.  
(*Essays and Fiction* 22)

In other words, Gissing was absorbing both determinism and pessimism, but trying to write objectively. To this extent, he fulfils the naturalist criteria; most importantly,

however, he will write in the English novelistic tradition referred to by Pelham Edgar, David Trotter and Warren Wright.

If critics can be persuaded to accept that there is, in many European national literatures, a definable and distinct “version” of naturalistic writing, then England can similarly be shown to have had its own practitioners. There are two caveats, however. First, there need not be any author who writes consistently or solely as a naturalist; what is more important to an identification of naturalistic perspective is that the critic can identify the existence of naturalistic execution of some, or any, works by a given author. Second, the naturalistic perspective will always be moderated by a local or national aesthetic. That is to say that some of the characteristics of Naturalism may vary in certain different ways and delineated according to different cultural traditions. For example, the inhabitants of Aci Trezza in Verga’s *I Malavoglia* (1881) supinely accept misfortune by constantly quoting platitudes and shrugging off disaster as a simple fact of life. They are Sicilian peasants, many relying on the sea as a source of income, but accepting, nevertheless, that the sea is a dangerous place to work. By contrast, in Gissing’s London respiratory illnesses are equally hazardous and equally part of city life. The miners in Zola’s *Germinal* fight the mine-owners and the system which sustains them, in a vain attempt to win better working conditions. The farmers in Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* are threatened by the greed of the railway robber barons and similarly resort to violence. The acquiescent peasants of Aci Trezza may seem far removed from the militant wheat farmers of California, but both are

struggling with forces beyond their control in naturalistically depicted sets of circumstances. The characters, or groups of characters, in these examples differ in that some seek to resist those forces, whilst others are more stoic and passive. The naturalistic writer will endeavour to show that reactions to these circumstances will not be depicted as the reactions of individuals to adversity, but will paint a broader picture of how certain temperaments adjust to prevailing conditions, adversity, and misfortune. Consequently, under the broad heading of “Naturalism,” there are identifiable sub-groups such as “American Naturalism,” “French Naturalism,” “British Naturalism,” and so on. This type of redefinition does not in any way dilute the mode or genre; it re-affirms that the techniques and perspectives used in this genre are flexible enough to withstand the strictures of acceptance into a local ideology. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, British authors were about to assimilate naturalist concepts into an established novelistic form, and some of them would leave an indelible imprint on literature and influence the future of English fiction.

Trotter makes a very good case for the “avoidance” of Naturalism by English writers, even though many confess to an admiration for Zolaesque fiction. Once again, the differences seem to be aesthetic rather than theoretical. Similarly, Constance Harsh has identified Gissing as an English author who may be linked with the French literary movement without his having participated in its theoretical prescriptivism. Harsh, writing in 1992, notes that “The naturalist impulse proves impossible to reconcile with English fictional exigencies” (912). The title of Harsh’s

essay is “Gissing’s *The Unclassed* and the Perils of Naturalism,” and for writers in Victorian England, there were certainly perils to be faced. The most common, of course, was the accusation of pandering to prurient tastes; however lofty the ideals of the author, if the subject matter was adjudged to be “unclean,” then the writer was similarly tainted. Subjects considered to constitute bad taste were prostitution, alcoholism, women’s sexuality, adultery, and any other extra-marital sex, especially amongst the lower classes. As previously noted, both Moore and Gissing were, at one time or another, accused of writing unwholesome novels and of publishing accounts of such moral turpitude as might offend the average Victorian reader. The connection between these two authors, in particular, and their perceived mentor, the diabolical Zola, was not lost on the guardians of British morals.

The novels of Zola found widespread currency in England, both in the original and in translation, but often met with adverse criticism, from church groups, such as the Methodists, and from the National Vigilance Association. The criticism was most frequently directed at the content more than the writing itself. In fact, the motive for most adverse criticism in England is not so much moralistic as reactionary; the iconoclasm and subversion of Naturalism is a direct critique of a society that allows materialism to disfigure the lives of those with the least means to resist it. As David Baguley puts it:

In their mimetic texts, they elaborately represent the ostentatious materialism and materiality of their age, but dwell upon its underlying

shams, hypocrisy, tyranny, and injustices. Their work was attacked by their contemporaries, not because it was sordid and corrupt, but because it undermined the myths that disguised the sordid and corrupt. (218)

In 1888, Henry Vizetelly, the publisher of Zola's translated works, was taken to trial at the instigation of the National Vigilance Association and pleaded guilty to publishing "an obscene libel". There could have been several different possible literary reactions to this event and a number of ways in which writers could have dealt with it: if Zola's work was really "obscene," which the modern reader would find laughable, then what were English authors, especially those attempting to emulate Zola's genius, do in order to get published? If, on the other hand, the majority of English readers were seen to be prudish and naïve, was it the responsibility of English artists to expose this failure on the part of the reading public and persist in pushing their point? The most obvious solution was self-censorship, which not only British authors, but their American counterparts were socially and economically compelled to undertake, given the *Realpolitik* of Victorian publishing. In America, where reactionary forces are still perhaps the strongest in the Western world, Stephen Crane excised passages from the first edition of *Maggie* to avoid allegations of indecency; these passages were reinstated in later editions. Similarly, most of Zola's translated works in America were heavily censored in translation. If Victorian British writers had conformed to "foreign" artistic criteria, they were obviously revealing their work

as something other than British, which would have confirmed the hostile critics' view that Naturalism was a foreign import with a deleterious effect on native literature. Nonetheless, many enlightened and eminent Victorians read and enjoyed Zola's works: Beatrice Potter, (later to become Beatrice Webb) according to David Trotter, was embarrassed on a train journey by the presence of a well-known Liberal MP, as she had in her pocket "a volume of Zola," about whom she "remained enthusiastic" ("The Avoidance of Naturalism" 613). Although Zola had been earlier regarded as risqué, at best, and obscene, at worst, he overcame the odium which he had aroused and achieved a great deal of respect as a writer in England, which culminated in his being received in London in 1898 and feted by its civic dignitaries. The reason was scarcely literary: Zola had written the pamphlet, "J'Accuse...!" which incurred the wrath of the French authorities by pointing out that much of the case against Alfred Dreyfus depended on anti-Semitism, innuendo, and political expediency. In order to escape imprisonment himself, the author sought refuge in England.\* The writer who had symbolised "grossness" and the "French—therefore unclean" in the novel was finally deemed acceptable after thirty years of dedication to his literary ideal, but fêted more for his political courage than his literary achievements, which were, by any standards, considerable. On his arrival in London,

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\* Zola was finally forgiven by the French following Dreyfus's eventual acquittal, and admitted into the Académie Française. Six years after his death in 1902 his remains were transferred to the Pantheon.

however, he was not greeted by a committee of naturalist authors, however, as such a thing did not exist, but by the Institution of Journalists and the Lord Mayor of London. Although significant, the British engagement with the production of naturalistic writing was both short-lived and unconsolidated, and it is unlikely that the Lord Mayor's office could have found a phalanx of like-minded authors to take part in Zola's welcome party.

A number of British writers of the 1880s and 1890s were known for their admiration of the path which the French novel had taken and lauded Zola's technique and are even grouped together as if, like the French writers, there were some manifesto to which they subscribed. In fact, there was little bonding between the so-called British Naturalists and virtually nothing in the way of a cohesive policy; one cannot imagine of a "Manifesto of the Five Against *Workers in the Dawn*," for example. George Gissing, George Moore, Arthur Morrison, Hubert Crackanthorpe, Sarah Grand, and others have at times been linked to the naturalist cause, but never really showed enthusiasm to align themselves with that (or any other) movement. The extent to which British writers tried to emulate their French predecessors is not at all clear. Some commentators have claimed that George Moore and George Gissing are the two leading British Naturalists, but on this opinion is deeply divided, mainly because not all admirers of either Gissing or Moore are prepared to admit that Naturalism is a fundamental factor in the success of their novels, or even relevant to their lasting popularity. At a conference in Amsterdam in 1999—the first

International George Gissing Conference—very few of the “Gissingites” considered Naturalism to be a predominant feature of Gissing’s work. Some seemed genuinely dismayed that Gissing should be tainted with the Naturalist epithet: David Grylls remarks in *The Paradox of Gissing* that “by 1900, Gissing told [Eduard] Bertz, that he had ‘grown to abhor Zola’s grossness’” (Grylls 157). Notwithstanding such distaste for dwelling on the unsavoury, Gissing remains probably the most consistently naturalistic of Zola’s British contemporaries to have achieved any lasting success. This becomes even more significant when taking an overview of the naturalist aesthetic, plot similarity, and subject matter.

Zola, himself, disliked the terms “movement” and “school,” but was combative in his defence of the aims of the Naturalist writers, and the Médan group was justifiably described as constituting the vanguard of a literary movement, despite its leader’s objections to the epithet. By contrast, there was no alliance between English naturalistic writers which would have warranted putting up a united front: they simply wanted to write socially relevant novels. George Gissing and George Moore are frequently mentioned in tandem, but, as an examination of their works will show, they were two very different kinds of writer. Equally, each of these authors was influenced by the French realist movement and Zola’s Naturalism, but remained more or less faithful to an English novelistic tradition. It would be erroneous to assume that Naturalism in novels happens accidentally, although, as Charles Child



Walcott puts it, “the forms of naturalism may be assumed without the writer’s caring much about its theoretical basis” (130).

The aesthetic in British Naturalism differs from that in the French, and it is almost inevitable that the execution differs. Almost certainly, social distinctions in Britain, and the socio-political system in post-Revolutionary France can account for some of the philosophical differences in the two literatures. For example, there were many campaigners amongst the Victorian middle-class who demonstrated a concern for the welfare of the underclasses, but this was a concern born of a belief in the duty imposed by privilege rather than socialistic altruism. Whilst the British still looked to the monarchy and the aristocracy for moral principles, fewer than one hundred years previously, the French had violently removed their own monarchy and aristocracy for supposed crimes of moral desuetude, (although this was replaced with an emasculated and effete monarchical régime in 1830). As Gissing himself notes in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*:

Profoundly aristocratic in his sympathies, the Englishman has always seen in the patrician class not merely a social, but a moral superiority; the man of blue blood was to him a living representative of those potencies and virtues which made his ideal of the worthy life. (135)

Gissing, therefore, sees a difference between the English and other nationalities in class-related attitudes to morality. Writers from the two countries, England and France, in the role of social commentators, would necessarily have had a

different agenda. Firstly, many English writers were exploring depictions of the evils of capitalism, industrialisation, urbanisation, and poverty in Victorian England and a noticeable feature is that English realist and naturalist novels were, generally speaking, set in the present. On the other hand, Zola's *Rougon Macquart* series, played out against the historical backdrop of the Second Empire, addresses issues of its own time rather more obliquely. Similarly, *Les Soirées de Médan* (1880), the French naturalists' joint artistic statement of intent, consisted of short stories set in the time of the Franco-Prussian War, an event in recent memory, but reflecting a more unsettled age than the one in which the stories were actually written. After the Third Republic was established in 1871, there was a determined effort to put the economy and the country on to a more secure and stable footing and, by 1890, France was ready to enter "La Belle Epoque" and to assume the mantle of artistic leadership of Europe, if not the world. However, between the age of Balzac and that of Zola, France had seen turbulent times, politically and economically. Britain, by contrast, had been more cautious and dilatory in reform, having witnessed the excesses of the French Revolution, followed almost immediately by the instability produced by the Napoleonic era and its aftermath. Britain had also been relatively politically stable throughout the Hanoverian era. Artists from both countries, therefore, reflecting their times, inevitably differed in approach. Walter Allen, however, in *The English Novel* (1954) remarks on a more fundamental divergence between French and English authors:

The difference between the two attitudes might be put like this: the English novelists tend to work from the highly individual, the highly idiosyncratic, to the general type; the French tend to work from the general type to the individual. A French novelist, inventing a miser or a hypocrite, is interested in the quality of miserliness or hypocrisy. An English novelist is much more likely to stress the comic aspects of miserliness or hypocrisy, so much so, indeed, that both he and his readers may be in danger of forgetting the vice in their appreciation of the idiosyncrasies that are its result. (286)

This is a commonly held view and, in general, seems to be a reasonable conclusion to reach, despite the fact that Allen's typification of the technique of an "English novelist" could equally be based on that used by Molière to ridicule two of his most notorious characters, Tartuffe and Harpagon. The identification of national characteristics in authors has the inherent danger of over-generalisation, however, and one author in particular appears to thwart most attempts to label him with any specific national identity.

In Victorian England, expatriate Irishman George Moore was putting into practice some of the aesthetic lessons he had learned in France. Pierre Coustillas, an avowed and lifelong "Gissingite," who has written extensively on Gissing and his contemporaries, feels that Moore was the most Zolaesque British novelist of that time: "The early G. Moore was probably the only English novelist who can be called

naturalist by French and Zolaesque standards” (Coustillas E-mail 27-8-00), and Walter Allen had pronounced a similar verdict on Moore in *The English Novel*. Allen is discussing the period from the mid-1880s to 1914 and notes that “Moore remains almost the only English Naturalist in the French sense” (285), remarking also that “while there is plenty of realism in English fiction there is little true Naturalism” (286). Although Moore was deeply affected by his time in France, both artistically and linguistically, and criticised for his clumsy English prose, he eventually became a recognised British writer and achieved, as has been noted, lasting acclaim.

Moore was of Irish landed gentry, but went to France to finish his education. It was there that he encountered Impressionism and a new set of aesthetic values. Moore believed that the Impressionist painters were capturing the real artistic spirit of the late nineteenth century. One of his literary theories was that a novel should be like an Impressionist painting, defying conventional morality and avoiding sentimentality or Romantic depictions. Impressionism and Naturalism went hand in hand in terms of a common aesthetic, to present *une tranche de vie*, a slice of life seen through the artist’s eyes, and, more problematically, without moral judgement.

Walter Allen, however, points out a problem facing the English naturalists:

Naturalism was the literary equivalent of Impressionism in painting: just as the Impressionists painted objects as seen in certain conditions of light and atmosphere, so the Naturalists depicted human beings in terms of their environment. The relation between the two theories was

well known to the novelists themselves; and it is part of Zola's strength, for instance, that in his novels he often sets out to describe a scene as nearly as possible as Manet might have painted it. One of the weaknesses of the Naturalistic novel in England is that the novelists had no native contemporary painters working on parallel lines they could emulate. If Zola constantly suggests Manet, George Moore in his best novel, *Esther Waters*, suggests Frith in such a painting as 'Derby Day'. (283)

In this quotation Allen raises two related but quite different questions: first, were the English naturalists isolated from the main stream of Naturalism by not being in France, and what are the implications? Second, English painters, such as Alfred Sisley, lived and worked in France, but never achieved the great reputations of their French colleagues: were the French simply more temperamentally suited to Impressionism, and, by extension, Naturalism? It seems likely that George Moore embraced both art forms, firstly as an Impressionist art critic and then as a naturalist author, as a direct result of his extended stay in Paris. One additional point raised by Allen's statement is that of the relationship between visual Impressionism and literary Naturalism, both of which had their roots in the salons of Paris. Manet's relationship with Zola is well documented for the modern historian; Manet's striking portrait of Zola has been on display in the Musée d'Orsay for a number of years. It was completed in the same year as Zola was about to defend himself in his preface to the

1868 edition of *Thérèse Raquin*. Prominent in the background of the portrait is the “blue-covered brochure written by Zola and sold at Manet’s exhibition in 1867 that sealed the two men’s common struggle” (Madeline 46). Laurence Madeline includes not only the Zola portrait, but also another painting that illustrates the bond between the Impressionists and the Naturalist movement in *Musée d’Orsay: 100 Impressionist Masterpieces*. She describes Frédéric Bazille’s *L’Atelier de la Rue de la Condamine* (1870) as depicting “a small select group of exponents of the new type of painting and the work is an informal manifesto of emerging Impressionism” (Madeline 18). Zola and Renoir are talking together; Manet and Monet are grouped around an easel with Bazille, whilst Edmond Maître plays the piano. Zola wrote a defence of Manet’s art in 1866, and the link between naturalistic writers and impressionistic painters is demonstrated by Zola’s frequent visits to their studios and their presence at his literary gatherings. George Moore was in no doubt as to the relationship, but may have lacked the technical ability to illustrate it in his writing.

*Esther Waters* (1894) has now become George Moore’s representative work, as against, say, *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885), which is more naturalistic in execution; it is probably the attempt at a naturalistic lack of adornment which gives the earlier novel what Pelham Edgar, in *The Art of the Novel* (1933), describes as its “unremitting drabness” (231). Moore himself admits that the writing is clumsy and that the prose lacks fluency; nevertheless, *A Mummer’s Wife* rates a mention in Yves Chevrel’s list called “Naturalism triumphant,” whilst *Esther Waters* is in the list of “dernière vague”

Naturalism (46). Chevrel's study of Naturalism was published in 1982, but draws on a significantly historical tradition as regards the worldwide linear development of naturalistic fiction. Moore also became a martyr to the naturalist cause by becoming a banned author; *A Modern Lover*, *A Mummer's Wife* and *Esther Waters* were all at one time banned by the circulating libraries for their "unclean" or "questionable" content. Unpunished adultery, female alcoholism, and giving birth out of wedlock, with or without graphic descriptions of childbirth, were subject matter of such indelicacy that Mudie's and Smith's felt that their subscribers could and should avoid the works of George Moore. Moore poured out his vitriol in *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals* (1885) to protest at the powers of censorship which Smith's and Mudie's exercised over the dissemination of literature, but saved most of his vitriol for the publishers, "whom he termed robbers with but one interest —plunder" (Griest 208).

By far the most successful, by any standards, of Moore's so-called naturalist works, *Esther Waters* is a departure from the usual naturalist plot line in that Esther's salvation lies ultimately in her Christian faith. The twin evils of drink and gambling are seen by the Church as the potential downfall of both the middle classes and the working man. Esther remains resolute in her disapproval of both drink and gambling, despite becoming the landlady of a London public house where gamblers gather; furthermore, the father of her illegitimate child has become a bookmaker. She rationalises her acquiescence to this situation by reasoning that the income derived will benefit her son and that the ends justify the means. It becomes apparent to the

reader that her motivation to succeed in life is to ensure the well-being of her son; despite her piety, she justifies her hypocrisy by weighing up the possibilities, deciding that to accept an income derived from gambling and drinking in order to provide for her son is preferable to bringing him up as a pauper, or, in modern terms, she is in the dilemma of the morally-compromised single mother. Throughout the novel, the reader is frequently reminded of Esther's loyalty to the Plymouth Brethren; in fact, the reason that she has a reasonable start when she quits her employment when pregnant is that her employer is a "Sister" too. The modern critic might be tempted to read into this a Dickensian leitmotif; Christian salvation and a happy ending seem to go against the grain of Naturalism. Nevertheless, Yves Chevrel includes *Esther Waters* in his table of *dernière vague* naturalist works, alongside, it has to be noted, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, and, less contentiously, *Maggie – A Girl of the Streets* (Chevrel 46). This table is in a chapter which might well have been entitled "The Last Gasp of Naturalism," as Chevrel saw it. Moore and Chevrel are united on one point: as quoted above, George Moore had stated that no writer is a naturalist forever, and Yves Chevrel endorses this view of naturalist writers:

All of the works cited do not all contribute in the same way to the history of naturalism; moreover, one must beware of concluding that such and such a writer is a naturalist. For many of them, Naturalism



only consisted of a moment, sometimes decisive, in their personal evolution.

Toutes les oeuvres citées ne contribuent pas de la même façon à l'histoire du naturalisme; encore davantage faut-il se garder de conclure que tel écrivain est un naturaliste: pour beaucoup d'entre eux le naturalisme n'a constitué qu'un moment, mais parfois décisif, de leur évolution personnelle. (49)

It is easy to understand why Moore should have subscribed to such a view; he eschewed any lifelong intention to write Zolaesque novels and after initially being impressed by the master, later found himself disgusted with Zola's appearance and personality, as much as any artistic or literary repugnance he may have felt. In *A Portrait of George Moore* John Freeman describes the occasion of the fancy-dress ball for *L'Assommoir*, when Moore met Zola for the first time. Moore was with Manet, and Moore was dressed as a "Parisian workman" from one of Zola's novels; at a certain point in the evening's proceedings, he

[. . .] found himself speaking to a thickly built, massive person—Zola himself—who chilled him with a bow and passed on. Not until he sought out naturalism in a temporary fastness did he really talk and listen to Zola, who was not yet the kindly and gracious host, but a bear cursing the universe—no, a Buddha with fat legs lying on a sofa. [. . .] 'I have made a friend,' repeated Moore again and again as he returned

from his first conversation with Buddha; but the significance of the friendship was exaggerated. Years after, when *Confessions of a Young Man* was appearing in a magazine and Zola was under a promise to write a preface to a French translation of *A Mummer's Wife*, Moore called again and found that Zola would not write it. (49)

Zola had taken offence at certain passages which slighted his style; to Moore's protestations that the passages were not his own opinions, but a "synthesis of others," Zola replied that "children will devour their fathers" (Freeman 50). At first, Moore was upset, but consoles himself with the somewhat irrelevant observation that "at this time Zola was fat [. . .] ; that Zola's house revealed a large coarse mind, a coarse net through which living things escape," but, immediately afterwards, Moore "forgets the external man and considers the inward genius, until he cries—a most extraordinary imagination!" (50). It becomes evident that Moore was torn between an artistic admiration of Zola's works, and an antipathy towards the great man's arrogance and gross appearance. However, in his early career as a novelist, Moore was happy to risk his reputation as "the English Zola," or "Zola's ricochet in England," as he often described himself, although he was, in fact, neither an Englishman by birth nor a Zola in ability. What Moore did not possess was Zola's facility with language, in either French or English. However, he yearned to write literary novels in English, having (unsuccessfully) written both poetry and prose in French, but felt disadvantaged by the influence which his immersion in the French language had imposed on his ability

to write fluent English. On his return to England, he became aware that his unwieldy and uneven prose showed the effects of having been so long expatriated. In a discussion of *A Mummer's Wife*, John Freeman refers to Moore's having overcome difficulties of grammar, but still describes the novel as containing "frigid and inexpressive prose" (75). Nevertheless, Freeman, who was writing in 1922, is more sympathetic to Moore's efforts in *Esther Waters*. The so-called coldness of the prose is once again a criticism and Freeman defends it thus:

One objection to *Esther Waters* has often been rehearsed—that for all its skill and verisimilitude, it fails in animation and heat, being written from without and not from within, coldly and not fondly. The charge is somewhat vague, and the vindication can be little less vague, if more strenuous. I think it is the presence of form in a rare degree that suggests coldness; the uncommon quality being assumed to exclude a common quality quite inevitably. But that exclusion is far from inevitable; it is merely the slackness of the mind that calls violence power and restraint coldness. [ . . . ]

Let it be granted, nevertheless, that passionate heights and deeps are not touched in this novel; but let it also be granted that they are not within its aim. The naturalistic novel moves within definite limits, and it has not the power of Ariel to fly or run at will. (114-5)

Freeman displays in this passage a sympathy with the naturalists in at least one fundamental of naturalistic fiction: that an integral aim of naturalistic writing is its dispassionate treatment of passion. With regard to impartiality, Zola tried and failed with *Thérèse Raquin* with the result that he was criticised for his lack of distance from his subject. As Leonard Tancock notes, not as an adverse criticism, but more as a comment, “Zola the poet [. . .] exploits emotionally-charged descriptions and atmospheres as strikingly as any Romantic” (*Thérèse Raquin* 16). The naturalist, it seems, can never win: if the author demonstrates involvement with his subjects, he is accused of partiality and sentimentality; if he writes dispassionately, he is accused of frigidity. Moore may have been trying too hard to maintain a distance between author and subject and thus left himself open to such criticism. Most critics, both pre-Great War and more recent, agree that *A Mummer’s Wife* is Moore’s most naturalistic work, and is possibly the most naturalistic of any English novel, plainly and unashamedly owing its genesis to the influence of Zola. However, Pelham Edgar is of the opinion that Moore, in the writing of *A Mummer’s Wife*, had been inspired less by Zola than by the Goncourts, who had been such an inspiration to Zola himself:

We rather suspect a source that he has never mentioned, and hazard the supposition that he stole a graft from the graceful but poison-dropping tree that the Goncourts so confidently planted. The pathological fury with which he pursues Mrs. Ede to her drunkard’s grave is a disciple’s reproduction of their clinical obsessions. (232)

This is an interesting observation in that it credits Moore with having a deeper knowledge of French literature than is usually attributed to English writers. It is also very revealing of a critical attitude towards Naturalism which was prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century. This attitude towards British Naturalism goes part way to explaining the unwarranted verdict that British Naturalism either did not exist or it was simply a mutation of a Continental import. The Goncourts revelled in the cut-and-thrust of fiery literary debate and dissent in a way which most British authors disdained. Whilst the brothers Goncourt wrote creditable literature, they did not enjoy the vast reputations of Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, and Hugo. They saw themselves in the avant-garde, as indeed they were, forging a new path for post-Balzacian French realism and its as yet unnamed offshoot, Naturalism. Pelham Edgar credits Moore with not only being at the forefront of British Naturalism, but also placing his association with the movement alongside that of Zola's, rather than subsequent to it, or resultant from it. The implications for British Naturalism are significant and far-reaching, even though Moore was hardly typical of British writers. The received wisdom is that naturalistic fiction in British literature, indeed in most literatures, stemmed from the efforts of Zola, and later the Médan group, to promulgate a new approach to fiction. However, if Pelham Edgar's hypothesis could be proven, it would mean that at least one British writer had been absorbing much more radical realist influences than have usually been acknowledged. Research does not reveal that Moore discovered the Goncourts before he came under Zola's

influence, even though his writing is closer to the Goncourts' more prosaic style than to Zola's fluent, poetic treatment of fiction. Furthermore, Moore would have been able to read the Goncourts only in the original French, as there was no English translation of a Goncourt work published until 1886. Moore the Francophile, it must be conceded, may well have been one of the first British writers who were willing to explore the possibilities of incorporating French Naturalism wholesale into English fiction, but this seems more likely to have been the result of his friendship with the Impressionists and Zola's influence than from having read the Goncourts. One could speculate that other English authors had been tracking the progress of the French novel, not simply as a curiosity but as a source of inspiration, and Zola simply became the catalyst which provided the impetus for British writers to experiment with the new form, as happened in France.

However, one writer who appears to have been an instinctive naturalist, at the same time as rejecting Zolaesque theorising, is George Gissing. Gissing wrote several socially thematic novels in Zolaesque style, which of itself is not proof positive that Zola was any more than a passing influence on Gissing, any more than was Turgenev, whom Gissing also admired, but a thread runs through Gissing's work which leads the historicist to make inevitable comparisons. Gissing was born in 1857 and received a classical education, which was curtailed whilst at university, owing to a prosecution for theft, but he retained a lifelong love of the Classics. By the time Gissing was in his teens, Zola was a relatively successful published author. The former came under

the latter's influence, although Gissing always maintained more of an interest in Dickens than in Zola and published a definitive, if not always sympathetic, critical work on Dickens' novels in 1898. David Grylls' *The Paradox of Gissing* (1986) is aptly titled: whilst Gissing was an author steeped in gritty realism and Naturalism, he admired Dickens, although his opinion was that Dickens tended to over-sentimentalise, a criticism which has, on occasion, been levelled at Gissing himself. There are critics who point to the character of Reardon in Gissing's *New Grub Street* and say that the characterisation of an author suffering for his art is a Romantic notion. However, to accuse Gissing of being a romantic, (in its pejorative sense, meaning sentimentalist) simply because Reardon conforms to the stereotype of the "artist starving in a garret" is somehow to miss the point. Surely, as Northrop Frye points out, if reality is the ultimate irony, then Reardon, as a Romantic figure, is the artist that a realist novelist must depict. Authors painting a Realist picture of Romantic characters must represent them in the romantic vision—the reality *is* the romanticism, and the romance, as far as the artist depicted is concerned, is the reality. What Gissing does not do is to romanticise the reality of starving in a garret, for to do so would betray his own realist aesthetic, or to indulge, as Andrew Sanders puts it, in "romantic affectation" (467). (Sanders, in *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, is yet another critic who writes about Gissing without once mentioning the word "Naturalism").

The subject of Chapter XXI of George Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903) is the notion that the production of good art is in some way connected to a willingness to undergo hardship and penury. The "novel," written in the style of an autobiographic journal edited by the author, is itself widely accepted as being a vehicle for Gissing's own reflections on a life in literature, and was written whilst he lived in seclusion in Devon. Walter Allen describes the book thus:

Neither a straight novel nor a straight autobiography, *Ryecroft* may best be described as an autobiographical fantasia, projected in the form of a collection of personal essays largely composed in that curious dialect of written English Lamb devised from the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and bequeathed to the occasional essayists of the nineteenth. (276)

*Ryecroft* is far from being any kind of apologia, or even an explanation for his literary tendencies, but goes some way to explain how Gissing saw the role of the artist and provides clues as to the author's aesthetics. Henry Ryecroft bemoans the leisured and privileged lives that young writers appear to lead: "No garretters, these novelists and journalists awaiting their promotion," he writes, and the reader will immediately recall the life of Reardon and Biffen as described in *New Grub Street*. "I surmise," continues Henry Ryecroft, "that the path of 'literature' is being made too easy." He later adds: "Starvation, it is true, does not necessarily produce fine literature; but one feels uneasy about these carpet-authors" (210-211). The implication is that hardship,



if not outright starvation, is in some measure helpful if great literature is to be produced and once again, the notion of the true artist starving in a garret is being mooted. Moreover, there is the underlying suggestion that in keeping with Zola's exhortations to research assiduously novelistic material the author could do no better than to live through the experiences to be depicted in a work of fiction, not simply to add verisimilitude, but to write with authority. Both Taine and Spencer, whose philosophical influence on naturalistic literature cannot be overestimated, believed strongly that writers should deal with subjects of their close acquaintance, and it would have been difficult for the serious late-Victorian author to ignore the prescriptive message in their writings. Gissing's self-inflicted role of impecunious artist, however, was not an indulgence for the sake of fictional veritism. The simple explanation is that he was determined to be a writer of novels rather than be thought of as an "author and hack" by living off journalism and writing fiction in his spare time. The willingness of a literary artist to accommodate the needs of day-to-day living is clearly a major pre-occupation of many writers.

As noted above, Gissing, despite being invited, refused to take on journalistic jobbing work, whilst Moore, according to Freeman, was not a proficient enough writer and found "because his English was as yet rotten with French idiom, that literary criticism was soon closed to him, at any rate as far as leading journals were concerned" (77). Both Gissing and Moore were very aware that commercial success came at a price: works had to be acceptable to the libraries, and marketing was as

important in the 1880s and 1890s as in the present day. As previously noted, Moore launched his own attack on the circulating libraries in *Literature at Nurse*, which primarily decries censorship of literature by the libraries, but is equally a treatise on their economic power, and Gissing wrote *New Grub Street* (1891), which, whilst not necessarily attacking the commercial in literature, showed that literature was an art form whose integrity was threatened by those ultimately responsible for its success or otherwise. The real discussion, in modern critical terms, centred on commodification; characters in novels were consumers, and so the reader of the novel became aware that what was presented for the delectation of the subscriber to Mudie's or Smith's was equally commodified. Gissing's objection to the power of the circulating libraries was not their power of censorship, but the considerable economic power which they wielded.

The hard economic fact was that authors were usually inept when it came to the business of profiting from their art. Gissing was very aware of this: through the autobiographical musings of Henry Ryecroft he called Anthony Trollope "a big, blustering, genial brute" who could "hold his own" and profit from his work; Dickens was "a shrewd and vigorous man of business" (*Ryecroft* 214), thereby suggesting that pecuniary success was denied those who had not the temperament to struggle and fight for their just rewards. The implication is that success as a writer is not simply a question of producing good writing, but playing an active part in its commodification and commercialisation. The ability, willingness, and inclination of the artist to

participate actively in profiting from his skills is the subject of *New Grub Street*, which still remains Gissing's most celebrated novel.

In *New Grub Street* the central character, Edwin Reardon, is trying to write a truly worthwhile novel, having failed so far to make his mark; he makes friends with a fellow author called Harold Biffen, who has similar aspirations and similar literary tastes. Reardon's conversations with Biffen are textually self-referential; Biffen discusses his novelistic perspective and "the theory on which he worked." Biffen then continues, as if explaining something that Gissing has been eager to explain to his own readership:

'I have thought of a new way of putting it. What I really aim at is an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent. The field, as I understand it, is a new one; I don't know any writer who has treated ordinary vulgar-life with fidelity and seriousness. Zola writes deliberate tragedies; his vilest figures become heroic from the place they fill in a strongly imagined drama. I want to deal with the essentially unheroic, with the day-to-day life of that vast majority of people who are at the mercy of paltry circumstance. Dickens understood the possibility of such work, but his tendency to melodrama on the one hand, and his humour on the other, prevented him from thinking of it'. (173-4)

The comments on Dickens are pure Gissing. The literary conversation between Biffen and Reardon in Chapter 10 gives the lie to the frequent assumption that the character of Reardon is closely modelled on the author, even though it is reasonable to project many of Gissing's personal difficulties and preoccupations on to the struggling, self-pitying writer. There are several instances where Biffen more closely resembles Gissing in terms of philosophy and aesthetics, which is not to say that Biffen is Gissing in disguise, any more than are some of the other major characters. Explaining how he is going to incorporate a real-life love-scene that he has witnessed into his novel, Biffen continues:

‘For my own part, I am going to reproduce it verbatim, without one single impertinent suggestion of any point of view save that of honest reporting. The result will be something unutterably tedious. Precisely. That is the stamp of the ignobly decent life. If it were anything but tedious it would be untrue.’ (174)

Thus Biffen, ever the conscientious artist, has set out his naturalistic aesthetic. “I couldn’t do it,” is Reardon’s reply, explaining that “vulgar circumstances” have beset him in his personal life and are consequently too close to home. On the other hand, the most casual study of the life and work of George Gissing shows him only too willing to write on subjects of his close acquaintance, including, and especially, those which have caused him most grief. As Pelham Edgar notes: “Too much of [Gissing’s] own harsh and narrow experience went into the making of his books to

permit the spirit of critical detachment which Moore consciously imposed upon himself as an experiment in artistic discipline" (235). In the context of Edgar's chapter on "French Realism," the foregoing comment does not emerge as an adverse criticism, but is more directed at the sincerity of the writing; perhaps a self-conscious detachment can, in certain circumstances, detract from the impact of the story. In other words, Pelham Edgar is almost endorsing Henry Ryecroft's unstated view that unless the author has lived through hardship he is somehow unqualified to write about it. Edgar insists that Gissing is "passionately autobiographic," like no other English novelist, yet the evidence is that Gissing was able to set himself at a remove by using several different characters to display multiple facets of the authorial voice. As the novel unfolds, Gissing subtly undermines the expectation that Reardon is the authorial voice, despite the fact that Walter Allen describes him as the "successful emblem of Gissing's self-pity" (279). The two fictional authors, Reardon and Biffen, go on to discuss the "fateful power of trivial incidents," a typically Zolaesque comment, taken almost verbatim. A few sentences later, Biffen reinforces his position as the voice of novelistic progress when he gently upbraids Reardon:

'You take the conventional view. If you wrote of these things you would represent them as laughable. [. . .] The man who laughs takes the side of a cruel omnipotence, [. . .] . I want to take no side at all; simply to say, Look, this is the kind of thing that happens'. (175)

Throughout the novel, Gissing states the case both for a naturalistic perspective and for the New Woman, both contemporary issues close to Gissing's heart, but not in a unified schema, or by using any particular character as a mouthpiece, as one might expect. Reardon, as central character, often acts as a counterpoint for ideas put forward by other characters, including his wife; surprisingly, Amy Reardon is more enlightened than her supposedly liberal husband. As the novel unfolds, the reader is made aware that Reardon's wife has an intellectual depth of which her husband is probably ignorant or, more likely, it has not occurred to him to speculate as to his wife's capacity for learning. He has tried half-heartedly to educate her in terms of his sensibilities, "but with the result that she became clearly conscious of the divergence between herself and her husband"; when alone, she would obey her intellectual impulses and read material "alien to Reardon's sympathies" (397). This is described in the third volume of the novel, in a chapter entitled "Married Woman's Property," which is a reference, in part, to the Married Woman's Property Act of 1883. By extension, the author gives Amy Reardon independent intellectual property, too. Her choice of reading is that which the modern reader might reasonably expect of Gissing the author and thinker:

The solid periodicals attracted her, and especially those articles which dealt with themes of social science. Anything that savoured of newness and boldness in philosophic thought had a charm for her palate. [. . .] Thus, for instance, though she could not undertake the

volumes of Herbert Spencer, she was intelligently acquainted with the tenor of their contents; and though she had never opened one of Darwin's books, her knowledge of his main theories and illustrations was respectable. She was becoming a typical woman of the new time, the woman who has developed concurrently with journalistic enterprise. (397-8)

With the exception of the second half of the last sentence of this quotation, Gissing's position is made quite clear. (It is not altogether clear why *New Woman* should have emerged alongside "journalistic enterprise," except possibly that the dissemination of popular scientific and philosophical theories was through enlightened magazines). The narrator makes it plain to the reader that modern thinking and writing would have to acknowledge social Darwinism and Spencerian theories. In the following chapter, in conversation with Biffen, Reardon himself acknowledges one such theory: "I shall never become a drunkard; I haven't that diathesis, to use your expression" (403). The reader is invited to suppose that Reardon subscribes to the belief that people are predisposed in certain ways, but that he emphasises that the terms he is using are Biffen's scientific, Spencerian, and, consequently, naturalistic, terms to describe such predisposition; Reardon thus distances himself from the scientific neologisms of the day. Throughout the novel, Gissing puts forward most of the arguments used by Zola, and the other established naturalists, as well as incorporating the *New Woman* question, and the issue of the

control exercised by the circulating libraries over the output of authors. The novel is heavy with polemic and invective, but conveyed with subtle execution.

Edwin Reardon progressively becomes a less sympathetic character. He behaves churlishly towards his wife, whose requests are simply those of a rational housewife and mother. The Reardons separate, and Edwin proudly and obstinately continues to send what little money he can spare in order to support their child. Eventually, he becomes ill through malnutrition, but he remains true, as he sees it, to his artistic calling. For Reardon the artist, this miserable life is reality, not merely an idealistic dream, and, for much of the novel, the reader's sympathies lie with Reardon, for no other reason than a wish to see him succeed. That is not to say that Jasper Milvain, the pragmatic counterpoint to Reardon's artist, is the villain, any more so than is Reardon's wife, Amy. Each is dealing realistically with the need to make a living, and, in Milvain's case, to forge a new career; alternatively, as Bernard Bergonzi notes in his introduction to *New Grub Street*, "Jasper's moral faults, like Amy's, are seen as arising from his deliberate decision to accept the prevalent system of values" (19). The values are simply those of the capitalist society of late Victorian England, and artists are traditionally seen as a counterpoint to the ruling ideology. Indeed, if there is a villain, it is the cut-throat world of publishing and journalism. Jasper Milvain, after all, is subject to the same market forces as Reardon; admittedly, he does not have quite the same aims as Reardon, but, more importantly, he has a totally different temperament. As perceptively noted by Walter Allen, "A Reardon,



one feels, could survive in no form of society in which the element of risk entered. He is damned by his own temperament, and though he is a pathetic figure, he is not a tragic one [. . .]” (279). Taking this simple fact as pivotal to the novel, the human drama played out becomes a truly Zolaesque scenario—a study of temperaments. Gissing’s technique, whether realist or naturalist, allows him to present a tragedy-in-the-making under close scrutiny, which, as Allen remarks, is not to say that Reardon becomes the tragic figure, especially in any Aristotelian sense. The tragedy is that much of the misery which befalls the Reardon family, Biffen, and implied others, (including the author), could have been avoided. How it could have been avoided is itself a multi-faceted question; the simple answer is that if Victorian society had not been the cultural construct that it was, many of the problems facing authors would not have existed. This argument, however, becomes circular, because if Victorian society had been ideologically different, *New Grub Street* could not have been written. Therefore, whilst Gissing is pointing an accusatory finger at a society which allows literary artists to live in deprivation, he is not overtly blaming that society for Reardon’s downfall. Reardon, like Gissing, is instrumental in bringing about his own tragedies. The decline-plot, or degeneration, affects only those who are prone to its effects, or those who place themselves in situations of vulnerability. The reader is made aware of Reardon’s degeneration, both as it appears to those close to him, and as Reardon himself rationalises it. In the same way as Zola used intimate stories in order to illustrate the larger truth, so Gissing took the story of one fictional writer in

late Victorian England in order to show the world of publishing, and by extension, the corruption and misery of commercialised England in the period. *New Grub Street*, on closer examination, is much broader in its scope than a simple social document, however—or even “a major social document,” as it is described in the sleeve notes to the Penguin edition: it is a vehicle for many of Gissing’s most deeply held beliefs about the role of the novelist, his views on the realist and naturalist aesthetic and the emergent status of women in Victorian England.

One of the most frequent criticisms of Gissing’s work is that it so often seems to be less than objective. It is well documented that the author lived with and married a prostitute, that he had been prosecuted for theft, and that he was undoubtedly a slave to his art. He put himself through unnecessary hardships in order to remain a free agent and an author of integrity, as he interpreted this role. Gissing refused to take journalistic work, even though he needed the money. Bernard Bergonzi, in his Introduction to *New Grub Street*, quotes from an account by Austin Harrison of Gissing’s attitude towards journalistic work:

He hated editors; he was no journalist, he said; he could not degrade himself by such ‘trash’. In truth, at any time after 1882 Gissing could have obtained a place as critic or writer on some journal, which could have enabled him to write at leisure. But he would never hear of such a thing. My father [the philosopher, Frederic Harrison] begged him to

accept some post, but Gissing declined to 'serve'. Gissing positively chose to live in strife. (11)

Whilst the above observations are undoubtedly true, the author's choice of lifestyle does not of itself imply that he wishes to portray himself as the underdog hero of his fiction. Although the trials and tribulations suffered by Reardon may parallel some of Gissing's in depth of misery, there is one fundamental difference: none of the women in Gissing's life were as intelligent or as long-suffering as Amy Reardon. Reardon is clearly living in a world where commercialism has no place, but Amy rebukes him:

'Art must be practised as a trade, at all events in our time. This is the age of trade. Of course if one refuses to be of one's time, and yet hasn't the means to live independently, what can result but breakdown and wretchedness? The fact of the matter is, you could do fairly good work, and work which would sell, if only you would bring yourself to look at things in a more practical way. It's what Mr. Milvain is always saying, you know.' (81)

Amy Reardon is simply stating what she (and the reader) knows to be a commercial fact of life. Throughout the novel, Amy attempts to convince Reardon that although he has the ability to succeed in the world of writing, he must make some artistic compromises in order to do so. Gissing may well be making Amy the mouthpiece for those supporters of his who entreated him to do the same thing. Reardon, however,

like Gissing, is opposed to taking what appears to be the sensible course and is obstinate in his disinclination to succeed in anything other than the sphere of the multi-volume author. At this point in the novel, Reardon surely loses the sympathy of the reader. His unwillingness to compromise seems either arrogant or simply silly. The reader's failure to sympathise with Reardon, however, does not itself imply that Gissing's message in the novel is lost. At this point, the question arises as to whether, on the one hand, Gissing's sympathies lie with Reardon, or if Gissing has used this character as an extreme example of how a victim of the market forces of commodification is also a victim of the shortcomings of his own temperament. The naturalist would undoubtedly subscribe to the latter view.

*New Grub Street* was first published in 1891, the same year in which French critic Louis Bloy was to publish "Les Funérailles du naturalisme," an article pronouncing the end of Naturalism in France. However, Stephen Crane was already formulating ideas for the novel which would eventually be entitled *Maggie - A Girl of the Streets*. Frank Norris was enrolled in the College of Letters at Berkeley and publishing articles and poetry. Theodore Dreiser was about to discover the literary world of Chicago; Hamlin Garland's *Main Travelled Roads* was published in 1891 and favourably impressed the young Dreiser. The 1890s in America were to produce an economic depression, the Chicago World's Fair, and see the beginnings of Naturalism as a potent literary force.

## **Chapter 4 - Beginnings of Naturalism in the New World**

"The Nineties - that sober period of American disillusion"- Vernon Parrington

The principal aim of this chapter will be to examine the origins of Naturalism in America and its early critical reception. Even though William Dean Howells and Henry James were not themselves naturalistic writers in any meaningful sense, much of the early part of this chapter looks at their critical and aesthetic views for the simple reason that the approval of these nineteenth-century giants of American letters was fundamentally important to the early naturalists. In many respects, Howells and James were sympathetic to the American naturalists, but would not extend that sympathy to a personal novelistic engagement with the naturalist cause. More important to both writers were concerns about the relationship between European and American realism and the way in which American fiction could be both a reflection of American society whilst retaining an aesthetic integrity with worldwide movements in the field of the arts. Howells, in particular, was primarily concerned with the establishment of a true American literary voice, whilst James's pre-occupations were more universal.

In this chapter and the following, there will be an analysis of aesthetic differences between American naturalistic fiction and that of its earlier European counterpart, with particular emphasis on the perceived conflict between romanticism and Naturalism. Whereas Zola and the French naturalists had tried to break with romanticism, Norris insists that these two terms are not mutually exclusive and that the romantic mode combined with realist perspective produce Naturalism. One particular notion will be explored, and that is the frequent assumption that American Naturalism arose solely, or even primarily, from the adoption of Zola's literary

theories and his fictional practice. In addition, in this chapter the journalism of Frank Norris and Stephen Crane is assessed for its relevance to their fiction, with special reference to their portrayals of the city and of slum dwellers. Slum fiction has frequently incorporated portrayals of degeneration and decline; the “decline plot” has already been discussed in relation to English Naturalism, and later in the chapter, there is a further discussion of its relevance to the American version.

America in the 1870s had its own well-established literary tradition in both prose and poetry, but was understandably going through a period of introspection. The psychological effects of the American Civil War on the nation were so great that post-bellum reaffirmations of an American literary voice were mostly focused on the consolidation of the triple themes of Union, democracy, and the definition of American identity. The writings of, *inter alia*, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Hawthorne were self-consciously directed at these specific concerns and each of these writers addressed these problems in different ways; very often obliquely or subversively. The questions later posed by Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature* (1949) were perplexing in the nineteenth century, and they remained unanswered even now:

It is not very easy to determine the point at which literature written in America ceased to be ‘colonial English’ and became an independent national literature. Is it the mere fact of political independence? Is it the national consciousness of the authors themselves? Is it the use of national subject matter and ‘local colour’? Or is it the rise of a definite national literary style? (52)

Political independence is simply a matter of legal definitions, but cultural independence is more difficult to define. “National consciousness,” “national subject matter,” and a “national literary style” are jointly and severally essential to

an independent national literature; these issues were being explored by the above-named authors and many others, and would be a recurrent theme in American letters well into the following century. As J. Pelham Edgar puts it, writing in 1933:

A desire to express America to herself had long been cherished, but this had been combined with a recognition of the superior value of the English product. With the new century this admission of the necessary inferiority of America's effort was definitely more faint, and the ambition of self-expression correspondingly stronger; but as yet there was no body of literature to substantiate the claim of independence. (Edgar 244)

At the same time, there was growing literary interest in the scientifically based deterministic philosophy which had come to dominate progressive European fiction. Schopenhauer's pessimism, Comte's positivism, and Darwin's evolutionary theories had steadily gained currency throughout the Western world and would more or less subtly play their respective parts in the development of serious American fiction, as they had in European writing. Moreover, Taine's positivist theories of literary expression and Spencer's sociological theories of fiction were, in many ways, more influential on the development of American realism and Naturalism than they were on the British novel of the time. This could be because their influence was felt somewhat later in America than it had been in Europe or may be due to the traditional British resistance to theorising.

The intriguing critical fiction that American naturalistic literature came into existence solely as a result of the French influence has become received wisdom. *Post ergo propter* has seldom been more frequently applied to a literary form, but the truth is more complex than an admission of one national literature simply emulating or imitating that of another. Both Taine and Spencer had a large and

enthusiastic American following and Spencer's reputation as a social Darwinist benefited from the proselytising of his American acolyte, John Fiske. However, it was Taine's application of Comte's positivism to a literary aesthetic that was to have the greatest effect; in *Howells and the Age of Realism* (1966), Everett Carter notes the following:

Hippolyte Taine took positivism and made it into a literary credo, and it was Taine's positivistic theory of the source and function of literary expression that became the basis of conscious American realism.

Taine was almost unknown in America before 1870. There had been a review of his work in 1861 when M.H. Harisse had summarized the latest developments in French criticism for the *North American Review*. (Carter 95)

Carter, then, presents the literary historian with several intriguing questions; given that Taine was not widely known in America before 1870, was realism before that time "unconscious," or was it not "American"? Alternatively, was there a "realism" that was not "consciously American"? The answer to this last question is almost certainly in the affirmative; realism, taken as a mode rather than as a genre, had still not provided writers with a satisfactory solution as to how Americanness was to be defined in literary terms. Another significant point regarding the above statement is that, in this context, "realism" must be taken to include Naturalism; similarly, George Becker thinks of "Naturalism" as a variant of realism or simply as Zolaesque phraseology to describe the same literary aim. The main thrust of Taine's thesis is that "to be a great artist, one must express one's own times, and the attitudes of one's own people" (Carter 95). In other words, in order to be a great artist the novelist is not only aware of current events, but must have an artistic and aesthetic



willingness to incorporate contemporary social issues into the novel. Thus, the artist must be prepared to assume a moral role, a role with which Howells had no problem; the problem arises with a later critical assessment of the supposed differences between Naturalism and realism. At its most fundamental level, literary realism assumes that there is a real, knowable world, the knowledge of which is either empirical or verifiable by corroboration, and it also demands that fictional representations be true to that knowable and verifiable world. Therefore, if the mid-nineteenth century American psyche was still geared to the idea that there were heroic frontiersmen who were pushing ever westward in order to tame the country, then fiction would quite rightly depict a nation steeped in such a mythology. Whilst the presence of the mythology can be verified, the myth itself remains what it is—a romantic myth. (Equally, as discussed in the previous chapter, the depiction in a naturalistic novel of an artist “starving in a garret” is still a realistic depiction of an artist living out the romantic myth.) At the same time, the settled East and mid-West would also have its own reality and its own mythology; Americans would have to accept a kind of national schizophrenia. There could not be a universally acceptable “Continentality” of American art whilst the country was so diverse; the Civil War had been a brutal and apt reminder of how deeply that diversity ran. Sectionalism was more than a definition of boundaries, it depicted separate cultures, and sectionalist writing portrayed, and often celebrated, those boundaries. In the next chapter there is a fuller discussion of how Norris and Dreiser tackled the problem of how Naturalism could be applied to regional writing whilst simultaneously looking outwards to wider issues, avoiding the introspection associated with sectionalism.

Naturalism, however, depends on so much more than local variations on the human condition; humanity, the naturalists believe, can be observed as a function in

a mechanistic universe, obeying certain universal rules. The rules cannot be changed to suit the locale, even though the author will inevitably write according to “*race, milieu, et moment*,” as Taine had put it. Characters in a novel, human “types,” should behave in observable ways which accord with the rules, and their various circumstances will determine their behaviour in a pattern which accords with what the author knows of human nature. Furthermore, however ugly or unseemly their behaviour, its representation would be excused by the truth of its depiction. Howells, like Zola, believed that a true representation of humanity would be artistically beautiful—that a “true novel,” to return to the Goncourts’ phrase, would be a “good” novel. According to Carter’s evaluation, by the mid-1870s Howells was already coming to the same conclusions as would be formulated in Zola’s “The Experimental Novel” in 1880:

The reason for this equivalence of truth and beauty, Howells believed, lay in the function of literature as the laboratory of man’s behavior, where a reader may watch an experiment in social relationships, and can find out what will happen, given certain personalities reacting to each other under certain conditions. [. . . ] Like the scientist, the novelist, Howells felt, ‘contributes his share to a thorough knowledge of groups of the human race under conditions which are full of inspiring novelty and interest.’

In this feeling, of course, he was elaborating and adapting to American conditions the basic ideas of Hippolyte Taine. And he continued to the end to feel that any philosophy of art must be based upon what men know of the laws of natural science. (101)

Thus, Howells is already in agreement with Zola, even if he found Zola's subject matter a little too gross for his refined East Coast tastes. In fact, George Santayana's scathing epithet "genteel tradition" seems most apposite when applied to Howells' approach to his own fiction. (To Howells's dismay, Santayana also characterised the "genteel tradition" as a type of effeminacy in American nineteenth century literature; as will be discussed below, this was something which had troubled both Howells and James.) The two most important ideas contained in Carter's assessment of Howells's philosophy are the "scientific method" and "American" conditions. These are two particular issues which, taken together, have a considerable impact on not only Howells's critical stance, but on the future of American Naturalism in practice and the critical perception of its genesis.

James had a rather more simplistic view of what was central to Naturalism's theoretical platform. For example, he believed, or affected to believe, that assiduous research and attention to detail constituted a naturalistic approach. As Michael Robertson notes:

As every student of James's career has observed, with *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Cassamassima* (1886) James deliberately turned to the mode of writing that we now term literary realism and that James thought of as "naturalism". As numerous critics have remarked, *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Cassamassima* fit, better than any of other of James's other works, the definitions we now use to describe the body of late nineteenth-century fiction known as realism. (38)

Robertson also remarks that James wrote to Thomas Sargeant Perry after visiting a prison to take notes for *The Princess Cassamassima* and described himself as "quite

the naturalist” (38). Whilst James may have thought of himself as such, Howells had no such illusions about his own writing.

Howells, among others, took Taine’s theoretical views on literary expression and the concept of the scientific method to be central to a realist aesthetic. By contrast, Zola believed that these two fundamentals were an integral part of a move away from the early realism of Balzac and Stendhal (via Flaubert) to what has since become known as Naturalism. It is axiomatic that Zola’s Naturalism primarily concerned itself with the condition of France rather than with mankind as a whole, and consequently it should be expected that American Naturalism, when it came, would do the same thing with respect to the “state of the Union”. However, during the period that Hippolyte Taine was influencing Howells and Zola, the writers who would do most for the cause of American Naturalism were barely infants; Frank Norris was born in 1870, one year before both Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser. A whole generation would have to come of age before America was to accept the social critique which the naturalistic aesthetic demanded of its practitioners, but which the New Criticism would regard as valueless in literary terms.

French and English naturalists had been enjoying varying degrees of success for some two decades, and in the 1890s it was almost inevitable that American writers would eventually adopt, adapt, and build on what seemed to be a relatively stable novelistic format, as had happened in the past. America still looked to Europe for the artistic lead, despite the fact that home-grown literary art from the time of Crèvecoeur and Phillis Wheatley had shown that there could be a distinctively American literary voice, albeit based on a European model. As the Victorian era unfolded, writers such as Poe, Whitman, Melville, and Mark Twain were defining that voice even further. What finally emerged, however, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, is that the French novel was having an unprecedented influence on

American fiction. The works of Dickens, it is true, had enjoyed considerable popularity in the United States following his promotional lecture tours, and there had been a resurgence of interest in his fiction in the 1890s. The American realists also greatly admired George Eliot's unsentimental prose for its stark, insightful portrayals. However, as the end of the nineteenth century approached, Americans started looking once again to their own authors, many of whom had been looking in turn to Europe, especially to France, for a modern mode of literary expression. As Norris remarked of American artists in one of his regular newspaper columns:

Hardy and adventurous enough on all other lines, disdainful of conventions, contemptuous of ancient custom, we yet lag behind in the arts—slow to venture from the path blazed long ago by Old World masters.

It is preëminently so in the fine arts. No sooner does an American resolve upon a career of painting, sculpture or architecture than straight he departs for Paris [ . . . ] and, his education finished, returns to propagate French ideas; French methods; and our best paintings today are more French than American; French in conception, in composition, in technique and treatment. (Pizer *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, 108)\*

Whilst Howells and James were undoubtedly the most powerful and influential men of letters in the latter part of the century, their own fiction now seemed more rooted in a Gilded Age tradition. Equally, as critics, they were aware of the beginnings of a new mode of fiction that was prepared to strip bare the harsh social realities of the fin-de-siècle. Norris, Crane, and Dreiser, all of whom had a

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\* Hereinafter referred to as "*Criticism*".

personal stake in taking realism to new heights, would be the new generation of writers who would lead American literature into the twentieth century. The untimely death of Crane in 1900 and that of Norris in 1902 almost certainly had a bearing on Dreiser's rise to prominence among this young triumvirate. Norris, as is well-documented, had already started on the final part of a planned trilogy at the time of his death; the first two of the three, *The Octopus* and *The Pit*, indicate that he had become a major force in American letters, and appeared destined for further literary greatness. Of the three authors, Frank Norris had the most refined and highly formulated aesthetic in that he took more interest in developing a theoretical perspective on the future of the American novel. He had honed his critical faculties and was well aware of European thought, having spent his late teenage years in France studying art and absorbing French literature, significantly that of Zola. However, in the early years of the nineteenth century's last decade the three young lions had yet to make their mark on American literature, and would have to seek critical acceptance from an older generation of critics. An important fact to note, however, is that these three did not constitute a "school" or a "movement"; indeed, they were not even friends.

Although James and Howells continued to be powerful voices in American literary criticism, they are two notable American writers whose awareness of, and critical attitude towards, Naturalism suggests that they deliberately chose to avoid it in their own fiction, as did certain English writers mentioned in the previous chapter. In 1896, Norris had famously described Howells's realism as the "real Realism. It is the smaller details of every-day life, [. . .] small passions, restricted emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an afternoon call, crises involving cups of tea" (*Criticism* 71). Whilst Howells and James were close contemporaries of the pioneering European naturalists, they displayed little desire to move away from the

aesthetic of the early realist tradition. The realism of Howells was a forerunner of much of the later, more gritty realism espoused by the early twentieth century writers, whereas James's European-influenced writing had an undoubted influence on the Modernists, whose own writing may be seen either as a response to the Jamesian novel or as a simple and natural progression. Nonetheless, Howells and James, whilst eschewing naturalistic tendencies in their own fiction, could scarcely ignore Naturalism's growing influence on American literature; Howells, in fact, became a champion of the American naturalist cause. Whilst this chapter focuses on the emergence of Norris, Crane and Dreiser, it is important to note the reaction of the most significant spokesmen of the earlier generation, as their approval and positive criticism would ensure that the younger writers received a fair hearing. To speak of "literary traditions" is only possible, of course, with the benefit of hindsight and at a critical distance from the literary period in question. The critic Donald Pizer has retrospectively divided American literary Naturalism into three "phases" which constitute a linear progression of the form and, taken together, become a tradition within American fiction.

It has now become a cliché that Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris be grouped together as the "first phase" of American naturalists, which is true enough in itself, as long as the definition of Naturalism in the American novel can accommodate three somewhat different aesthetic approaches to fiction. As Donald Pizer points out: "Each explores a different aspect of American life through his own imaginative response to his world rather than in accord with a pattern and philosophy established by Zola" (*Theory and Practice* 19). Moreover, as will be later discussed, the story of American Naturalism does not end with a relatively small group of naturalistic works of fiction, as it did in England. The impact of American naturalistic fiction was of greater importance to the development of the

American novel than was English Naturalism to the English novel. Where English fiction grudgingly acknowledges the presence of naturalistic influences, American writing positively celebrates the social realism which inheres in naturalistic fiction. There is no reason to conclude, however, that American social realism will mean the same thing as English social realism; as stated in a previous chapter, different cultures will have different interpretations of both the social and the real. Many commentators find it surprising that America became fertile ground for the sowing of the naturalist seed: the very country whose culture and ideology has always celebrated the residual worth of the individual became the environment which nurtured what was arguably the most successful and sophisticated exemplar of later naturalistic fiction. After all, Naturalism in its purest form is more focused on humans as types or “temperaments,” and is less concerned with the individual than with a broader view of humankind. However, as Ruland and Bradbury note, even when American authors wrote about specific regions of the United States or used certain regional settings, they were using these settings “not to celebrate the separate section but to question universal values through the specific case” (324). This perspective is seen in the methodology of most naturalistic authors in American fiction, but is not specific to Naturalism, of course. Dreiser’s biographer, Dorothy Dudley, prefaces her fictionalised account of Dreiser’s life (“A Novel of Facts”) with a simple epigram, the first line of which states: “The more specific the detail the more accurate the immensity it projects.” In other words, whilst America has always valued the individual, fiction which celebrates achievements of the individual uses that person’s world as a microcosm; the individual character then comes to represent an aspect of the human condition. This contrasts with the view of both Flaubert and Zola, who believed that fictional characters begin as “types” and that the novelist works from the general type to the specific character.



Ironically, Zola, as previously noted, was determined to break away from the Romantic tradition, personified by writers such as Hugo, whereas much American literature celebrated (and continues to celebrate) a Romantic view of the individual's ability to rise above the challenges of life, especially those associated with the vastness of the country. Thus, whilst some commentators may find the success of Naturalism in American literature puzzling, given the importance attached to individual worth, there is no reason why American writers should not be successful both as naturalists and as American writers of fiction. Frank Norris himself was adamant that Naturalism was a Romantic form and was convincing in his defence of this view, noting an important difference between Romanticism and sentimentality:

Let us at the start make a distinction. Observe that one speaks of Romanticism and not of sentimentalism. One claims that the latter is as distinct from the former as is that other form of art which is called Realism. Romance has often been put upon and overburdened by being forced to bear the onus of abuse that should by right fall to sentiment; but the two should be called very distinct, for a very high and illustrious place will be claimed for Romance, while sentiment will be handed down the scullery stairs. (*Criticism* 75)

This quotation is taken from "A Plea for Romantic Fiction," written for the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1901. Over five years earlier, Norris had written an article for the *San Francisco Wave* in which he describes Zola as a Romantic writer:

It is curious to notice how persistently M. Zola is misunderstood. How strangely he is misinterpreted even by those who conscientiously admire the novels of the "man of the iron pen." For most people Naturalism has a vague meaning. It is a sort of inner circle of realism—a kind of diametric opposite of romanticism, a

theory of fiction wherein things are represented “as they really are,” inexorably, with the truthfulness of a camera. This idea can be shown to be far from right, that Naturalism, as understood by Zola, is but a form of romanticism after all. (*Criticism* 71)

Thus, Norris, even at this early stage, is already setting out his template for American Naturalism and proposing an aesthetic which may be the key to the relative success and survival of the American version. However, what Norris appears to be doing is redefining romanticism (or Romanticism), which Zola had described as being a “collective fit of madness of a group of men”. On the other hand, Norris demonstrates how Zola’s writing itself could be open to a romantic interpretation. In “Zola as a Romantic Writer” Norris seeks to define Naturalism as being closer to romanticism than it is to realism and goes so far as to equate naturalistic fiction with the romantic novels of Hugo, a writer who had earned Zola’s particular disdain: “We have the same huge dramas, the same enormous scenic effects, the same love of the extraordinary, the vast, the monstrous, and the tragic” (*Criticism* 72). Some six years later the writer of “The Novel of Misery” makes the same point:

Throughout his career M. Zola has been an example of the persistence of the romantic movement. [. . .] In ‘Germinal’, ‘L’Assommoir’, and ‘La Débâcle’, for instance, has he not entirely followed the methods of Victor Hugo? There is the same unreal but effective personification of material objects—the cathedral in ‘Notre Dame’ and the tavern in ‘L’Assommoir’; the sea in ‘Les Travailleurs de la Mer’ and the mine in ‘Germinal’, or the railway engine in ‘La Bête Humaine’. (392)

Later in the article he finds that similarities in Norris's and Crane's work indicate a common ancestry:

As the passages relating to railway engines and wheatfields in 'The Octopus,' by a recent American novelist, seem to have been paraphrased from 'La Bête Humaine' and 'La Terre', so the style of Mr. Stephen Crane's earlier works appears to have been modelled upon *l'écriture artiste* of the De Goncourt [*sic*]. (412)

One major point that Norris fails to clarify in his discussion of Romanticism is the question of free will; Romanticism emphasises that the individual human can overcome obstacles by an exercise of free will, whereas Zola's Naturalism would deny this. Naturalism insists that man is always subject to forces beyond human control or volition, and that free will, under such circumstances, is denied. At the time of writing the earlier article, however, Norris had not yet completed his final draft of *McTeague*; it may be that his perspective was to shift slightly, but not significantly enough to recant, as may be seen from his later criticism. Norris had been describing a set of aesthetics which is common to both some naturalistic fiction and some romantic fiction, which justifies the conclusion that many Norris scholars have reached regarding his theoretical stance—that realism and romanticism are in dialectical opposition, with Naturalism providing a synthesis in the middle ground. However, one might find aesthetic similarities in many different genres or modes; grand themes and the "extraordinary" are common, after all, to any epic-length piece of literature, but these commonalities alone are surely not a foundation upon which to base a literary generalisation.

Norris was almost certainly using a definition of romanticism which was at odds with that of Zola's; Zola disliked Romanticism for its lack of scientific causal reality and for its lack of respect for the laws of probability. Although, as Norris

himself remarks, “terrible things must happen” in the naturalistic plot, they must be plausible—they must happen for a reason. When the modern reader comes across a piece of work by Frank Norris, the first impression received is that Norris was working with causal chains and that the human condition that he depicted was determined by heredity, environment, societal or economic pressures, or any combination of such determinants. In this regard, Norris was adhering to the ideals set out by both Taine and Zola, whilst simultaneously injecting an unmistakable American romanticism. Howells remarked that Norris “seemed to derive his ideal of the novel from the novels of Zola” (Cady 398) and when Howells first reviewed *McTeague* in 1899, his advice to the younger man was to “refine his art” and get more “beauty” into his work. However, shortly after Norris’s death in 1902, the “Dean of American Letters” felt constrained to write an effulgent paean to Norris’s career; there was a re-evaluation of *McTeague*: “I must own it greater than I have ever yet acknowledged it, and I do this now with the regret which I hope the critic is apt to feel for not praising enough when praise would have helped most” (Cady 401). *The Octopus*, published in the year preceding Norris’s death, earned Howells’s particular praise, who compared it with a classical epic: “It will not be suggesting too much for the story to say, that there is a kind of Homeric largeness in the play of passions moving it” (Cady 402). Each author, it seemed, respected the other, whilst agreeing to differ sometimes in the matter of interpretations of aesthetics. Nevertheless, Howells’s own aesthetic appears closer to that of Norris’s than to any of the other “first phase” naturalists.

A number of eminent critics, in addition to Norris, have remarked on the type of romanticism which Naturalism could be said to accommodate; Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin’s study of Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* labels the novel “A Naturalistic Romance” and in a short monograph she argues that Romanticism

and Naturalism can harmoniously co-exist. Most critics acknowledge that Jack London is a naturalistic writer, and the case made in *The Call of the Wild: A Naturalistic Romance* (1994) shows that American naturalistic fiction can be seen as having embraced a certain type of romanticism, but of an American variety rather than European.

Thus, despite some critical and social opposition, by the end of the nineteenth century, a distinctively American version of Naturalism flourished in American literature; the reasons are complex, but explainable in both literary terms and sociologically. It has frequently been suggested that Naturalism, and American Naturalism in particular, succeeds in the urban environment. A general survey reveals that the majority of naturalistic plots are set in large centres of population, although Norris's *The Octopus* (1901) is a notable exception, as are many of London's works. In "The Loss of Innocence" Brian Lee and Robert Reinders describe Naturalism as being a "new language" which would replace the old realism, an idiom particularly suited to depicting urban problems: "It explored the detail of city life, the workings of heredity and environment, the sense of social struggle" (220-21). One of the most significant factors in American Naturalism's success, therefore, has to be the rapid rise of the urban population; by the end of the nineteenth century the growth of the urban population of the United States of America had overtaken that of the rural areas. The influx of immigrants from Europe had a marked impact on the large urbanisations of New York and Chicago in particular, and the slums of these two great cities were to provide the settings for many of America's greatest naturalistic fiction. A certain type of European (especially British) Naturalism has been categorised as "slum fiction," and with some justification, given the predominance of its subject matter. As slum fiction, in a strict realist sense, cannot be written without the pre-existence of slums, American

writers would have to find some slums of their own. These were not long in coming: as the immigrants were largely at the mercy of those who owned property in the big cities where most of the employment was to be found, slum landlords came into their own in the tenements of New York and Chicago. The “huddled masses” in teeming tenements provided an endless source of a compressed block of humanity which could be studied by those who wished to view a distillation of working-class humanity. The slums provided the ideal opportunity to put the new American underclass under the microscope; the last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed an emergence of a new breed of realist authors who were willing and able to apply the European initiative and do what novelistically had to be done.

In 1890 Jacob Riis published *How the Other Half Lives*, a best-seller which documented slum life in photographs and prose. This book introduced a new aesthetic into American art and letters, a starkly unsentimental survey of an aspect of American life, illustrated with photographs that were as artistically beautiful as their subject was unlovely. In the meantime, a new kind of journalistically inspired fictional prose came into its own as American Naturalism. James and Howells were dismayed at the trend, as each saw journalism and reportage as a threat to the higher art of the novelist; in this attitude there are unmistakable Arnoldian resonances. As Michael Robertson points out:

Post-Civil War literary realists like Howells and James faced a situation unknown to antebellum writers: the novel and the newspaper shared both subject matter and narrative technique. At the same time, the institutions of journalism and literature and the roles of reporter and novelist were drawing closer. (18)

Robertson shows that both Howells and James endeavoured in some their fiction of the 1880s to insist on differences between journalists and novelists. Howells did so

in *A Modern Instance* (1882) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and James in *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Cassamassima*, both of which were published in 1886, and both of which, incidentally, James considered to be “naturalistic”. Whilst neither author denied that literary realism and reportage had certain similarities, they still remained unhappy with what was happening to literature:

James’s and Howells’s fiction records with varying degrees of fear and resignation their recognition of the growing importance of the importance of journalism in American culture and the increasing links between novel and newspaper, artist and reporter. Generally hostile to journalism, they used their fiction as a bulwark, shoring up the high culture’s defenses against the encroachments of mass journalism. (54)

One concern shared by both Howells and James is that journalism was seen as “masculine” in nature, and that literature was seen as “feminine,” or, at least effeminate. The new generation of novelists, however, appeared unafraid to have a foot in each camp.

The naturalistic novelists were often called “muckrakers,” an epithet that had been applied to certain social historians and commentators of the same period, notably Henry Demarest Lloyd, Lincoln Steffens, and Riis himself. It was Theodore Roosevelt who originally used the name, and more recently it has become synonymous with tabloid journalism. However, in the context of the times it had a less flippant meaning: the muck that was being raked was that of political corruption and social evils brought about by the abuse of capitalistic power, not the peccadilloes of soap-stars and footballers. Applying the epithet “muckrakers” to naturalist authors is consistent with the European criticisms of Naturalism, in that those who wrote naturalistic fiction were dealing, as Henry James said in a letter to

Howells, with “unclean things” and purveying, according to others, a “literature of the sewer”. Stephen Crane led the way in American slum fiction with *Maggie - A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and with his journalistic short pieces about the Bowery, such as “An Experiment in Misery”. Crane’s endeavours as a “slum reporter” are chronicled in Michael Robertson’s *Stephen Crane, Journalism, and the Making of Modern American Literature* in which Crane’s reportage is seen as an important development towards bringing his later fiction closer to real life. (Robertson emphasises, however, that drafts of *Maggie* were written before Crane wrote his newspaper articles). In terms of early successful American naturalistic novels, very few were directly comparable with English slum fiction, with the notable exception of *Maggie* with its focus on a working-class girl.

Industrialisation and the production line meant that unskilled workers, especially women, were a source of cheap, unskilled labour. The factory women thus had an income of their own which gave them a measure of independence, especially if they were single; however, the possession of an independent income also deceived them into believing that they could afford goods beyond their means. (Marxist critics describe this type of self-deception as a “false consciousness.”) The lure of a regular wage attracted many women into the cities, but once there they found that the cost of living was relatively higher. Nevertheless, most had a disposable income hitherto unknown to them and the city stores were a magnet to the working girls. Thus, another element of fantasy had entered the consciousness of the working class. This is aptly illustrated in *Maggie*: Maggie Johnson meets Pete, whom she idealises for his apparent sophistication. In fact, he is a violent, uneducated product of the slums, but possessed of more worldliness than Maggie, who looks upon him as her means of escape from the life which she has hitherto



known. After meeting him, she becomes more aware of her own humble appearance:

She began to note, with more interest, the well-dressed women she met on the avenues. She envied elegance and soft palms. She craved those soft adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women.

(Katz 31)

Pete also took her to the theatre, where she would build fantasies of an escape from her life of deprivation, (another false consciousness) believing that her salvation lay in waiting for a theatrical miracle:

Maggie always departed with raised spirits from the showing places of the melodrama. She rejoiced at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually surmounted the wealthy and wicked. The theatre made her think. She wondered if the culture and refinement she had seen imitated, perhaps grotesquely, by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory. (Katz 35)

This passage demonstrates one particularly important point: Maggie has a degree of self-awareness. She knows that as a girl from a tenement who works in a factory she will find life hard and is not so deluded that she envisages a simple escape. On the other hand, she is not sufficiently versed in Crane's world that she can envisage the spiral of degeneration which the author has planned for her. Although she must know that the chances of her succeeding in life are slim, her only hope lies in a measure of self-deception, to wish for some *deus ex machina* to appear in the melodrama which is her life. Alerted by the title, both the reader and the author can foresee her fate, but Maggie cannot. This type of dramatic irony is, as many critics

have noted, a recurrent theme in naturalistic fiction. However, as Malcolm

Bradbury notes of Dreiser:

Dreiser takes up a position of personal implication; he is a part of the naturalist world. He delights in the struggle, moves emotionally along with Carrie, shares many of her wants, and looks with her at the alluring material possibilities of the great dream theatre of city life. His characters, too, generally understand that they are *within* a naturalist world, and respond to its laws of energy; they know their own shortage of self. (*The Modern American Novel* 23-24)

Seen in this light, Dreiser's aesthetic attitude to his characters contrasts with that of both Norris and Crane, each of whom, in the works discussed in this chapter, maintains a more dispassionate, narratorial distance from the "victims" of the naturalistic world. Dreiser, as will be discussed in the next chapter, gives the impression of having a closer relationship with the world inhabited by his characters than that of Crane and Norris with theirs. In these early novels, Crane and Norris are more clinical observers than is Dreiser, which is unsurprising, given their more formal theoretical attitude to fiction.

Although Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) has the eponymous central character living in meagre circumstances when she first arrives in Chicago, her life, and those of the other principal characters are not the lives of slum dwellers. Only when Hurstwood, the second of Carrie's lovers and the most fully developed character of the novel, finally degenerates into a Bowery bum does the reader glimpse life at the bottom of the New York social heap. The effect is heightened by the contrast between Hurstwood's previous life and what he has become; the horrors of the slums are seen through the eyes of someone not born to such a life, but one who has degenerated and sunk to the level of a slum-dweller. The poignancy of such an

Aristotelian fall from grace emphasises the degradation in which so many slum-dwellers were fated to live out their pitiful existence. However, it is not until the twentieth century that American “slum fiction” really comes into its own, with novels such as Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) and later works such as James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* trilogy—eventually published in book form from 1932-1935. Hamlin Garland’s *Jason Edwards: An Average Man* (1892), criticised at the time for its overt Marxist polemic, is set in part in the slums of Boston, which is in itself a useful contrast to the Boston of Howells’ *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, written only seven years previously. In fact, the catalogue of genuine slum fiction in American writing of the late nineteenth century is notable for its lack of quantity. There are novels which chronicle ghetto life, such as Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl* (1896), but remarkably few novels about the immigrant experience written by immigrants themselves. There are many possible and plausible explanations for this, not least of which is that the first immigrants themselves did not have confidence in a sufficient command of English to write publishable works. The writers of English slum fiction were not themselves from the slums and very few had even been slum-dwellers, with the exception of Dickens and Gissing, although others, (notably Morrison in journalistic guise), undoubtedly investigated conditions at close quarters. Stephen Crane, on several journalistic missions, did spend time among the “Bowery bums” and with prostitutes and opium addicts in the Tenderloin, an area described by Michael Robertson as “New York City’s Gilded Age centre of entertainment and vice” (109), but whether the result is fiction or straight reportage is hard to determine. The results of his research are quite diverse; as Joseph Katz remarks in his Introduction to *The Portable Stephen Crane*: “Crane’s slum fiction offers an extended example of his conscious attempts to remake the world to his own ends. It is not all of one kind” (x). Katz illustrates the diversity of Crane’s slum fiction by

noting the distinction between describing and narrating the stories of the inhabitants of New York's East Side, and "representing the viewpoint" of temporary slum dwellers and transients and those who are "slum crawlers who wish merely to experience the quality of life at the depths" (x). This becomes an important distinction in naturalistic slum fiction; like Gissing, Crane elicits little sympathy for the tenement dwellers and never romanticises poverty. Crane made the following comments in a letter to Catherine Harris in 1896:

In a story of mine called "An Experiment in Misery" I tried to make plain that the root of Bowery life is a sort of cowardice. Perhaps I mean a lack of ambition or to willingly be knocked flat and accept the licking. [. . .] I had no other purpose in writing "Maggie" than to show people as they seem to me. If that be evil, make the most of it.

(Katz 2)

In aesthetic terms, slum fiction provides the most complete congruence of European and American Naturalism. In Gissing's *The Nether World*, the narrator describes both the locale and the inhabitants of Shooter's Gardens—a slum "like any other slum; filth rottenness, evil odours, possessed these dens of superfluous mankind." Nevertheless, continues the narrator, "here was independence, that is to say the liberty to be as vile as they pleased. How they came to love vileness, well, that is quite another matter, and shall not for the present concern us" (*Nether World* 74). In each of the above examples the author reveals a lack of sympathy for the slum dwellers, even though Crane often describes them as "victims." However, both Gissing and Crane are of the opinion that the slum-dwellers willingly accept poverty and degrading conditions without making an attempt to lift themselves out of their misery. The question of sympathy for the characters in this type of fiction divides critics, who appear to be uncertain as to what constitutes "sympathy". In a

not altogether favourable review of *Maggie*, Norris compares the plot and subject matter to Zola's *L'Assommoir*, Morrison's *Tales of Mean Streets*, and to *The Nether World*, but finds that "there is a certain lack of sympathy apparent. [. . .] His people are types, not characters. [. . .] With him it is the broader, vaguer, *human* interest that is the main thing, not the smaller details of a particular phase of life" (*Criticism*, 166). Paradoxically, in his 1995 introduction to *McTeague* Jerome Loving makes a similar comment about Norris's attitude towards both *McTeague* and his wife, Trina, each of whom, as will be discussed later in this chapter, are depicted as victims:

For Norris, it appears, heredity and environment were barriers mainly for the poor, not the middle and upper classes in America. It was not, as it was for Samuel Butler, the way of *all* flesh. Instead, Norris's naturalism is informed by the social prejudices of his day [. . .]

Norris, then, was a selective naturalist, but perhaps because he felt little or no compassion for his characters, he was an even 'purer' or more objective naturalist than Zola himself, who does show pity for his characters, certainly more for Gervaise in *L'Assommoir* than Norris shows for Trina. (xxvi-xxvii)

Louis Budd disagrees in general terms, however:

Naturalism can be described as taking a huge and aggressive stride in compassion toward characters whom novelists had still cheated out of a squarely respectful hearing, such as the illiterate, the stupid, the crudely violent, or the unreflective, and toward characters—the groups were often assumed to merge—of the lowest social classes. (qtd. in Pizer *McTeague* n.4, 314)

This assortment of critics, Gissing and Norris from the nineteenth century, Loving and Budd writing a hundred years later, is far from comprehensive, but it seems clear that they cannot each be applying the same criteria when defining either “sympathy” or “compassion”. However, it is not necessary for naturalist authors to be preoccupied with showing the “victims” in a sympathetic light or with suggesting solutions to social ills; rather, their duty is merely to report and record them. Likewise, the compassionate author is fulfilling his purpose if he faithfully reports a condition of society. Although Zola had described the novelist’s task as somehow “regulating” life and society, that responsibility stops short of recommending alternatives, cures, or plans of action; it is enough, it is suggested, that the ills of society should be brought to general attention. Lars Åhnebrink interprets the naturalists’ justification for this: “The naturalistic novel should not satirize nor preach, but only describe human life objectively; the naturalist should draw no conclusions because the conclusions were implicit in the material” (25). This abrogation of further responsibility has led some critics to regard Naturalism as a literary aesthetic with no moral purpose, but opinion on literary morality has always been divided. Vernon Parrington described Naturalism as being “a child of nineteenth century thought—offspring of Darwin, Marx, Comte, Taine” (323), in other words, primarily scientific and analytical, whereas Åhnebrink says that for Zola “the purpose was predominantly social and humanitarian. [. . .] [He] had a reformer’s zeal. He believed that society was responsible for all the misfortunes that befell the French people” (25).

One of the unfortunate misconceptions that arises from describing a novelist as “detached” or “scientific” is that the novelist has no aesthetic or moral interest in the outcome of events. As the quotation from Åhnebrink illustrates, this was not the case. Although Zola, Norris, Crane, Gissing, and many others contrived to avoid

moral judgements on individual characters, their fiction was largely concerned with the depiction of societal evils. Once again, critics seem to be divided as to what constitutes a moral judgement; the individual characters are not there to be judged, but there is an implicit comment on a society that allows or causes the character's downfall. Simply to point out that a particular malaise is at the root of a social problem is, in and of itself, a moral judgement. The aesthetic comes from a truthful depiction of society's problems in a work of literary art; this general aesthetic dominates and defines the literary Naturalism of all cultures. As George Becker points out, Engels himself did not propose that novelists should supply a solution to the social problems highlighted in a novel:

He [Engels] believes that "a socialist-biased novel fully achieves its purpose [. . .] if by consciously describing the real mutual relations, breaking down conventional illusions about them, it shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, instils doubt as to the eternal character of the existing order, although the author does not offer any definite solution or does not even line up openly on any particular side." [Letter to Minna Kautsky, November 26, 1885] (Becker 483)

Few, if any, American naturalist authors were committed Marxists, but they embraced, at least partially, an aesthetic which showed a commitment to social realism. To show compassion for the underclasses, however, does not include enlisting sympathy for those who are too lethargic, lazy, or unwilling to help themselves. Addressing society's ills entailed, for the naturalist writer as artist, drawing the reader's attention to the existence to those ills and putting them in a social context.

One of society's afflictions, as many Victorian writers described it, was moral degeneration—they believed that industrialisation, urbanisation, and

capitalistic values were root causes of a national decline in moral values.

Alcoholism, prostitution, and physical degeneracy were among the evils symptomatic of a societal malaise; the literary depiction of such degeneracy is often referred to as the “decline plot,” although some commentators distinguish between “degeneration” and “declension”.\*

The decline plot is a frequent feature in American naturalistic fiction and whilst degeneration of the individual takes many forms not all degenerates become ostensible failures. For example, in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, the eponymous Carrie Meeber becomes morally degenerate but enjoys a successful career, whereas George Hurstwood degenerates socially, morally, and physically. On the train, Carrie has met the first of a series of three lovers, a travelling salesman called Drouet. After she is settled in Chicago, he shows her that there is more to life than simply working and paying the rent and introduces her to the temptations of the big city. She is seduced by the goods on display in the big department stores and by the opulence of Chicago life, in many ways reflecting earlier naturalistic novels such as Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* and Gissing’s *Eve’s Ransom*. In these novels women are seen not only as consumers, but also as dupes of the capitalist system, in that they are led to believe that the goods on display are easily available to them. On one level, this is true, but the women have to pay a heavy price—one which frequently involves a moral compromise. George Hurstwood is the manager of Hannah and Hogg’s, a respectable and successful saloon and a meeting-place for local businessmen; there he is introduced to Carrie by Drouet, the man she met on the train journey to Chicago and who became Carrie’s first lover. Hitherto, Hurstwood has led a comfortable middle-class life in the suburbs; he has a son who contributes nothing to the household expenses, and his daughter, encouraged by her mother, spends

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\* See Trotter *The English Novel in History* 111-141.



extravagantly. Hurstwood feels that his family is leading a pampered existence, which he can ill afford, and resents their ever growing demands on his income. Finally, Mrs. Hurstwood sues him for divorce and most of his assets, at which point Hurstwood decides to pursue Carrie, with whom he has fallen in love. An opportunity to steal \$10,000 arises through a bizarre set of coincidences, starting with a drinking session with some customers. Although Hurstwood later returns most of the money, his degeneration starts at this point. By contrast, Carrie begins her climb to success by abandoning her moral principles and thus, as Malcolm Bradbury points out, “her apparent ‘downfall’ is actually her energetic ascent” (*Modern American Novel* 23). In other words, Carrie, having been figuratively seduced by the display of material wealth, discovers that allowing herself to be physically seduced gives her fiscal power, as long as she maintains an attitude of propriety. Far from being an innocent, naïve waif like Crane’s Maggie, Dreiser’s heroine uses her sexuality to exploit others to her own ends. By the end of *Sister Carrie* the reader’s sympathies lie more with Hurstwood than with Carrie, who finally emerges as cold and self-centred. Hurstwood, like Maggie, is depicted as a victim of a society which places a higher value on appearances than on moral codes.

Frank Norris’s *McTeague* is one of the most frequently offered examples of undisputed American Naturalism. Ruland and Bradbury, among others, cite this novel as “the purest example of Zola-esque naturalism America would produce” (230). However, this assessment begs the question of what other kind of Naturalism might have been possible at this early stage in the evolution of the form, but opens up the possibility that American Naturalism eventually became something other than Zolaesque, which it undoubtedly did. Lars Åhnebrink has no doubt about the origins and genesis of *McTeague*:

As is evident from [the] outline, the novel adheres rather closely to the naturalistic pattern. It is, perhaps, the most important American novel of the nineties which employs *in extenso* a naturalistic technique. *McTeague*, modelled extensively on *Thérèse Raquin* and *L'Assommoir*, is naturalistic in theme, subject matter, treatment, and ideas. (115)

Åhnebrink begins this assessment of *McTeague*'s literary roots somewhat cautiously, but the last sentence of the quoted passage can leave no doubt as to how Åhnebrink would categorise Norris's influences. The eponymous hero is a dentist who has ambitions beyond his reach, relatively humble though those ambitions may be. *McTeague* becomes a social and moral degenerate, whilst Trina degenerates from being a loving wife to a parsimonious harridan. At the beginning of the novel, *McTeague* seems like a dull but well-meaning fellow; he is living the American Dream, moving up the social ladder by changing his profession from miner to that of dentist. However, he has a simplistic view of what constitutes success; he envies the dentist who has a giant gilt tooth hanging above his "dentist's parlor" and becomes obsessive about becoming sufficiently successful to indulge in similar ostentation. In other words, his idea of success is based solely on a display of wealth—the dentist who has earned enough to buy a gilt tooth to hang above his parlour is somehow a more successful dentist—professional excellence is not in the equation. Gold is a recurrent symbol in the novel, a motif which Parrington categorises as both Romantic and overcooked:

An exaggeration that is almost Dickens-like, with its warping singleness. The gold tooth, the \$5,000, Trina's twenty-dollar gold pieces, the imaginary gold-plate of Maria Macapa, the absurd canary

in the gilt cage, the discovery of the gold mine. The wonder is that he didn't give Trina gold hair instead of black. (331)

By contrast, Walter Benn Michaels' *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* can seize upon this fixation with gold to show that Naturalism conforms to his New Historicist, Foucauldian critique of fiction as part of an economically-determined cultural construct: the text is culturally bound to the American economy and the debate over the gold standard. Somewhere between these two extremes is the perfectly acceptable naturalistic determinant of greed on the one hand, and a Veblenesque depiction of the desire to display achievement through the medium of gold-coloured objects.

McTeague lives simply and within his means; for example, he drinks "steam beer" as opposed to more expensive brews. He dreams only of the day when he can become a respected member of San Francisco society, the symbol of which would be the golden tooth:

Just outside his window was his signboard—a modest affair—that read: 'Doctor McTeague. Dental Parlors. Gas Given'; but that was all. It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive. He would have it some day, on that he was resolved; but as yet such a thing was far beyond his means. (7)

Once again, the character is realistically assessing his chances of a display of success. McTeague knows that the gold tooth is, for the moment, beyond his reach and is aware that his status is not yet sufficiently elevated to aspire to such a display of conspicuous consumption. The reader is more aware of the character's

limitations than is the character: with classical irony, the author telegraphs the reader that the character is in danger of aspiring to greater heights than those to which he can realistically lay claim. As Yves Chevrel notes, McTeague is only one of “a vast gallery of naturalist heroes who seem branded by failure, one way or another” (“une vaste galerie de héros naturalistes qui paraissent marqués par l’échec, d’une façon ou d’une autre” (101).

McTeague is consistently described in physical terms and much is made of his strength, but also of his stupidity. From the first few pages of the narrative, the Darwinist reader is also alerted to a further potential stumbling block in the path to Mac’s success, one of which McTeague himself is not aware. “For thirteen days of each fortnight his father was a hard-working shift-boss of the mine. Every other Sunday he became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol” (6). Later in the novel, McTeague will himself be described in similar terms, and his return to the mining camps whilst on the run for Trina’s murder confirms his atavistic return to type. Throughout the narrative it becomes apparent to reader that Mac cannot escape his heredity; similarly, Trina’s parsimony and later avarice are seen as part of hers. Trina is Swiss-German and much is made of her “trim little habits” and “penurious ancestors”.

In the early part of the novel, the Sieppe family is the butt of much crude humour; the child August, who wets his pants in the theatre, is constantly referred to as “Owgooste” to remind the reader how foreigners pronounce names and to emphasise Trina’s “otherness”. This otherness goes part way to explaining her decline. In “Loss, Habit and Obsession: The Governing Dynamic of *McTeague*” (Pizer *McTeague* 343-356) Barbara Hochman has pointed out that Trina’s “habits” and the lessons of her “penurious ancestors” are inherited characteristics, but these alone, however, do not explain her descent into obsessive, and ultimately fatal

miserliness. What is more likely, as Hochman suggests, is that Trina feels threatened by McTeague's slovenly ways; the fear of losing the order in her life, rather than the possibility of any pecuniary gain, drives her to obsession. Trina's inherited insistence on orderliness and McTeague's inherited predisposition to alcohol-induced violence are used in combination by Norris to explain how Trina's heredity has conspired with that of McTeague's to form a disastrous liaison. However, there are certain respects in which it would not be prudent simply to pick out heredity as the villain of the piece. Trina's decline is the result of a series of affronts to a racially inherited set of characteristics, whereas Mac's downfall, in Darwinian terms, ascribable to a diathesis inherited from one parent. In fact, Mac only becomes villainous through drink when he is nursing a grievance. In other words, there has to be an outside stimulus coupled with the already present inherited flaw; the flaw is suppressed in the same manner in which most social humans consciously suppress anti-social behaviour.

Norris labours the point of McTeague's stupidity to the extent that the reader can be left in absolutely no doubt as to why his anti-hero will come to a bad end, almost to the point that the reader feels guilty about anticipating some sort of disaster befalling someone whose principal failing is that of being a simpleton. Likewise, it is no surprise to the reader when Norris's McTeague exhibits the violent side of his nature, as the author has from the outset emphasised the character's physical attributes and ironically informed the reader that "McTeague's mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man" (7). However, as the novel progresses, the reader becomes aware that there is indeed something very vicious about the man—he is capable of enormous violence. Later in the novel the narrator tells a different tale, when McTeague and his old rival Marcus Schouler have a fight and Marcus bites McTeague's ear:

The brute that in McTeague lay so close to the surface leaped instantly to life, monstrous, not to be resisted. He sprang to his feet with a shrill and meaningless clamour, totally unlike the bass of his ordinary speaking tones. It was the hideous yelling of a hurt beast, the squealing of a wounded elephant. He framed no words; in the rush of high-pitched sound that issued from his wide-open mouth there was nothing articulate. It was something no longer human; it was rather an echo from the jungle.

Sluggish and slow to anger on ordinary occasions, McTeague when finally aroused became another man. His rage was a kind of obsession, an evil mania, the drunkenness of passion, the exalted and perverted fury of the Berserker, blind and deaf, a thing insensate.

(181)

In this description of McTeague, Norris uses animal imagery and crude psychoanalysis to convey the unreasoning, animalistic, reactions exhibited by this gentle giant when in a situation of extreme violence. However, the most significant phrase in this passage is that the “brute” in man lies “so close to the surface”; Zola had already stated this in the title of *La Bête Humaine*. In many ways, Norris overstates the naturalist position, but with the best of intentions; after the first few pages of *McTeague* the reader knows that the eponymous central character is exhibiting the characteristics of an animal. Norris’s posthumously published novel *Vandover and the Brute* (1914) takes this theme further; the novel won the admiration of Jack London, who sent a telegram to Norris’s brother on its publication:

VANDOVER AND THE BRUTE IS FRANK NORRIS FROM A  
TO Z IN IT IS ALL HIS RIPE PROMISE WHICH HE SO

SPLENDIDLY FULFILLED VANDOVER AND THE BRUTE  
 WAS TWENTY YEARS AHEAD OF ITS TIME AND TODAY IT  
 IS JUST IN ITS TIME ALL LOVERS OF FRANK NORRIS WILL  
 HAIL IT WITH DEEPEST SATISFACTION - Telegram to Charles  
 G. Norris April 15<sup>th</sup> 1914 (Hendricks 121)

London seems to be endorsing Norris's use of Zolaesque themes of man's bestial nature as a key to understanding what lies beneath the surface of humankind's apparent evolutionary sophistication, a technique much used by London himself.

Early in the novel, McTeague is described as having "all the strength of a crude and primitive man" (23) and he saw himself as "so coarse, so enormous, so stupid" (42). This is yet a further irony, as McTeague thinks of himself in such terms only in comparison to Trina's refinement or when comparing himself to "some finer-grained man"; he remains unaware of the potential consequences of these shortcomings. His aspirations, therefore, are such that they will tempt him to overreach, even though he is quite happy to enjoy simple pleasures and has no ambition for great wealth for its own sake. He merely seeks the appearance of being successful on his own terms. It is almost as if McTeague is, like Crane's Maggie Johnson, acknowledging that he has no right to aspire to greater things than circumstances will allow; each of these characters could be happy with a limited amount of success. To a certain degree, the naturalist author is depicting the victims as having a sense that they are stuck in a situation where too much ambition could be dangerous, or that the wish to better themselves must be tempered by an awareness that life will not offer easy solutions. The irony is that whilst their aspirations may be relatively humble, to have aspirations of any kind is presumptuous, as the forces and determinants in their life will direct what happens, irrespective of what the characters may personally desire. To a large extent, the

tragic aspects of these humble lives is that greatness is not sought, but that even limited success is thwarted by environment, society, or heredity. The rapidly changing world meant a change in both environment and society; advances in mechanisation and transport meant that the old agrarian life and cottage industries were giving way to a more mobile, city-based society, which brought a new set of problems and determinants. American Naturalism would have to show that it had the wherewithal to deal literarily with an increasingly urban, industrialised, capitalistic country; a world in which the robber barons dictated the pace of progress and in which city landlords and factory owners would prescribe the living and working conditions of a large proportion of the populace.

Norris, Crane, and Dreiser were showing a willingness to tackle unheroic themes, to use the decline plot and degenerative behaviour in the depiction of an ailing society, and to write about alcoholics, criminals, and prostitutes; to portray domestic violence, family murders, and the failure of the American Dream. This type of subject matter was moving inexorably away from the genteel tradition of nineteenth-century realism and preparing America to face a new reality.

In conclusion, American literature at the turn of the century has three relatively young authors poised to make an indelible impact. Three first novels, *McTeague*, *Sister Carrie*, and *Maggie*, taken together, have already signalled a new direction in serious American fiction.\* The different treatments, characterisations, locales, plots and subject matter, mean so much less than the similarities of form. Each of the authors has set out to write an “American” novel—the locales of California, Chicago, and New York are central to the plots; the accuracy of description of places and the attention to historical detail are an integral part of the

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\* *McTeague* had already been completed when *Moran of the Lady Letty* was published in 1898.



novels. The characters are not simply superimposed on a locational backdrop; they are part of a total picture in which their actions are conditioned by their immediate environment. In addition, the reader sees these characters in a broad American cultural context, going to music-halls, the popular theatre, the opera, dingy drinking-halls and fine restaurants; they go window-shopping, visit leisure-parks, ride street-cars and take trans-continental train journeys. In short, the central characters in naturalistic works are portrayed as ordinary Americans doing things that other ordinary Americans are doing; they are not eccentrics or human oddities cut off from the real world—it is only their temperament that makes them behave differently from those around them. The manner of their portrayals and the use of *milieu* in the plots discussed above provide a useful contrast with the Gilded Age realism which had preceded the early naturalists.

Throughout this chapter, there has been much discussion of the attitudes of Howells and James to the question of a “new” American literature, one which could help define an exclusively American literary identity. Whilst they had each contributed immeasurably to defining and refining an American approach to realism, they demonstrated a palpable unwillingness to fully embrace slum fiction, unpleasant subject matter, or mankind’s animalistic nature; in other words, they were still part of the “genteel tradition”. These lacunae contributed to the inability of their literature to paint a full picture of the human condition whilst locating it in an American context; American Naturalism in its formative stages appears to have succeeded to a much greater extent.

In the next chapter, Norris and Dreiser’s different approaches to further refining their art will be discussed in more depth. In the early years of the twentieth century American literature takes an irreversible and unmistakable step forward; an

examination of its development into a national literature with its own aesthetic will follow be a subject for the following two chapters.

## **Chapter 5 - Norris and Dreiser**

“It almost seems that with few exceptions we have waited for European sanction before daring to enjoy our own originals” - Dorothy Dudley.

The intention of this chapter is to examine more closely the aesthetic and philosophical aspects of the writings of Frank Norris and those of the early fiction of Theodore Dreiser, paying special attention to *The Octopus* and *Sister Carrie*. At the same time as discussing their literary approach to dealing with Americanness, equal importance will be attached to discussing their naturalistic fiction as a commentary on the broader human condition. However, there are times when a discussion of the “American Novel” clashes with a general discussion of the aims of Naturalism; New Critics, in particular, devalue the social criticism and commentary which is central to naturalistic fiction, thus reducing its artistic value and integrity to a similar degree.

From a slightly different perspective, Lionel Trilling, as discussed below, claims that liberal and Progressive criticism has overvalued Dreiser’s contribution to American literature by emphasising the value of social commentary in the novel, rather than concentrating solely on its literariness. Other critics have said that the “sordid” themes often found in Naturalism do not reflect an American reality, but are “European” in origin. However, the naturalistic trajectory is not aimed at local issues alone, even though both Taine and Spencer were at pains to emphasise the necessity for writers to write whereof they knew; later in this chapter it will be shown that both Norris and Dreiser, in the two works under scrutiny, comply with these prescriptive demands and manage to avoid the frequent accusation of parochialism that often besets regionalism, sectionalism, and local colour writing.

In terms of naturalist methodology, the human condition is observed and remarked upon by examining local issues or a select group of central characters, then applying a wider interpretation and inviting the reader to draw the intended conclusion. “True” novels, in the sense which has already been applied by the Goncourts to Realism and Naturalism, frequently employ what in philosophy is referred to as the “weak inductive argument” to show that a certain type of character in a certain set of circumstances is likely (rather than certain) to react in certain ways; the naturalist novelist posits a mechanistic universe in which the plot and story conform to its rules. The “truth” in “true” novels is generated by the author’s fidelity to what has been observed in the verifiable world. Given realist principles and practice, the novelist should not invent a serendipitous outcome, but adhere strictly to laws of probability, (although the contentious ending of *McTeague* may be a notable exception). In this, of course, the naturalists were not alone; Hamlin Garland, for example, agreed with the approach, but preferred to call himself a “veritist,” maintaining a regional approach rather than one which dealt in “universal truths”. Therefore, whilst Norris and Dreiser were using regional or sectional issues to illustrate a larger point, writers such as Garland were writing specifically about certain aspects of American life itself.

In *Sister Carrie* and *The Octopus* respectively, Dreiser and Norris used real events and based many of their characters on actual people. Dreiser, in particular, drew on his own family members and certain episodes in their lives for some of the events and characters in *Sister Carrie* (as he did in much of his other fiction). The result, however, is not reportage or “journalistic fiction,” but fiction of a kind which demonstrates to the reader how the laws of Naturalism have been applied to certain characters and situations. The author’s knowledge of the world and human nature

mediates the outcome of events; however, despite Flaubert's tortured quest for total objectivity, the author's political or social agenda is also bound to play a part in the result. The outcome of a novel will inevitably be predicated on the writer's subjective knowledge of the fictional world created in a given work. Additionally, there is no question that American realist and naturalist authors were working in a tightly focussed moral framework; it is only their interpretation of the moral imperatives that varies, and this will, equally inevitably, be the result of a subjective decision. Gissing, in contrast to Flaubert, derides the notion of an objective reality in literature:

In terms of art, reality has another signification. What the artist sees is to him only a part of the actual; its complement is an emotional effect. Thus it comes about that every novelist beholds a world of his own, and the supreme endeavour of his art must be to body forth that world as it exists for him. The novelist works, and must work, subjectively. ("The Place of Realism in Fiction" 85)

Dreiser and Norris are portraying humanity from contrasting viewpoints and, importantly for the American novel, from opposite sides of continental America; consequently, whilst these two authors may be seen to subscribe to the same broad tenets, they approach their fiction rather differently. Their differences in approach signal an aesthetic distance between them as regards intended outcomes of the novel; parts of this chapter will examine those intentions and their relevance and importance to American Naturalism.

There are purely formal conventions in the Naturalism (and realisms) of all national literatures that give indications of the genre or mode, and these are found in the works of both Norris and Dreiser. One such is the "pivotal moment," where

determinants meet, and the reader is made aware of a crucial point in the plot. The passage in *Sister Carrie* wherein Hurstwood steals the money takes five pages to describe in “real time”; in other words, the action takes at least as long to read as does the physical execution, using a mimetic technique sometimes described as “durational realism.” In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* Wayne C. Booth describes this as “meddling with the natural sequence, proportion, or duration of events” (Booth 19) and a purist of realism such as Flaubert would construe such a narrative trope as authorial intervention. The reader is alerted to the importance of the moment by the slowing down of the narrative and the use of the narrator’s omniscience to describe and narrate the mental processes that Hurstwood goes through whilst deciding on what will become the irreversible path to degradation. After taking the money from the safe, George Hurstwood seems to be trying to replace it. He opens and closes the safe door several times, but eventually finds the money in his hands. He tells himself that the deed he has committed was a mistake, but a few minutes later, he has decided upon a plan of action which confirms his criminality. In the event, the safe door closes whilst Hurstwood is thinking about what to do—whether or not he has deliberately closed the safe door is a matter for conjecture. This pivotal passage in the novel moves deftly into free indirect discourse to heighten the reader’s awareness that Hurstwood is not yet ready to commit a criminal act without conscience and moments of doubt:

After he had all the money in the hand bag, a revulsion of feeling seized him. He would not do it—no. Think of what a scandal it would make. The police, they would be after him. He would have to fly, and where? Oh, the terror of being a fugitive from justice. He took out the two boxes and put all the money back. In his excitement

he forgot what he was doing and put the sums in the wrong boxes.

Then he pushed the door to, but in doing so he thought he

remembered doing it wrong and opened the door again. [. . .]

While the money was in his hand, the lock clicked. It had sprung.

Did he do it? He grabbed at the knob and pulled vigorously. It had

closed. Heavens! He was in for it now, sure enough. (270-1)

In certain respects, therefore, the seeds of doubt are sown in the reader's mind as to whether Hurstwood is irredeemably lost in criminality. However, the deed has been done and now Hurstwood must take the consequences—which, as it turns out, are dire. This point, the point of no return, echoes the moment in *Thérèse Raquin* when Laurent and Thérèse decide that Camille must drown, that Kate Ede, in *A Mummer's Wife* decides to leave her husband, and that McTeague finally gets sufficiently drunk to confront Trina, beat her to death, and take the money which he believes is his by right. Dreiser will use such a moment again in *An American Tragedy* (1925), when Clyde Griffiths is about to murder Roberta Alden:

All that he needed to do now was to turn swiftly and savagely to one side or the other—leap up—upon the left wale or right and upset the boat; or, failing that, rock it swiftly, and if Roberta protested too much, strike her with the camera in his hand, or one of the oars at his right. It could be done—it could be done—swiftly and simply, were he now of the mind and heart, or lack of it—with him swimming swiftly away thereafter to freedom—to success—of course—to Sondra and happiness—a new and greater and sweeter life than any he had ever known.

Yet why was he waiting now?

What was the matter with him, anyhow?

Why was he waiting? (491)

Such moments—analogue with W.D. Howells's "supreme events"—in naturalistic literature are more than simple twists of the plot; they are the point at which the various determinants are brought together, often with devastating results. A character may have previously been honest, hard-working, conscientious, considerate, gentle, and so on, but a sequence of events and circumstances seems to have conspired to produce a murderer, a thief, an alcoholic, or otherwise set someone on a downward spiral of degradation. This may justify Zola's statement that human beings do not have free will, that they will react to situations of difficulty in an animalistic manner and will obey their baser instincts if sufficiently provoked by the occasion. The determinants may be environmental or social, or some hitherto suppressed inherited flaw in the character's personality may rise to the surface and reveal the darker side of that character's temperament. Robert Paul Lamb deals with the notion of "pivotal events" in "How Marcus Schouler Found McTeague in Death Valley" (1997), but does not entirely agree with what Norris has to say on the matter. Norris believes, writing in "The Mechanics of Fiction" (1901), that this moment must occur towards the end of the novel, as "once it is disposed of attention is apt to dwindle very rapidly" (*Criticism* 59); in fact, he regards all that follows in the text as necessarily anti-climactic. However, as Lamb points out, this point of view does not tally with the idea that the rest of the action hangs on this moment. It is more likely, as Lamb conjectures, that a "pivotal moment" occurs earlier in the novel, or that there are a number of pivotal moments: in *Sister Carrie* there are several events in Carrie's life which could be so described. Another novelistic crux is Hurstwood's momentous decision to bigamously elope with her, although her



decision to go with him is not so important as his decision to go with her. The pivotal moments do not necessarily have the same importance for all the characters involved, even in the event of joint decisions. Of course, the plot and theme of the specific novel will dictate the relative importance of these moments with regard to certain characters.

Norris himself uses the build-up of events in the San Joaquin Valley and in the city to show how men of previously good character arrive at a situation where potentially self-destructive actions appear to be the only course open to them. In this respect *The Octopus* bears more than a passing resemblance to Zola's *Germinal*, in that an entire community decides on the course of action and similarly provokes violent retaliation from capitalists and their mercenaries. The difference is that the farmers are not starving mineworkers, nor even analogous to them, except in the broadest of terms. Their decision to resist the railroad with violence and set in motion a tragic sequence of events is no more than the pioneering Americans would have done to protect the land which was (arguably) not theirs to fight for in the first place. Consequently, in order to accept the premise of injustice, the reader has to accept an American ideological version of property rights. Thus, where Zola has portrayed a group of starving victims of a tyrannous industrial machine, Norris has taken a group of American agrarian entrepreneur settlers and put them in a similar situation. They are as powerless against the forces of capitalism as the French miners had been.

Norris had planned to write an epic trilogy about American wheat, in particular that grown in the San Joaquin Valley in California; each novel would focus on a different aspect of its production, sale, and eventual export to markets around the world. One reason for choosing such a subject was that he wanted to be

seen as writing about a specifically American subject, thus ridding himself of the reputation as an American author writing “French” novels. Howells described the writing of *The Octopus* as Norris’s response to “those who have demanded Continentality of American literature” (Cady 403); he was referring to those critics, Norris included, who were keen to see the emergence of a singular American literary voice from the sectional, regional, and local writing in which parochialism had been endemic in American fiction of the nineteenth century. However, Norris himself declared in “The Great American Novelist”—an article syndicated after his death—that:

[. . .] while the Great American Novelist is yet to be born, the possibility of *A*—note the indefinite article—*A* Great American Novel is not too remote for discussion. But such a novel will be sectional. The United States is a Union, but not a unit, and the life in one part is very, very different from the life in another. It is as yet impossible to construct a novel which will represent all the various characteristics of the different sections. It is only possible to make a picture of a single locality. What is true of the South is not true of the North. The West is different, and the Pacific coast is a community by itself. (*Criticism* 123)

The most important point that Norris goes on to make is that the naturalist novel is concerned with humanity as a whole, and, if the novelist succeeds in portraying universal truths, the novel ceases to be solely about America, and will fail as the Great American Novel. In other words, writes Norris, the Great American Novel is a doomed venture before it starts:

If an American novelist should go so deep into the lives of the people of any one community that he would find the thing that is common to another class of people a thousand miles away, he would have gone *too* deep to be exclusively American. He would not only be American, but English as well. He would have sounded the world-note; he would be a writer not national but international, and his countrymen would be all humanity, not the citizens of any one nation. (*Criticism* 124)

Norris goes on to dismiss the idea of the Great American Novel as “mythical like the Hippogriff, and the thing to be looked for is not the Great American Novelist, but the Great Novelist who shall also be an American” (124). Given that Norris wrote this shortly after finishing *The Octopus*, he was now emphasising the futility of attempting, as he had, to write the Great American Novel. There was no reason, however, to conclude that an American literary voice could not emerge from regionalistic writing nor that this type of fiction could not contain universal truths; Norris objected to the frequent shallowness and parochialism of most sectional writing, not its subject-matter.

As noted in the previous chapter, Norris had invested much time and energy in formulating a critical stance which would not only justify his own fiction, but one which could be applied to American fiction as a whole. The principal characters in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*, in Crane’s slum “journalism,” and in Norris’s *McTeague*, for example, are at the lower end of the social scale. By contrast, the cast of characters in *The Octopus* is not one that invites immediate sympathy from the reader because of their living conditions; these opportunist farmers are no dispossessed slum-dwellers, living in ignorance and despair and, by most standards,

they are already successful. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Barbara Hochman has stated that “[w]ithin the world of the novel, everyone fears the implications of change and loss; the threatened self turns for protection to whatever stabilising structures it can generate” (Pizer *McTeague* 344). Hochman, discussing *McTeague*, argues that the “imaginative coherence” of the novel is “not derived from naturalistic issues,” but focuses, rather, on personal loss and the “implications for self”. On the other hand, it could be argued that the ways in which different characters deal with the threat of loss of both material possessions and selfhood become naturalistic issues.

Loss of status, identity, livelihood, or dignity are common enough themes throughout literature; the naturalist author, however, will use loss, or the threat of loss, as part of a determined sequence of events—a causal chain. As discussed above, one of these events, sometimes the loss itself, becomes a pivot upon which hangs the outcome of the plot. If the loss is perceived to be caused by unwarranted or unjust external factors, rather than by a moral defect in the central character, the reader’s instinct is to sympathise. In other words, the author extends a moral invitation to the reader to side with the protagonist against the injustice. Thus, the reader will be placed in the situation of the audience in a traditional Greek tragedy, where the sympathy is for the protagonist’s loss or fall; the difference in the naturalistic novel is that the injustice stems not from games played by mischievous gods, nor from character faults, but from determinants issuing from a mechanistic and indifferent universe. Norris emphasises the effects of the indifference of both economic and natural determinants on the farmers in the San Joaquin Valley.

The farmers in *The Octopus* are not seen as primarily acquisitive; they simply wish to continue to make their living. They are, as are all farmers throughout

the world, subject to the exigencies of natural forces, such as the climate, and equally subject to economic forces, human constructs, such as the laws of supply and demand and the world market. The stability they seek can be generated only by exercising control over as many factors as possible, and the naturalist author would be concerned with showing all of these forces as being similarly impersonal and objective. The stabilising structures sought by the characters do not exist *a priori*; they are contingent on social or ideological models found in their fictional world. As this world is modelled on the “real” world, these structures have an internal logic based on an external reality. In this sense, the “external” reality, imposed by the real world on the fictional world, is a philosophically naturalistic set of rules which states that the characters do not have the free will nor the wherewithal to generate a different ideology which may or may not embody the stabilising structures that will ensure their future or maintain the *status quo*. In a realist world, the characters are inextricably bound to the society in which they exist, culturally, economically, and morally. Sympathy for the farmers, therefore, would entail a wish to reform society; June Howard notes, however, that Norris was reportedly “‘interested in stories, not reforms. He was comparatively untouched by suffering and misery’ and intended in *The Octopus* only to portray a segment of American society and the workings of economic forces” (Howard 117). Whether or not this assessment of Norris’s motives is true is largely immaterial; the question that he sets up for his intended readers is how the economic forces prevalent in American society could be construed as working for the greater good, given the localised ill-effects and the tragedies which befall so many diverse characters in his novel.

Natural forces, such as heredity or the elements, produce good or bad effects at random and indifferently; economic forces are man-made constructs; as such, they

are, to a greater or lesser degree, controllable by man. Through the poetic voices in the novel, Norris raises the doubt in the reader's mind as to the workings of these forces; are they immutable, monolithic, and unassailable or can they be manoeuvred and resisted? Norris's revised treatment of plot and characterisation, as will be discussed later in this chapter, does not invite total sympathy for the farmers, and falls short of suggesting societal reforms. In fact, the novel ends on an uncharacteristic note of optimism, and Presley, the poet-narrator comes to the conclusion that the conflict between the farmers and the railroad is insignificant compared to the greater good that is the continuing existence of the Wheat and the Railroad:

Was there no hope, no outlook for the future, no rift in the black curtain, no glimmer through the night? Was good to be thus overthrown? Was evil thus to be strong and to prevail? Was nothing left?

Then suddenly Vanamee's words came back to his mind. What was the larger view, what contributed the greatest good to the greatest numbers? (*Octopus* 457)

The flaw in the argument, that wheat—"that mighty world force, that nourisher of nations" (458)—is a natural product, is that the production of edible wheat is entirely dependent on man's intervention in nature and that wheat becomes simply another commodity. The wheat farms, the railroad, the shipping lines, are all part of a capitalist system and are interdependent. Cedarquist, the manufacturer and venture capitalist, tells Presley that the foundation of his new shipping line, which will ship wheat to the Orient, is enabled by the closing down of his unprofitable ironworks in California. Thus, one business closes and another one opens with no

emotional ties; the San Joaquin farmers, on the other hand, are expected to have an emotional attachment to the land, but there is scant evidence for this. Norris does not take the romantic view of the farmers as men of the land who have somehow bonded with the land they farm. Their motivation appears, in fact, to be similar to that of the venture capitalist. They have taken options on the land, improved it, and expanded their farms with a view to selling when the time is right. The viability of the previously undeveloped land as farmland gives it added value, and many of the farmers would be willing to sell if there was a profit to be had.

Whilst on his quest to find an all-encompassing American voice, Norris sought to write an epic novel which would be as vast as the America he wanted to portray; as Howells remarked “the story of the Wheat was for him the allegory of the industrial and financial America which is the real America” (Cady 399). The plot of *The Octopus*, as might be expected of Norris, is a fictionalised version of a true story. The shameful events of the “Mussel Slough Affair,” which pitted the Southern Pacific Railroad and its gun-toting mercenaries against the Valley farmers, do not reflect well on the railroad company; once again, a naturalist author was muck-raking, but this time in the sense in which Roosevelt had originally meant the term. This novel is one that takes a genuinely American theme and applies the naturalistic theme of pessimistic determinism, factoring into the equation environmental and purely economic pressures, rather than heredity or other societal determinants. What emerges is a wholly American naturalistic aesthetic, which even includes some of the romantic elements about which Norris had earlier written, and the inclusion of which is of paramount importance to him.

Two of the principal characters in *The Octopus*, Presley and Vanamee, perhaps the only characters to emerge as heroes, are romantic stereotypes: Presley is

a poet who “seemed more of a character than a type. [. . .] His eyes were a dark brown, and his forehead was the forehead of the intellectual, wide and high, with a certain unmistakable lift about it that argued education, not only of himself, but of his people before him” (12-13). Although this passage appears to be simply a physical description of a character, the mode of description gives clues to Norris’s attention to Zolaesque and Spencerian concerns: character versus temperament, heredity, and pre-disposition, and, importantly for Spencerian Darwinists, physical signs of diathesis. The description then moves to the inner man: “It could be foreseen that morally he was of that sort who avoid evil through good taste, lack of decision, and want of opportunity. His temperament was that of the poet [. . .]” (13). The reader is thus prepared for both a vindication of the narrator’s appraisal of Presley and an irony which the modern reader has been pre-conditioned to expect. The narrator has commenced Book 1 of his story with Presley as central character and one with whom the literary-minded reader can quickly identify. In every aspect, Presley seems set to be a romantic hero and, in the event, plays an active, if somewhat effete, role as a bomb-thrower. His appointed role is as poetic commentator, but it is a questioning role which appears as if it might be shared by the author, engaged in a similar quest to write the great American epic. Presley comes to represent the contemplative life and is dissuaded from taking any active part by those around him who value his status as poet and philosopher. As the protégé of the most powerful rancher in the area, he feels a quasi-familial loyalty to his protector and feels an obligation to join battle at Magnus Derrick’s side. However, his destiny is tied up in another American dream, that of chronicling the American pioneers’ success in taming the vast country in his poem “The Toilers”:



He was in search of a subject; something magnificent, he did not know exactly what; some vast tremendous theme, heroic terrible, to be unrolled in all the thundering progression of hexameters.

But whatever he wrote, and in whatever fashion, Presley was determined that his poem should be of the West, that world's frontier of romance, where a new race, a new people—hardy, brave and passionate—were building an empire; where the tumultuous life ran like fire from dawn to dark, and from dark to dawn again, primitive, brutal, honest, and without fear. (13)

The reader could be forgiven for equating Presley's literary quest with that of the author, but the truth was that Norris already knew how he wanted to write his great trilogy, and in any event, Presley is unsuccessful. However, Presley's earlier efforts and the eventual politicisation of his art inform the reader that poets have a role in the affairs of men. They are not, as Annixter would have it, simply "rhymers"; they have a political and sociological role to play. This is a message that Norris was absolutely insistent on conveying to his readers; literature should be life, not something separate and privileged.

The second character who springs directly out of the American romantic tradition is the shepherd, Vanamee. He is always at one with nature, the desert, the wilderness, and the elements, but not with himself; he lives a solitary, introspective, tortured life which has been conditioned by an earlier tragedy, when his girlfriend has been raped and left for dead by a drifter. Angéle, his girlfriend, later dies giving birth to the child of the rapist. Vanamee fulfils dual roles; he is at once James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking" character, a throwback to the early pioneers, those heroic misfits who felt the need to push further and further west to escape

settled society, but is simultaneously Presley's college-educated soulmate, thrown back on his own resources after having been let down by society's inability to console him in his loss. Having no use for society and its iniquities, his solace lies in the metaphysical, as represented by Father Sarria and the Mission, on one level, and the poetic vastness of the wilderness on another. "For two years he wandered through Arizona, living in the desert, in the wilderness, a recluse, a nomad, an ascetic. But, doubtless, all his heart was in the little coffin in the Mission garden. Once in so often he must come back thither" (34). Thus, Norris has created two romantic characters, one of whom is tied by an ethical loyalty to the farmers and another who is not tied by any loyalty except a deep-rooted, atavistic allegiance to primitive moral values. The Vanamee character confirms what Pizer refers to as Norris's "primitivistic anti-intellectualism" (*Criticism* xiii) and his tendency to privileging "masculinity"; Vanamee is able to be both a "poet" (who, crucially, does not write poetry) and a man who lives the outdoor life. In *The Octopus* Norris betrays his preoccupation with the "life" versus "literature" opposition in terms of "masculinity versus femininity"—or sometimes more accurately, masculinity versus effeminacy. Donald Pizer evaluates Norris's position thus:

To Norris, "life" included the emotions and the instincts. It incorporated both the world of nature (the outdoors and the country) and the kind of life which Norris believed "natural" (the life of passion and violence, and the life of the low and fallen) because such life was closest to the primitive in man and furthest from the cultivated. "Literature," on the other hand, included thought, culture, overeducation, refinement, and excessive spirituality. (xiii)

In *The Octopus*, Presley has already shown Annie Derrick his earlier poem which was to become “The Toilers”; her reaction places her aestheticism in opposition to his realism:

His Song of the West, which only once, incoherent and fierce, he had tried to explain to her, its swift, tumultuous life, its truth, its nobility and savagery, its heroism and obscenity, had revolted her.

“But Presley,” she had murmured, “that is not literature.”

“No,” he had cried between his teeth, “no, thank God, it is not.”

(49)

In this novel, Norris clearly reveals his view of the conflict between realism and romanticism on the one hand in opposition to aestheticism and Decadence on the other. The female characters who take an interest in artistic affairs are more concerned with the rarefied atmosphere of the salon than with the brutality which representative or mimetic art can convey. Mrs. Cedarquist is the capitalist’s wife who takes her salon seriously, as Annie Derrick takes her poetry seriously; nonetheless, both women are portrayed as typical dilettantes in the world of literature, each of whom uses her husband’s wealth as a means to indulge her literary fantasies. In describing Mrs. Cedarquist’s salon, Norris gives vent to his intense feelings on the trivialisation of art as a genteel amusement, separated from life:

This was the Fake, the eternal irrepressible Sham; glib, nimble, ubiquitous, tricked out in all the paraphernalia of imposture, and endless defile of charlatans that passed interminably before the gaze of the city, marshaled by lady presidents, exploited by clubs of

women, by literary societies, reading circles, and culture organizations [. . . ].

[Mrs. Cedarquist] spent her days in one quiver of excitement and jubilation. She was “in the movement.” The people of the city were awakening to a Realization of the Beautiful, to a sense of the higher needs of life. This was Art, this was Literature, this was Culture and Refinement. The Renaissance had appeared in the West. (222-223)

It is no coincidence that Annie Derrick, as a powerless woman, is a follower of the Aesthetic movement; given Norris’s feelings on the matter, it would be out of character for him to have given a strong male character such literary leanings. Her husband is strong, committed, and morally secure; he is a leader of men, but when he does waver, he becomes effete and powerless. Still, Annie Derrick does not take control, or even attempt to influence him, but waits to see how her husband will cope. Where he leads she will follow, for better or worse. The women characters in *The Octopus* are very unlike the New Woman which Gissing portrays in *New Grub Street*, for example. Although the episode of Mrs. Hooven and her daughters is tragic, the woman in Norris’s novel who had suffered the ultimate fate was Angéle, Vanamee’s lover.

W.D. Howells seems unsure about the inclusion of the story of Vanamee and Angéle:

It will be easily believed that in the handling nothing essential to the strong impression is blinked; but nothing, on the other hand, is forced in. The episode of Vanamee and Angéle, with its hideous tragedy, and the long mystical epilogue ending almost in anti-climax, is the

only passage which can be accused of irrelevance, and it is easier to bring than prove this accusation. (Cady 402-3)

Others, too, have taken issue with the inclusion of the story of Vanamee, whom Brian Lee refers to as a “Thoreau-like figure living close to nature and shunning society” and, he continues, “[i]t is an embarrassingly sentimental intrusion into what is otherwise a powerful, if flawed, epic” (Lee 48). Given the diverse nature of the poetic characters in the novel, and allowing for Norris’s wish to present an all-American work of fiction dealing with American aesthetics, the inclusion of a transcendentalist should come as no surprise. In addition, it could be construed that Norris has posed some questions in the novel with the characterisations of the three young college-men, Presley, Vanamee, and Annixter, who are among the principal players in *The Octopus*. The author has placed the trio in a strange conjunction; Presley is the “trained” poet who cannot find his poetic voice; Vanamee is a “natural” poet who sees poetry in the vastness and awesomeness of nature, seeking solace in the metaphysical, rather than in the written word; Buck Annixter is the hard-nosed, wealthy cynic who, despite having expressed the view that “you cannot buck the railroad,” dies fighting for the cause of the League of farmers. This special balance, which tilts first one way and then another, may be Norris’s ironic expression of the necessary dualism of naturalistic fiction as exposed in James K. Folsom’s essay “The Wheat and the Locomotive: Norris and Naturalist Esthetics” in Hakutani and Fried’s *American Literary Naturalism: A Reassessment* (1975). Folsom assesses American Naturalism in terms of Jungian dualism; where dualism is recognised and incorporated, he believes, Naturalism succeeds. As soon as naturalistic writing attempts a synthesis of the double nature of man, says Folsom, it is doomed to failure, simply because recognising the duality is the key to

understanding man and man as part of nature. In Folsom's terms, Norris *qua* naturalistic novelist and aesthetician is certain to succeed, as duality and binary oppositions are the key to understanding how *The Octopus* offers a platform from which to appraise the development of an American naturalist aesthetic. Progress, on the one hand, and attachment to traditional moral values, on the other, are not incompatible; pragmatism and romanticism can be reconciled in a dual system.

Farming itself implies a binary set of values; on the one hand, the farmer is the agent of a natural cycle of planting, germination, growth and harvest; on the other, he is but one cog in the wheel of a market-driven, capitalist structure, where the product of nature is manipulated into a means of generating income. In this novel, much is made of the mechanistic nature of the distribution of the wheat and its eventual destiny as bread to feed the hungry of the world. The method of distribution starts with the railroad, which itself can undoubtedly be a force for social good, but its owners are the robber barons whose sole motive, incentive, and yardstick, is profit. Politically, the businessmen had the upper hand, but their political allies needed to hide behind a façade of respectability, whereas the robber barons had no need to disguise their true colours. In order to justify their own allegiances, the politicians had somehow to convey to the populace the idea that the capitalists were working for the common good. Norris was careful to point out that the farmers, too, were opportunists; they had moved west, tempted by cheap land and the ready market for wheat. The farmers and the railroad men thus exist in an economic dialectic, that of capital-generated prosperity versus nature- and labour-dependent prosperity. The tension between the two should logically be resolved by an economically interdependent synthesis of market forces, wherein neither side functions efficiently without the presence of the other. However, the terms under

which this middle ground is negotiated forms the basis of the conflict which occupies the plot of the novel. However, the conflict is not portrayed as purely economic; there are conflicts of personality—power struggles; moreover, each character on one side has his counterpart on the other. Throughout the novel, the reader is confronted with a dualistic reading of artistic and economic dialectics; poet, farmer, college-boy, immigrant, capitalist, yeoman must jointly and severally exist as both united in opposition to outside forces and separate, disparate even, in their motives. The tension created by this dualism is essential; each principal character has a public and private role and the roles must maintain their separate integrity for the sake of the novel's internal logic. On the other hand, Norris turns each duality and each binary opposition into a means of subverting any simplistic reading of the novel. The subversion denies the possibility of moral conclusions about capitalism, progress, and the romantic hero.

There are several sets of binary oppositions in the novel: Presley, the striver after technical perfection in his poetry, has his more natural counterpart in Vanamee:

Of a temperament similar in many ways to Presley's there were capabilities in Vanamee that were not ordinarily to be found in the rank and file of men. Living close to nature, a poet by instinct, where Presley was but a poet by training, there developed in him a great sensitiveness to beauty and an almost abnormal capacity for great happiness and great sorrow; he felt things intensely, deeply. (32)

Norris emphasises here the difference between two kinds of poet—the “natural” and the “trained”—as personified by the two friends, by restating the contrast between them whilst allowing a deep and important relationship to exist:

There, in that moribund, ancient town, wrapped in its siesta,  
 flagellated with heat, deserted, ignored, baking in a noonday silence,  
 these two strange men, the one a poet by nature, the other by training,  
 both out of tune with their world, dreamers, introspective, morbid,  
 lost and unfamiliar at that end-of-the-century time, searching for a  
 sign, groping and baffled amid the perplexing obscurity of the  
 delusion, sat over empty wine glasses. (156)

At this point in the narrative, each of the two friends is trying to make sense of the world in his own terms. Norris's syntax reflects the bafflement of the two young men; the succession of adjectival clauses and fragments of description locate the reader in a similar confusion to that which the two young men are feeling; what "delusion"? What sort of sign are they seeking? Norris has also located the search in a particular chronology, placing the two intelligent young men at the *fin-de-siècle*; the implication is that they must find a rationale that can be carried through from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. By including this phrase, Norris is inviting the reader into a contemplation of what contemporary issues might be facing a thinker in this particular period. The most telling phrase is "lost and unfamiliar"; earlier, however, the reader has been given the impression that Vanamee has already formulated a world-view:

College bred though he was, the life pleased him. He was, as he desired, close to nature, living the full measure of life, a worker among workers, taking enjoyment in simple pleasures, healthy in mind and body. He believed in an existence passed in this fashion in the country, working hard, eating full, drinking deep, sleeping dreamlessly. (*Octopus* 32)



On the other hand, the passage from page 156 tells the reader that Vanamee is far from certain about life, especially with regard to a future in the twentieth century. The author is alerting the reader to the proposition that poets (and all artists) will have to be prepared to address not only present-day problems, but also the aesthetic and moral issues which a new century will bring. Given that the American impulse is towards technological progress, is a romantic approach appropriate to the artistic impulse? Presley, whilst attracted by the romance of the wheatlands and by the romanticism of their depiction in art, found little in common with those who sought a living there:

These uncouth brutes of farmhands and petty ranchers, grimed with the soil they worked upon, were odious to him beyond words. Never could he feel in sympathy with them, nor with their lives, their ways, their marriages, deaths, bickerings, and all the monotonous round of their sordid existence. (10-11)

At the same time, however, his projected epic poem will glorify and heroise these very people. The narrative alternates between depicting the self-assurance of youth and the self-doubt resulting from the vicissitudes and realities of experience. The narrator leads the reader to believe that the two young men are still struggling to come up with an aesthetic and moral solution, despite their apparent confidence in an aesthetic attitude. Nevertheless, Vanamee and Presley find themselves capable of forming a bond, as do Presley and Annixter, the young rancher. Annixter is yet another college-man among the wheat-farmers, who, despite his gruffness and gaucherie, has an awareness of literature, but one which is naïve, uneducated, and simplistic to the point of caricature:

No doubt, there was not much use in poetry, and as for novels, there were only Dickens's works. Everything else was a lot of lies. But just the same, it took brains to grind out a poem. It wasn't everyone who could rhyme "brave" and "glaive" and make sense out of it (25).

In these terms, Annixter equates poetry with rhyme and admires the works of Dickens, one suspects, for their preponderance of heroic male protagonists; thus the reader is introduced to Norris's ironic appraisal of the aesthetic sensibilities of the college-educated man of action. Early in the novel, therefore, the narrator has depicted three young men, two of whom are already seen to have clearly defined aesthetic and moral values; the third wavers in his allegiances whilst seeking a philosophical platform upon which to base his true beliefs. Presley's search for universal answers is a theme which runs through the entire novel; Vanamee, too, is looking for answers to personal questions. Annixter's world is one in which the answers lie in action, but not action for its own sake; all actions are directed towards the prosperity of his own farm and the well-being of the farmers as a community.

The complex diversity of the principal and secondary characters, each of whom is furnished with a counterpart, shows that Norris was setting out something much more ambitious than an American epic, even allowing for the "allegory of the Wheat". *The Octopus*, as a text, becomes first and foremost an aesthetic statement and a declaration of Norris's political, moral, and literary standpoint ; there is even an aesthete in the person of Annie Derrick, who yearns to go to Rome and the Bay of Naples. She reads Walter Pater and Austin Dobson, preferring "rondeaux and sestinas and chansonettes" to Homeric epics, which she considers to be "violent and coarse". Annie Derrick is an aesthete who also happens to be married to Magnus, and is thus dependent on the wheat, but maintains a romantic, Marius-the-Epicurean

view of what is important in life, whilst Annixter, also dependent on the wheat, is a pragmatist, an educated man of action who reads Dickens. The characterisation of Annie tallies with Norris's personal view that the Aesthetic movement was imbued with dilettantism, effeminacy and a lack of moral strength, whereas the works of Dickens and Kipling celebrated Victorian values of honesty and rectitude. He saw masculinity as the bulwark of moral strength, and women as waverers, lacking the strength of mind required for moral leadership. The men in *The Octopus* do not waver: Annixter is too convinced of his own righteousness to ever contemplate another set of values. Lyman Derrick has political ambitions and feels no familial or communal loyalties, but still manages to justify his actions, whereas his brother, Harran, is committed both to his father's business and to the community of California farmers to which he belongs. Magnus Derrick becomes a tragic patriarch, falling from grace through corruption, whereas S. Behrman, corrupt banker, and railroad partisan dies, with ironic symbolism, in a grain silo. Whether they are right or wrong, these men are portrayed as having a fixed set of values and living by a code of conduct which embodies those values. The poetic voices in the story, however, continue to question morality and to examine society.

It is very tempting to cast the "poets" into the roles of different facets of Norris's aesthetic personality. It is equally tempting to infer that Norris was depicting the railroad and its men as villains and the farmers and their families as victims. Closely read, though, *The Octopus* is a very complex, but quite succinct, naturalist *tour de force* and literary manifesto. There is no doubt that the dualities referred to above are part of Norris's naturalistic credo, and that he deliberately invited the reader to fall in to the trap of presuming a heroes-versus-villains scenario, along the lines of a traditional romance. By the end of the novel, however,

apportionment of guilt and innocence is not such a clear cut issue; Magnus Derrick, the patriarchal figurehead of the farmers, is found guilty of corruption, albeit for the best of reasons, but his humiliating punishment is more than the reader is prepared for. In many ways, Magnus Derrick is the odd one out among the farmers, simply because of his authoritative position. The manufacturer Cedarquist, who is as much a capitalist as Shelgrim, is depicted as a benign patriarch, whose wife is a patron of the arts. He takes an interest in the progress of Presley's planned epic, whilst watching events in the San Joaquin Valley with detached interest. He will own the ships which export the wheat around the world and knows that whatever the outcome of events in the Valley, the wheat will be grown by someone and that there will be a market for it somewhere, probably in Asia. In other words, although he is depicted as a disinterested observer of events, he has the entrepreneurial confidence to see which way the wind blows. One way or another, he will profit from the fact that wheat must be transported to its market. Cedarquist presents another face of capitalism; he sees public participation in the decision-making process as a way of controlling the excesses of capitalism. When he meets Magnus Derrick, he declares himself to be on the side of the farmers against the P & SW Trust. He also decries the lack of community interest in sustaining local industry:

Every state has its own grievance. If it is not a railroad trust, it is a sugar trust, or an oil trust, or an industrial trust that exploits the people, *because the people allow it*. The indifference of the people is the opportunity of the despot. [ . . . ] The people have but to say "No" and not the strongest tyranny, political, religious, or financial, that was ever organized, could survive one week. (215-216)

Norris has Cedarquist occupy a somewhat contrived middle ground; although a capitalist, he equates fiscal power with tyranny; whilst humanitarian, he deplores the apathy of the common people, without understanding that it is very difficult to say “No”; he is also a man of action who attaches value to poetry. Norris may have had Collis P. Huntington in mind when he depicted an intellectual capitalist, but Huntington wielded more power than does Cedarquist. Shelgrim is undoubtedly closer in kind to Huntington than is Cedarquist, who makes a puzzling speech to Magnus Derrick:

“We are both of us fighters, it seems, Mr. Derrick,” said Cedarquist.

“Each with his particular enemy. We are well met, indeed, the farmer and the manufacturer, both in the same grist between the millstones of the lethargy of the public and the aggression of the trust, the two great evils of modern America. Pres, my boy, there is your epic poem, ready to hand.” (216)

Although Cedarquist has closed the Atlas Iron Works, a company of his which has failed for want of investment, he has other interests. He has just berated an artist, Hartrath, for contributing to local apathy by participating in a public relations exercise to attract Eastern investors to California; he is enraged that more attention is being paid to erecting statues and opening parks than to exhorting San Franciscan investors to invest locally. “We don’t want fairs. We want active furnaces. We don’t want public statues and fountains and park extensions and gingerbread fetes. We want business enterprise” (214). Just what Norris is portraying here is not at all clear. Once again, a sympathetic character is asking for local interests to take precedence; the implication is that Norris believes that local problems should be solved on a local level. However, this would consequently

imply that Western literature should concern itself with Western matters. This conclusion would be congruent with Norris's statement above regarding the sectional novel, but would deny the universality that the naturalistic novel should portray. In this regard, Norris is, at this juncture, showing himself to be as much an American as a naturalist. Dreiser, too, takes his Americanness very seriously.

Dreiser, whilst lacking the formal education of Norris and Crane, was instrumental in presenting an American form of Naturalism to the reading public; one which had an aesthetic integrity, without seeming "French" or otherwise imported. Moreover, Dreiser was as uncompromisingly naturalistic in his early works as were Norris and Crane. Lionel Trilling, however, was unimpressed with the overt social and historical realism which lies at the heart of Dreiser's fiction, and was of the opinion that his uneven and sometimes stilted prose could not be excused on the grounds of social importance.

In addition to his dislike of Dreiser's fiction, Lionel Trilling found that Parrington's critical theories, generally supportive of the deterministic philosophy of literary Naturalism, embodied a flawed, reductive, and simplistic view of realism. The greatest flaw, according to Trilling, is that Parrington "expresses the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality" (Trilling 10) and that Dreiser's faults as a writer were overlooked by the liberal critics because they stemmed from his "ideas". Furthermore, says Trilling, "the scope of reality being what it is, ideas are held to be mere 'details', and what is more, to be details which, if attended to, have the effect of diminishing reality" (21). Trilling is attacking Parrington's apparent view that "ideas" in realistic fiction are separable from the plot and narrative and

can be considered out of context. F.O. Matthiessen notes that Santayana held similar views to those of Trilling:

Observing our dominant New England culture, Santayana believed that its deep-rooted error was that it separated thought from experience. Among the legacies of a colonial culture is the habit of thinking of creative sources as somehow remote from itself, of escaping from the hardness and rawness of everyday surroundings into an idealized picture of civilized refinement, of believing that the essence of beauty must lie in what James Russell Lowell read about in Keats rather than in what Walt Whitman saw in the streets of Brooklyn. The inescapable result of this is to make art an adornment rather than an organic expression of life, to confuse it with politeness and delicacy. (Matthiessen 62)

Dreiser's "ideas" in *Sister Carrie*, expressed as the narrator's thoughts on life, are often thought of as disruptions to the narrative which can be happily skimmed over. The contrary view is that these philosophical musings, which often take the form of diegetic intrusion, explain the author's concerns and justify the plot and characterisation. It is by making a virtue of such literary faults as these awkward interruptions, asserts Trilling, that Parrington, as a liberal critic, was able to place Dreiser in the first rank of American writers. By contrast, Fredric Jameson describes the work of Dreiser (along with that of Balzac and Scott) as an "ideal of realism" (Jameson 104), without necessarily implying that it was an ideal of literature. Despite criticism of Dreiser on the basis of his lack of education, uneven prose style, and uncertain aesthetics, the undeniable aspect of his writing is its historicity. As F.O. Matthiessen points out:

It has often been remarked that Dreiser describes objects as though no one else had ever described them. His realization that all of his surroundings were changing continuously and rapidly served not only to detach him from them but also make him want to seize upon them before they disappeared. This again was a great asset for his work.

(*Theodore Dreiser* 68)

An example of this is a passage in *Sister Carrie* which fulfils a dual function: firstly, to chronologically contextualise the period, and secondly to show the sociological forces at work. Carrie is looking for a job and has been told to try “the department stores”:

The nature of these vast retail combinations, should they ever permanently disappear, will form an interesting chapter in the commercial history of our nation. [. . .] They were handsome, bustling, successful affairs, with a host of clerks and a swarm of patrons. Carrie passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, shoes, stationery, jewelry. Each separate counter was a show place of dazzling interest and attraction. [. . .] There was nothing there which she could not have used—nothing which she did not long to own. (22)

Hence, Carrie is fulfilling two roles in this passage: she is at once the seeker after work, looking for a job in a place where young women were typically employed. At the same time, she is the *flâneuse*, strolling among the aisles looking at the display of goods on offer; if she were employed, of course, she could afford to buy. In an ironic circularity, her motivation to become employed in just such a place is to earn enough to shop there, not simply to make purchases, but to be seen



shopping in a department store. Clyde Griffiths, in *An American Tragedy* goes through a similar process when he is employed at the Green-Davidson Hotel and notes people “not so much older than himself” drinking and socialising and wearing the latest fashions: “Such grandeur. This, then most certainly was what it meant to be rich, to be a person of consequence in the world—to have money. It meant that you did what you pleased” (47). In both novels, Dreiser presents the American Dream as seen through the eyes of someone who has yet to achieve it.

Dreiser, having told the reader that the first three department stores were opened in Chicago in “about 1884,” describes their impact not only in historic terms, but also in cultural terms. People were being overwhelmed with a visual display of glitter and gaudiness which was unmistakably designed as a *trompe-l’oeil* of consumer excess. Being subject to the same forces of consumerism, the contemporary reader could not but identify with Carrie; the moral question which the realist poses is that to what extent the window-shopper is willing to compromise moral values in order to become a purchaser. Dreiser also illustrates for the reader the contemporary pressures which fuel the desire to possess goods and instigate the moral compromises necessary to take possession. What does it take for materialism to triumph over morality? is the question that Dreiser asks. What Trilling describes as Dreiser’s “vulgar materialism” has been seen by others as a genuine concern on Dreiser’s part that capitalism, consumerism, and commodification have become the driving forces in American ideology. The “pursuit of happiness,” a seemingly innocuous phrase in the context of the Declaration of Independence, had become commodified in the late nineteenth century; “happiness” has become equated with being able to afford the goods on display in the great department stores of the cities or to eat in fine restaurants.

Carrie Meeber, who had early in the novel been described as “ambitious to gain in material things” (*Carrie* 4), is soon seduced by the city life and is not content to accept her lowly status. It has already been hinted that she may be willing to compromise in order to succeed in her ambitions, as she had “only an average little conscience” (89), and the alacrity with which she drops Drouet and allows herself to be seduced by Hurstwood comes as no surprise to the reader. Nonetheless, her materialistic outlook becomes stronger as the novel progresses and seems all the more reprehensible because Carrie continually justifies it by looking at the alternatives. After Drouet has given Carrie twenty dollars with which to buy some clothes, she rationalises her acceptance of the gift. The often-intrusive narrator explains:

As for Carrie, her understanding of the moral significance of money was the popular understanding, nothing more. The old definition, “Money; something everybody else has and I must get,” would have expressed her understanding of it thoroughly. Some of it she now held in her hand, two soft, green ten-dollar bills, and she felt that she was immensely better off for the having of them. (62)

On the other hand, she knows that she cannot reveal the source of the money to her strait-laced sister. She tells Drouet when she meets him that she cannot accept the money, but when she sees the goods in the clothes-store she is once again seduced by the display of commodities and by Drouet’s easy charm. The way out of her predicament is avoid the conscience-pricking presence of her sister, Minnie, by moving into a place of her own, which is initially paid for by Drouet. To reinforce the theme of Carrie’s fall from grace, the narrator describes a dream that Minnie has following the discovery of Carrie’s note to say that she is leaving their flat, but

remaining in Chicago. In the dream the two sisters are playing by an old coal-mine; despite Minnie's protests, Carrie lowers herself in a basket "and was going down—down." Then the dream changes and the sisters are in a "place by waters she had never seen. [. . .] Carrie was slipping away somewhere over a rock, and her fingers had let loose and [Minnie] had seen her falling" (79). The symbolism is rather crude and unsubtle, but the reader will undoubtedly get the message. The decision to leave Minnie's home becomes the pivotal moment at which Carrie must decide between chaste penury and the chance to partake in the conspicuous consumption for which Chicago had become renowned. This moment also becomes an important psychological event in Carrie's life: Minnie has become her conscience in the big city and her touchstone for homespun moral values. Leaving Minnie's home also entails breaking away from moral guardianship. In the eyes of Carrie's sister and brother-in-law, she is now a fallen woman. However, even in the later stages of the novel, she is still portrayed as an innocent abroad.

In New York, when she goes out with her wealthy neighbours, the Vances, she contemplates what wealth means, but, whilst the narrator is ironically describing scenes of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste, Carrie is marvelling at what it is to be rich and remembering harder times. They go to Sherry's restaurant:

Once seated, there began that exhibition of showy, wasteful and unwholesome gastronomy as practised by wealthy Americans which is the wonder and astonishment of true culture and dignity the world over. The large bill-o'-fare held an array of dishes sufficient to feed an army, sidelined with prices which made reasonable expenditure a ridiculous impossibility. (332)

There are two narratorial voices in this section of the book; one is the omniscient, intrusive, authorial narrator; the other is Robert Ames, an inventor nephew of the Vances. He is thoughtful, intelligent, and well read—often occupying the same ground as Presley in *The Octopus*. In other words, he frequently voices what would seem to be the author's thoughts on a subject, but his morals and ethics vacillate between condemnation of the materialism and vulgarity he sees around him and acceptance of the *status quo*. In a similar way to that in which Norris has described Presley, Dreiser draws on Spencerian concerns with physiognomy:

Ames was looking away rather abstractedly at the crowd and showed an interesting profile to Carrie. His forehead was high, his nose rather large and strong, the chin moderately pleasing. He had a good, wide, well-shaped mouth, and his dark brown hair was slightly long and parted to one side. (333)

The reader sees Ames through Carrie's eyes. She is obviously impressed by both his intellect and by his pleasing appearance. He startles her somewhat with his views, however, especially when he observes that "it's a shame for people to spend so much money this way" (333). He remarks that the clients in the restaurant are paying more for luxuries than they are worth, echoing Veblen's well-known comments. Carrie is confused, but eager to please:

She felt as if she would like to be agreeable to this young man and also there came with it, or perhaps preceded it, the slightest shade of a feeling that he was better educated than she was—that his mind was better. He seemed to look it, and the saving grace in Carrie was that she could understand that people could be wiser. She had seen a

number of people in her life who reminded her of what she had vaguely come to think of as scholars. (334)

Lawrence Hussman proposes that “Ames’s function in this scene is to corroborate and amplify Dreiser’s judgement and to begin to show Carrie that her dreams of luxury and pleasure are misguided” (Hussman 25). However, Ames’s observations on the obscenity of the display of wealth in the restaurant are not consistent with his participation in the social scene. He is a contradictory character, as is Presley, and can be used to show at least two different points of view. On the one hand, he shows that the new breed of American consumers buy into the system as knowing participants, feeling a prick of conscience but acquiescing in this facet of the American Dream. On the other hand, he shows Carrie (and the reader) that not all the consumers at the trough are oafish parvenus, that at least some are like him—scholarly, educated, and self-aware. This realisation, though, has the effect of confusing Carrie; as Philip Gerber remarks in “Dreiser: Extreme and Bloody Individualism,” Ames has “put a crack in her attitude,” leaving her “perplexed, discomfited” (qtd. in Hakutani & Fried 115). Dreiser has enabled the seed of doubt to be sown in Carrie’s mind; she is heavily influenced by the Vances, but they have introduced her to someone who criticises their lifestyle but is comfortable in their company. Lawrence Hussman suggests that much of the Ames character, both physically and philosophically, is based on Thomas Edison, whom Dreiser had interviewed for *Success* magazine in February 1898. A successful inventor, of course, is the romantic embodiment of the American Dream; an inventor, moreover, is primarily concerned with progress, not morality. On a later occasion, playing the role of Dreiser’s spokesman, he advises Carrie to improve her mind: “Read all of Balzac’s. They will do you good,” he advises Carrie (482). He then appeals to her

sense of ambition and materiality by proposing that she will have a better career as an actress if she harbours kind thoughts:

‘You can’t become self-interested, selfish, and luxurious, without having these sympathies and longings disappear, and then you will sit there and wonder what has become of them. You can’t remain tender and sympathetic, and desire to serve the world, without having it show in your face and your art. If you want to do most, do good. Serve the many. Be kind and humanitarian. Then you can’t help but be great.’ (486)

A few minutes later, however, Ames sees something in Carrie that may be a clue to the reason that she is never punished for her acquisitiveness. “There was something exceedingly human and unaffected about this woman—a something which craved neither money nor praise” (487); the reader has not yet seen this side of Carrie. The omniscient narrator often hints at an inner turmoil and a touch of conscience, but it is usually Carrie’s self-interest that wins the day. Dreiser leaves a doubt in the reader’s mind that Carrie is irredeemable; however, whilst Dreiser leaves the door open for Carrie to return to the moral fold, she remains outside.

Punishment in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* is not visited on Carrie, as it might have been in a romantic novel, but on George Hurstwood, who, as previously noted, is the most fully developed (and the most interesting) character in the novel. Like Magnus Derrick’s fate in *The Octopus*, the punishment is almost too severe for the crime. Both Norris and Dreiser have taken the theme of crime-and-punishment and meted out punishments to respectable men of substance whose only sin has been a moment of weakness. The punishments are not simply severe; they require the total humiliation and ruin of those who receive them—George Hurstwood and Magnus

Derrick, neither of whom, despite their importance, is the central character. In *An American Tragedy*, as in *McTeague* and *Thérèse Raquin*, murder has been committed, and the reader knows that according to the laws of the day, death was considered the appropriate penalty; therefore, these works simply depict contemporary morality which the reader either rejects or accepts, but cannot deny. However, Hurstwood and Derrick have not committed murder, the punishment for which has been prescribed since Biblical times; but it was, and still is in some societies, a punishment inflicted by society, primarily reflecting society's wish for retribution. The punishments received by Derrick and Hurstwood are ironic and transcendental. Magnus Derrick, financially ruined, having lost his home and his farm, has then to humble himself before his arch enemy, S. Behrman, and promise to "turn railroad"; Hurstwood becomes a Bowery bum and commits suicide. As Blanche Gelfant notes in "What More Can Carrie Want? Naturalistic Ways of Consuming Women," "Hurstwood becomes a nameless pauper who must die because his eyes once glowed at the sight of Carrie Meeber" (Pizer *Cambridge Companion* 192). The two naturalists demonstrate to the reader that in a mechanistic, indifferent universe, even good men will suffer the consequences of a momentary lapse of morals, even if brought about by a chain of events over which they have no control. In both *Sister Carrie* and *The Octopus* those characters whose morality is most questionable have the least to fear; it is those who already have fixed moral codes for whom a punishment awaits, should they transgress.

In conclusion, Dreiser and Norris have each set out a template for a naturalistic approach to fiction. Their points of view are different, but that is to be expected. They are writing from geographically and culturally separated regions of America and have educationally and socially different backgrounds. Nonetheless,

they each strove to take American literature forward in a way which would equip future generations of writers for a new approach to portraying American society in a meaningful and socially responsible way. Norris had undoubtedly formulated a tangibly aesthetic and measured approach, whereas Dreiser was writing, as Taine and Comte had insisted, from a close, personal angle. As Malcolm Bradbury puts it:

In *Sister Carrie*, Naturalism turns towards expressionism, and finds the literary means to display not only the ironies but the energies of American urban culture, or post-culture. Crane had used Naturalism as a mode of aesthetic perception and a tactic of irony. Norris had seen it as a neo-philosophy generating the plots of modern romance. Dreiser takes up the position of personal engagement; he is literally a part of the naturalist world. (Bradbury 29)

Bradbury uses the term “expressionism” to mean, as he puts it, the “position of personal engagement; he is literally a part of the naturalist world” (Bradbury 29). Dreiser could hardly be accused of the type of expressionism found in German literature and drama in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Lukács points out the ideological difference, as he sees it, between the naturalists and the expressionists:

The naturalist movement of the 1880s and the 1890s still had a certain connection to the workers’ movement — however loose, vacillating, and unclear this may have been — and owed everything positive it may have achieved to precisely this connection. Expressionism, however, could no longer make the same connection. This was above all the fault of the expressionists themselves, whose bourgeoisification, even in their oppositional strivings, was so



advanced that they could only raise even their ‘social’ questions to the level of subjective idealism [ . . . ] and could find no understanding of the social forces acting in the real world. (Lukács 84-5)

Dreiser, on the other hand, was well aware of the social forces of the real world. He guides the reader through the streets of Chicago and New York, pointing out places of interest and explaining the social context. Department stores and restaurants become much more than buildings in which to buy clothes or food; they take on an American consumerist iconography. Even Hannah and Hogg’s, where Hurstwood works, is more than a “saloon”; businessmen go there to meet and draw up plans for new ventures; Hurstwood is sucked into the world of grand ideas and big deals, and ultimately, in the setting of this male club, conceives the idea of taking Carrie from Drouet. Carrie herself is seduced by the material wealth which she sees displayed; in the department stores the goods are secondary—she wants the means to purchase. The food in the fashionable restaurants is no more nutritious or desirable to a hungry person than that which is available elsewhere more cheaply; it is simply more ostentatious. Dreiser sets out the comparisons for the reader and flags up the moral conclusions that the reader must inevitably reach.

Norris also leaves the drawing of conclusions to the reader of *The Octopus*, but his concern is the morality in art itself. His starting point is that it takes an artist to signal to the reader that there are moral decisions to be made. The literature that someone such as Dreiser produces to make a moral point has to be aesthetically and philosophically sound. Literature, believes Norris, does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it wrought in an ivory tower—art is life. Poetry, the visual arts, novels, should each tell the audience something about life itself and not idealise. It is for this reason that

he reserves so much venom for Hartrath, the literary dilettantes, and aesthetes. It would be inconceivable that Norris could ever to subscribe to the Wildean notion that “a book is either well written, or it is badly written—that is all”. Both Dreiser and Norris have shown that Naturalism and the American Novel can co-exist and that depicting America in naturalistic terms is not only possible, it is an imperative.

The three fledgling American naturalists, Crane, Norris, and Dreiser had already indicated a direction for an American fiction which incorporated not only naturalistic philosophy, but also a revised moral agenda, and a certainty that local issues could reflect greater concerns. In the following chapter, the legacy of Crane and Norris will be discussed, as will the continuing influence of the only member of the three fin-de-siècle naturalists to survive into the second decade of the twentieth century.

## **Chapter 6 - The American Century**

"It is life," he said, "and life is not always beautiful. And yet, perhaps because I am strangely made, I find something beautiful there." Jack London - *Martin Eden*.

The intention in this chapter is to examine the ways in which Naturalism was able not only to persist, but also to be a dominant force in American fiction of the first four decades of the twentieth century, when it had seemed so rooted in nineteenth-century thought and attitudes. The tradition of nineteenth-century Naturalism could be relevant in the new century only if authors from the old tradition could demonstrate a willingness to adapt their literature to a rapidly changing world. A profound difference between the emergent national literature of the United States and the British literature published just after the turn of the century is that the main pre-occupation of many American authors continued to be the quest to define an American literary voice. One of the principal questions for the modern literary historian turns on why the naturalist novel enjoyed greater success in America, whilst appearing to be a more typically European genre. This chapter will explore the possibility that the romantic element in American Naturalism and its national specificity were instrumental in the success of the twentieth-century naturalistic novel in American fiction in the period preceding World War II.

It is undeniable that there was a prevailing mood of world-weariness and *ennui* in Europe during the years preceding the turn of the century, which was in marked contrast to the spirit of anticipation in America. In Europe, the artistic response had been Decadence, reflecting a society whose morality was a necrotic,

crumbling façade. This was followed by the move towards Modernism, which began as a nervous reaction to the prospect of dealing with the future, but had gained momentum and was almost ready to dominate world art. *Fin-de-siècle* America, ever cautious, was not yet prepared for Modernism, though, and would never embrace Decadence with any enthusiasm. American artists and thinkers, noting the very great changes in American society following Reconstruction, industrialisation, and mechanisation in the latter part of the nineteenth century, had been concerned with having to respond to the growing social (as opposed to artistic) needs of the twentieth century. Whilst artists, especially Americans, still flocked to London and Paris, in America itself the new century was awaited with greater enthusiasm than in Europe. This enthusiasm, however, was tempered with caution and prudence; Ruland and Bradbury remark upon this difference:

As the new voices sounded during the 1890s the Genteel Tradition began to fragment, and by the time the century turned there was evidence of a vigorous modern mood. It did not yet have the flamboyance and challenge of the European movements of the opening years of the century; it was heavily wedded to the spirit of naturalism—a naturalism that was, however, by no means a flat statement of reality but an innovative struggle to perceive it and understand it, thereby questioning moral values, dominant social assumptions, social and political power, the limits of literary form. The new mood reaffirmed the Romantic sense of the arts as experimental, reaching to the future, distrusting the conventional values of the prevailing culture. (Ruland & Bradbury 235)

This last sentence seemingly implies a similarity of aims between Romanticism and Modernism; however, Modernism was primarily concerned with the artist's privileged role, whereas Romanticism dwelt on the role of the individual in a societal context. The novel of social realism has an aesthetic interest in the literary portrayal of the plight of the individual, rather than an artistic response to the state of society. It is for this reason that Norris and London were happy with being described as romanticists, even though their works could hardly be described as "romances" in the nineteenth-century sense. However, while Europe was making the definitive aesthetic break with Romanticism, America, as Norris had always insisted, continued to embrace the Romantic impulse as the way forward and as a mode of reform. The Utopianism of Marx himself, in which the individual becomes the seeker after a political and social ideal, gives Marxism one of its philosophically romantic elements, as does the heroic vision of the working man. In fact, Gorky, as late as 1957, still firmly believed in Romanticism as essential to the literature of reform:

Revolutionary romanticism—this essentially is a pseudonym for socialist realism, the purpose of which is not only to depict the past critically, but chiefly to promote the consolidation of revolutionary achievement in the present and a clearer view of the lofty objectives of the socialist future.

He had already declared in 1928:

I think that a mixture of realism and romanticism is necessary.

Not a realist, not a romantic, but a realist and a romantic—they are like two facets of the same being. (Becker 487)

This is exactly how Norris viewed Naturalism, in a dialectic where Naturalism was the synthesis of the opposing forces of realism and romanticism; in an essay in the *Chicago American* (August 3, 1901) Norris asks the following question:

Does Truth after all “lie in the middle”? And what school, then, is midway between the Realists and Romanticists, taking the best from each? Is it not the school of Naturalism, which strives hard for accuracy and truth? (*Criticism* 75)

However, in England, romanticism and Naturalism were still seen as oppositions by some critics. William Frierson notes that in 1902 “Andrew Lang, romanticist, naturally approved the romantic swing as a reaction against naturalistic brutality” (125). Again, the simple explanation for the apparent conflict between Naturalism and Romanticism is that not all critics are using the same terms of reference when describing Romanticism (or romanticism). The fact remains that Frank Norris, in the 1890s and again in 1901, had defined Naturalism as a romantic mode and had described Zola as a romanticist, and that the Marxists agreed that Naturalism fitted into an ideal of reformist literature. According to Rodney Livingstone, Lukács used the term “romantic anti-capitalism” to describe the kind of literature whose targets could include “machine-production, the modern division of labour, the depersonalization of individuals (Nietzsche), the growth of large towns and the break-up of small communities” (Lukács 4), and so on. Many of these targets will be familiar as concerns of the American naturalists, as well as earlier practitioners of naturalistic fiction in Europe.

The seeds of reform, if not revolution, which were so crucial to the acceptance and adoption of Naturalism as an American mode of expression were sown early in the 1890s; the second half of that decade did more to define the

*Zeitgeist* of the first part of the new century than did any period in the twentieth century itself. Therefore, this chapter will also examine some of the social reasons behind the impulse for reform which influenced so much political and social thinking in the era of Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt, when the United States was contemplating a new century—the anticipated “American century,” as Senator Albert Beveridge had declared it.

The new America had, by the turn of the century, moved on from the agrarian Puritanism which had previously dominated the nation’s psyche and was now an urbanised, city-dominated superstructure resting on a base of corporate finance and the wealth generated by city-based tycoons. The old pioneers had been replaced by entrepreneurs. Henry Adams noted in *The Education of Henry Adams* that, after a century of indecision, “the majority at last declared itself, once and for all, in favor of the capitalistic system with all its necessary machinery. All one’s friends, all one’s best citizens, reformers, churches, colleges, educated classes, had joined the banks to force submission to capitalism” (qtd. in Tindall & Shi 895). Morality had necessarily undergone similar changes and literature with pretensions to realism would have to reflect the changes in society by adapting in an appropriate way. In his introduction to Lukács’s *Essays on Realism*, Rodney Livingstone describes how authors had to adjust their stance to accommodate “romantic anti-capitalism” in literature at the turn of the twentieth century:

The anti-capitalism of the turn of the century may be distinguished from earlier critiques by the realization that capitalism had become an irreversible process. A nostalgia for earlier, traditional societies was now joined by a mood of resignation, a ‘tragic consciousness.’ (Lukács 4)

As discussed in an earlier chapter, naturalistic literature has, either in different national literatures or over time, assumed diverse forms, and one of the factors which enabled Naturalism to flourish in American literature was its flexibility. American literary works of the period became the most palpable demonstration of the ability of naturalistic fiction to adapt to regional and national issues. American literary Naturalism did not grow out of the narrow prescriptivism of European Naturalism, but had taken the various strands of its philosophy and woven them together in a different pattern. The philosophy of Herbert Spencer, to take but one example, was a far greater influence on American literature than on European; in fact, Spencer's influence on American life in general was greater than his influence on life in Britain. In *Data of Ethics* (1879) Spencer explicates his moral relativism, and how it allows for more or less adherence to moral imperatives according to the state of society: "The moral man is one whose functions [. . .] are all discharged in *degrees duly adjusted to the conditions of existence*" (Spencer 86) [Emphasis added]. As Brian Lee and Robert Reinders note:

Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer offered a scientific rationale for a laissez-faire system based on competition, and flattery for those who survived the struggle for competitive existence. Most importantly, Spencer argued that social evolution was inevitable, and that its apogee was in Western industrial society. (226)

Spencer himself put competition into a context with which Americans would be familiar:



Sentient beings have progressed from high to low types, under the law that the superior shall profit by their superiority and the inferior shall suffer from their inferiority. Conformity to this law has been, and is still, needful, not only for the continuance of life, but for the increase of happiness [. . .]. (Spencer 228)

Schopenhauer's pessimism, on the other hand, was rather more subdued in most American fiction, especially when compared with that found in the writings of George Gissing, for example. America, by now emerging as heir apparent to the once-powerful British Empire, still had the optimism of youth, whilst Queen Victoria's Empire was complacently sitting out the century, contemplating the lessons learned in the Boer Wars. Whereas America was building skyscrapers, Britain was fixing the plumbing in crumbling palaces, both literally and figuratively. American writers had been seeking a solid platform upon which to base a national literature fit for the twentieth century and were conscious of the need to promote the novel as a defining voice in the art of the "American century"; this would require a regenerative impulse.

A simplistic answer for Naturalism's greater success in America in this period is that Naturalism had started much earlier in Europe. The Old World already had a long tradition of literature, and, particularly during the nineteenth century, had seen many changes, whereas American literature had moved forward more slowly and cautiously. Even in Europe, change was not always welcomed with enthusiasm. Naturalism became the *enfant terrible* of French literature and was seen as Zola's personal crusade; Zola, until his rehabilitation in the twentieth century, was considered to be something of an upstart, with little to offer in the way of lasting literary value. He was not, in the eyes of the establishment, a

literary lion in the manner of Balzac or Flaubert, despite his lavish dinners and *soirées* where he would entertain his *côterie*. Nevertheless, Naturalism in France had become Zola's domain, and after the "Manifeste des Cinq contre *La Terre*" was published in 1887, Zolaesque Naturalism went out of fashion. J.-K.

Huysmans' defection to the Decadent movement in 1884 with the publication of *A Rebours* had also been a body blow to Naturalism's centrality to the future of literature, challenging, as it did, Zola's insistence on the social duty of the writer. By the 1890s, European Naturalism was on its last legs. Yves Chevrel calls this period the last wave of Naturalism (*dernière vague naturaliste*) and points out that certain works, whilst written earlier, were not publicly aired until some years later, often because of censorship, often giving the impression that the movement was still in progress. More significantly, he believes that Naturalism's role after 1900 was more indirect than direct:

Having gone through the school, as readers as much as authors, a great number of writers built on it, as if it were taken for granted, and the greater part was no longer a cause for dispute—even if all the innovations of Naturalism, in particular that of defining the social role of the writer, were far from having definitively triumphed.

Étant passés par son école, comme lecteurs autant que comme auteurs, bon nombre d'écrivains bâtissent sur lui comme sur un acquis dont une bonne part n'est plus remise en cause, même si toutes les innovations du naturalisme, en particulier quand il s'agit de définir le rôle social de l'écrivain, sont loin d'avoir définitivement triomphé. (Chevrel 48)

Alfred Kazin virtually paraphrases this remark in his assessment of the American writing of the thirties when he notes that “naturalism was no longer a creed or even a method: it became a reflex” and that for “protest” novelists such as Richard Wright “the classic hardness of Naturalism was instinctive” (Kazin 291). Therefore, in the twentieth-century, the naturalist perspective becomes an automatic response for a certain type of author, both in European and in American writing.

It is now commonly accepted that Naturalism did, indeed, become the most influential force on new American fiction in the early part of the twentieth century. Malcolm Bradbury describes Naturalism’s predominance more strongly, stating that “the period between *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* saw naturalism become a staple mode of American fiction” (Bradbury 33). This may be tending towards overstatement, if a rigorous definition of Naturalism were to be (or even could be) enforced; nevertheless, there is no doubt that much serious fiction incorporated positivist and determinist perspectives. Furthermore, social attitudes had changed; Richard Hofstadter points out in *The Age of Reform* that the middle-classes were ready for social and economic reform, stating that

[. . .] the middle-class citizen received quite earnestly the exhortations that charged him with personal responsibility for all kinds of social ills. It was his business to do something about them. Indeed, he must do something if he was ever to feel better. But what should he do? He was too substantial a fellow to want to make any basic changes in a society in which he was so typically a prosperous and respectable figure. What he needed, therefore, was a feeling that action was taking place, a sense that the moral tone of

things was being improved and that he had a part in this improvement. (Hofstadter 210)

One of the ways in which this notional person could have eased his conscience was by reading *McClure's* and by reading the naturalistic novels and the muckraking literature associated with Progressivism. In this way, he might persuade himself that the mere exposition of the problems besetting America meant that the problems were being dealt with. As previously noted, simply to expose social problems is sufficient to fulfil the duty of the socially responsible writer, according to Engels, Gorky, and others; therefore, if people were reading this type of literature, then the writer's duty to society had been fulfilled. That is to say, exposition of the problems might lead to reform, if the populace is sufficiently motivated by art to make the cognitive leap from seeing what is presented as fiction as being grounded in reality. However, "reform" might be too strong a political term for Hofstadter's middle-class citizen, but the word "Progressivism" did not have the same connotations of radicalism and was, therefore, more readily acceptable as the new Republican buzzword.

In the new century, Progressivism became the loose umbrella term for much of the political movement towards social reform. Even the most general modern surveys acknowledge that there was a widespread feeling that America's leaders had failed to respond to the reformist spirit which was building up among the middle-classes. In *America: A Narrative History*, Tindall and Shi note the following:

The Progressives saw themselves as engaged in a democratic crusade against the abuses of urban political bosses and corporate robber barons. Their goals were greater democracy and social

justice, honest government, more effective regulation of business, and a revived commitment to public service. What they shared was a common assumption that the complex social ills and tensions generated by the urban-industrial revolution required new responses [. . .] (Tindall & Shi 935)

Implicit in this common assumption was that American business could not be operated on a laissez-faire basis; experience had shown that the entrepreneurs had enjoyed too much freedom, had irresponsibly exploited that freedom, and had violated too many Puritan-based values for Middle America. Although the Progressives were modernisers, their paradoxical appeal was to reactionary tendencies; there was a common perception that it was more important than ever to apply “traditional” moral values to an increasingly amoral world. In the city, the cardinal virtues of justice and temperance, in particular, were giving way to the deadly sins of lust, avarice, envy, and gluttony. *Sister Carrie* shows the city in this light, even though Dreiser himself had no wish to base his moral misgivings on religious grounds. Dreiser would never be the voice of Protestant or Puritan America, despite his later belief in a benevolent “divine, creative Intelligence” which he admits in an essay called “My Creator” (1943). In this piece of writing, says Matthiessen, Dreiser declared himself “moved not only to awe, but to reverence” (Matthiessen 241). In *A Book About Myself* (1922), he declares that he had already abandoned Judaeo-Christian religion in favour of the teachings of T.H. Huxley, John Tyndall, and Herbert Spencer as early as the mid-1890s and had already stated this in a letter to H.L. Mencken in 1916:

Incidentally in Pittsburgh—1894—I discovered Herbert Spencer, and Huxley and Tyndall. They shifted my point of view

tremendously, confirmed my worst suspicions and destroyed the last remaining traces of Catholicism which I now detest. . . . At the same time I discovered Honoré de Balzac [. . .] (qtd. in Moers 73)

Therefore, the notion that the authorial narrator's moral stance in *Sister Carrie* stems from a morality based in any kind of religiosity may be safely discarded; equally, the Balzacian influence is more likely to be novelistic, or narratorial, rather than early realist morality. Dreiser adapted a modern realist morality to the urban environment; he portrayed the city as both temptress and seducer, depending on the gender of the character and left the result to determinism. In this sense, Dreiser was not on a moral crusade, nor was he muckraking, nor writing the novel of protest. As he said himself: "the greatest writers 'are not concerned with social amelioration as an end or motive. [. . .] They paint the thing as it is, leaving change to nature or to others'" (qtd. in Matthiessen 188). The background material in *Sister Carrie*, for example, is very much reportage, in so far as it is a clinical analysis of the urban environment; the plot itself becomes, as Zola described *Thérèse Raquin*, a study of temperaments. However, Dreiser's novel as a whole (leaving aside the narratorial intrusions), becomes a powerful indictment of *fin-de-siècle* urban morality and begs fundamental philosophical questions about the American Dream and how that dream is being achieved. The plot itself poses a uniquely Utilitarian question: is the American system working for the greatest good of the greatest number of people?

Given the broad spectrum of concerns, it becomes clear that the popular impulse for societal reform in America cannot have emanated from puritanical notions of duty, as might have been expected during the early nineteenth century: times had changed. Many of the reformers were socialists (in the broad sense) of

one sort or another; conversely, though, Roosevelt was not swayed by socialist rhetoric in his drive for reform—he was much more pragmatic. Most of the Progressive measures undertaken were more cosmetic than effective, especially the cases against the trusts. However, the significance is not simply that reform was in the air, but that the middle-classes, usually the most reactionary section of the populace, had been convinced by the muckrakers and other activists that if the twentieth were to be the “American century,” then American society must be seen to be progressive. It is no coincidence that the middle-classes, the “professional and opinion-making classes,” to borrow Richard Hofstadter’s epithet, were those most likely to consume the serious fiction of the day and to subscribe to those magazines which frequently featured articles by authors and journalists whose opinions and *bons mots* carried most political weight. Populism had already sown the seeds of reform in the 1890s; the work of social critics such as Jacob Riis and Thorstein Veblen had provided an impetus for the implementation of policy and legislation on social matters. Moreover, as Alfred Kazin points out:

[Veblen] was a naturalist, a more tragic-minded and finely conscious spirit than any American novelist of the naturalist generation; his final view of life was of an insane mechanism, of a fruitless struggle between man and the forces that destroy him. Yet though he had what Dreiser and Crane and Norris seemed to lack, he was not their equal as an artist. (Kazin 111-112)

Nevertheless, Veblen’s influence on both naturalistic writing and political reform was all-pervasive, despite the fact, continues Kazin, that “he despised the Progressive movement and presciently regarded it as reactionary; he owed nothing and contributed nothing directly to the intellectual ferment that attended

Progressivism. Yet his shadow falls everywhere [. . .] (112). The point that Kazin is making is that Veblen had been writing about a “whole civilisation,” not simply bits of society that required some tinkering. Veblen was not concerned with the political expedient of simply easing the conscience of Hofstadter’s middle-class citizen. To this extent, Dreiser’s depictions of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste in Chicago and New York in *Sister Carrie* have a closer relationship to Veblen’s thoughts about a societal malaise than do Norris’s depictions of capitalistic excess in *The Octopus*. In other words, both Veblen and Dreiser were pointing out a need for radical reform, not only in society, but also in the thinking that determined how society worked. Larzer Ziff notes that *Sister Carrie* was more than a “screaming protest”:

[. . .] it went deeper than that, and in its reconstruction of society from the bottom up, the mark of its honesty was as much its elaboration of commonplaces into newly discovered truths as its rejection of other fundamental tenets, specifically those concerned with marriage and success. (Ziff 341)

The radicalism of *Sister Carrie*, then, is consonant with Veblen’s demonstration of a need for fundamental reform, not just running repairs. Veblen had been writing as an economist, but the *Theory of the Leisure Class* was predictably “immediately picked up by literary people; it was Howells who wrote the review that helped to make it famous” (Kazin 106). The predictability lies in the fact that American “literary people” had seized on the works of Darwin and Herbert Spencer (often via John Fiske) and had taken on board the urgings of Taine and Comte. Taine and Comte had long been instrumental in persuading literary figures to use their art in a socially responsible way; their main thrust was



that art, especially literature, in the hands of competent artists, could be a tool for effecting social reform. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the purveyors of fiction had long shown an eagerness to embrace the “scientific” world in its many guises. Veblen’s despondent socio-economics galvanised both the literary realists and the social reformers and provided a loosely united platform that the politicians could ill-afford to ignore. The President, in particular, knew his electorate, and was conscious of the need to appease the ever-growing number of malcontents.

Many of the measures which McKinley had planned, Roosevelt promised to implement, although he did so with some caution, not wishing to alienate totally the trusts and major corporations. Purveyors of fiction, too, were noting the changing face of American politics and it becomes increasingly apparent that the politicisation of the American naturalistic novel has often been an important factor in its success. It is particularly significant that Cedarquist had remarked in *The Octopus* that both the farmer and the manufacturer faced a common enemy, “the lethargy of the public and the aggression of the trust, the two great evils of modern America” (216). As early as 1894, E.L. Godkin had said in *An Essay on the Art of Governing American Cities* that “ ‘democracy’ had not done so well as its founders had hoped it would: ‘the people’ had not shown a desire or competence to employ leading men to manage the growing cities” (qtd. in Filler 94). By the time of Roosevelt’s election victory in 1904, the public had awoken from its lethargy and the Sherman Ant-Trust Act of 1890 was being implemented with more vigour. When Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle* in 1906, the stage was already set for more legislation. However, the Act of Congress which Sinclair’s novel supposedly brought about was not concerned with workers’ rights or union recognition, but was the Meat Inspection Act (1906) which demanded

that hygienic standards of meat production and transportation be enforced. In her essay “*The Call of the Wild and The Jungle*,” Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin notes that “the miserable fate of the workers turned out to be of remoter interest to Sinclair’s readers than their realization of the contaminated food they were eating” (*Cambridge Companion* 254). The *McClure*’s muckrakers, Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell, had also struck a popular chord; in 1906 they founded the *American*, in order to devote an entire magazine to muckraking. Additionally, Roosevelt himself was notionally in favour of exposing corruption and business malpractice—the robber barons had more or less had their day, anyway, and had become pillars of the community by endowing colleges, libraries, and museums. In *World War I and the American Novel*, Stanley Cooperman notes that “protest and reform spilled over into literature, and the naturalists published exposé after exposé. Books such as *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Jungle* (1906) had all but written legislation” (Cooperman 6). Cooperman does not offer novelistic examples other than the two mentioned here; he may have had others in mind, but it would be difficult to guess at what they might be, and what legislation they had inspired, other than that already mentioned. Cooperman may be overstating the case for the power of the fiction-writer to influence legislation, and, furthermore, he may be making assumptions about the political power of naturalistic fiction that do not bear scrutiny.

One particular problem with assessing the naturalist impulse in terms of an “exposé” is that such an assessment is reductive; the implication is that the naturalistic novel equates with the novel of protest. However, the naturalist trajectory is more than simple polemic, although many naturalistic works are unequivocally polemical in content; Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) is an

example and will be discussed later in this chapter. Equally, there are many naturalistic works which are not overtly polemical in character; *Sister Carrie*, for example, does not offer a prescriptive moral stance, except in very general terms. On the other hand, Crane's *Maggie* contains much that is directed towards political and social matters, and the novel can be seen to be a naturalistic treatment of concerns about slum dwelling, poverty, and prostitution. If the two novels stand in direct comparison as regards a moral standpoint, *Sister Carrie* is much more concerned with broader questions of philosophy, morality, and human values than is *Maggie*'s tight focus on certain issues, even though the novel does not go into editorial comment on these matters.

A notable difference in *Sister Carrie* is that the city itself also becomes a character, in that the real "seducer" of Carrie is not any one of the male lovers she acquires on her journey, but is the city itself, be it Chicago or New York. Dreiser went to Chicago to live and work in 1892, and, as remarked by Lawrence Hussman, "soon observed that the city could be terribly cruel as well as fascinating, that it could devastate the ill-equipped as well as delight the financially secure." Furthermore, continues Hussman, "the cruelty of the city was a vital primer in the doctrine which he was later to know by name as the survival of the fittest" (Hussman 9). If Norris had described nature (and "the Wheat") as being indifferent, Dreiser was describing the city as actively exhibiting tendencies to favour the strong. Dreiser plainly recognised that the city would be the site of America's self-definition; the plains, prairies, and mountains might be testing grounds for those who reflected on a pioneering heritage, but the future lay with those who could survive and thrive in the metropolis. Furthermore, Dreiser, with his sense of historicity, knew that the city would become the site of the most

tightly focused human struggle and endeavour. Authors who set their novels in rural areas were, almost by definition, more likely to become known as local colourists or regionalists. Even if the underlying aesthetic in their works were to be defined as naturalistic, the inevitable parochialism could not be construed as having the force of a naturalistic commentary on humanity in general. For this reason, despite Lars Åhnebrink's inclusion of him in *The Beginnings of Naturalism*, Hamlin Garland is marginalised from the mainstream of naturalist writers by most modern critics. Literary regionalism (as opposed to setting a novel in a certain region) and literary Naturalism, as has been stated many times, do not make the perfect partnership. The American naturalistic novel, therefore, tends to concentrate on the urban population, or aspects of urbanisation which become widespread, or even universal, social issues.

In the 1890s, the American populace had become predominantly urban for the first time. Immigration, of course, was the principal reason; from 1891 to 1900, immigrants numbered 3.6 million; from 1901 to 1910 that figure had grown to just under 8.8 million (Tindall & Shi *Appendix 44*). This massive influx had a number of effects; most significantly, the majority of new immigrants remained in the cities, creating an urgent need for long-term cheap accommodation. Indigent Americans, too, were moving to the cities, in the manner of Carrie Meeber, in search of work. In the new industrialised age, women had also become seekers after the dull repetitive factory work which was to be had, and it had become one of the few choices available to unskilled country girls. Chicago and New York, unsurprisingly, became the two cities upon which most immigrant activity was focused, as well as being popular destinations for rural migrants, including poor mid-westerners such as Dreiser and his family. Another profound effect which

immigration had was to dilute familiar American values. The pattern of immigration had changed; immigrants were now arriving from other parts of Europe, bringing different religious and cultural values. Different religious affiliations would also mean different voting patterns, such as the New York Irish Catholic democrats, who would naturally feel some sort of religious bond with the Italian-Americans. As noted by Richard Hofstadter:

In the city the native Yankee-Protestant American encountered the immigrant. [. . .] The country had long been accustomed to heavy immigration, but the native Yankee was not prepared for the great shift in the sources of immigration [. . .] from the familiar English, Irish, Scandinavians, and Germans, to the peasantry of Southern and Eastern Europe. (Hofstadter 175-176)

Hofstadter goes on to say how “horrificed” the native American was by the conditions in which the immigrants lived, but more horrified by the way in which the immigrant vote was so unscrupulously usurped by the “urban machine”. The abuse of civic power by the bosses and landlords of urban America became a thorn in the side of those who sought good government and decent standards for all. The type of corruption which was rife in Tammany Hall would later be revealed as more pervasive than many Americans would have liked to admit; the extent to which Huey Long’s power in Louisiana, the *cause célèbre* of the 1930s, was based on corruption, was typical of local government throughout the United States from the 1880s onwards, especially in the big cities. Jurgis Rudkus, the hero of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, hears the rumours and “the gossip of the men” about the corruption in the meat-packing industry:

And then there was the condemned meat industry, with its endless horrors. The people of Chicago saw the government inspectors in Packingtown, and they all took that to mean that they were protected from diseased meat; they did not understand that these hundred and sixty-three inspectors had been appointed at the request of the packers [. . .] (Sinclair 116)

In fact, continues the narrator, the inspection of meat for consumption in Chicago and the rest of Illinois was carried out by “three henchmen of the local political machine” (Sinclair 116). The subtle point made by the narrator by stating that the employees of the meat-packers knew what was going on, whilst the “people of Chicago” were unaware, is that the people of Chicago and the employees of the meat-packers do not have a common forum in which such matters would have been discussed. Furthermore, the gossip of the immigrant workers does not reach the ears of the people of Chicago because the immigrants were speaking in foreign tongues—therefore, their voice remains unheard and their gossip simply circulates among the voiceless denizens of Chicago society. Sinclair’s deft use of a Lithuanian immigrant as his protagonist allows him to make a number of social and political points, such as the isolation of the immigrants and the lack of integration. He describes the slums, noting that the slum landlords are often immigrants themselves. In his descriptions of conditions for the new wave of incomers, Sinclair rarely moves out of ironic mode. The most striking use of irony is reserved for the exploitation of the immigrants, emphasising the naïveté which with they anticipate the Promised Land. Carrie Meeber may have been wide-eyed when she saw Chicago, but only because she was from a small town in Illinois; what she saw in 1889 was that Chicago was a “city of over 500,000, with

the ambition, the daring, the activity of a metropolis of a million” (*Sister Carrie* 16). What the Lithuanian arrivals saw on their arrival was “the same endless vista of ugly and dirty little wooden buildings. Here and there would be a bridge crossing a filthy creek, with hard-baked mud shores and dingy sheds and docks along it [. . .]” (Sinclair 31). Their arrival in America is in contrast to Carrie’s arrival in Chicago; Drouet “pointed out the marvels. Already vast net-works [*sic*] of tracks—the sign and insignia of Chicago—stretched on either hand”. Sinclair’s description of the filthy living conditions in Packingtown literally becomes a “literature of the sewer,” whereas Dreiser looks at the city through Carrie’s eyes, and what she sees is an adventure beckoning. Carrie does see the “dingy houses,” but only in the context of a burgeoning prosperity—hers as well as Chicago’s.

On the train, Carrie had been befriended by Drouet, whose motive had been to seduce Carrie as a willing participant, but as the train approaches Chicago, Carrie is attracted by the sights and sounds of the city. From that moment, Drouet almost becomes a pimp; initially, he extols the attractions of the city, but then it is he who introduces Carrie to Hurstwood and loses her. Rudkus Jurgis and his family, however, are exploited from the moment that they set foot on American soil. Jurgis has heard of how well-paid the American workers are, not realising that in a country where prices are higher, salaries must necessarily be higher, and that the poor in America are still poor; he has also heard other myths:

In that country, rich or poor, a man was free, it was said; he did not have to go into the army, he did not have to pay out his money to rascally officials — he might do as he pleased, and count himself as good as any other man. (29)

This is Sinclair at his most ironic, for most of the novel is concerned with paying money to “rascally officials”; moreover, the notion of equality and justice for all in America is simply revealed as a sham, especially when Jurgis finds himself tongue-tied before a judge.

‘What have you to say for yourself?’

Jurgis hesitated. What had he to say? In two years and a half he had learned to speak English for practical purposes, but these had never included the statement that someone had intimidated and seduced his wife. He tried once or twice, stammering and balking, to the annoyance of the judge [. . .] (201)

Had he been more familiar with the language, the case might have had a different outcome. The Lithuanians had yet to discover the social inequities in their new-found paradise; however, Sinclair will throw them in at the deep end and they will discover that they will be left to sink or swim. The environmental determinants and the immigrants’ ability to survive will decide their fate. The living conditions which they find in America are grim enough, but they soon find that justice is decided by expediency and that money is all-important, particularly when compared with morality, compassion, and decency. In this novel, Sinclair exposes many local issues—meat-packing, degrading working conditions, the corruption endemic in labour unions—but, more importantly, he demonstrates that much of America’s prosperity is based on a model of capitalism that allows, or even depends upon, such conditions in order to prosper. Shocking as the novel was, it was simply a documentary, as naturalistic fiction was meant to be, of American life as lived at a certain level and in a particular era, and in a peculiarly significant city.



Chicago had been the site of the Columbian Exposition of 1893 and was held up as an example of America's most forward-looking city. Unfortunately, it had also become an example of the triumph of capitalism over social responsibility. Although legislation might correct some procedural matters, it is not possible to legislate for corporate greed and government apathy if the country itself is complacent. Therefore, those novelists who are dealing in social realism in this era find themselves putting this case, more or less overtly, to the people who read their works. At the turn of the century, therefore, politicians and industrialists were not the only ones looking to a revived American outlook: artists and writers, too, were concerned with the future.

The naturalistic writing of the early 1890s had been firmly rooted in a distinguishably nineteenth-century tradition, whereas, by the middle of the decade, much of it was more forward-looking and progressive—artistically, if not yet politically. However, there were exceptions; Jack London's *Naturalism* follows a tradition of Zolaesque environmental determinism and heredity, which Norris and Crane had adopted. As noted in a previous chapter, London was a great admirer of Norris's fiction. In addition, both Norris and Crane were advocates of Roosevelt's "strenuous life," although neither adopted such a lifestyle in the way that London was to do both privately and in his fiction. London lived the strenuous life to the extent that he seriously damaged his health and died in 1916. He was one writer of this early period of the new century who incorporated determinism, social realism, and positivism into his writing whilst maintaining an unmistakably romantic perspective. His writing was also in the American idiom, in that it related to American ideals of survival and struggle. London, though, was a person of contrasts and contradictions. He was a Nietzschean idealist; a

Socialist who admired Kipling; a latter-day American frontiersman who went to London and, when he found himself unemployed and penniless, found enough material for a slum novel. Much of the reason behind his attitudes is explained in *Martin Eden* (1909) London's thinly disguised, and somewhat mythologised, autobiography. For example, London's leanings towards Spencerian positivism and Darwinism are the subject of much of Chapter 13:

And here was the man Spencer, organizing all knowledge for him, reducing everything to unity, elaborating ultimate realities, and presenting to his startled gaze a universe so concrete of realization that it was like the model of a ship such as sailors make and put into glass bottles. There was no caprice, no chance. All was law.  
(*Martin Eden* 149)

In *Martin Eden*, London revealed all that was important to him in the writer's craft. Most importantly, he put his philosophy into a literary context and, somewhat less importantly, became the first millionaire novelist. He is best remembered for *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, but he published over fifty books, in many of which he explored issues such as economic determinism, Marxism, and Nietzschean concepts, especially that of the *Übermensch*. The romantic perspective, however, is a thread which runs through most of his work; his philosophical outlook is a similar mix to that of Norris's, including an admiration for Kipling, but the supervenient component is a naturalistic view of determinants. London's universe is as mechanistic and indifferent as Norris's or Dreiser's; the harshness of life in the Klondike has the same ultimate effect as the indiscriminate consumerism of the city, or, most importantly, the omnipotence of capitalism: everybody feels the same effect, and some will triumph whilst others

will succumb. In *White Fang*, London describes the men in the Klondike as “puny adventurers, bent on colossal adventure, pitting themselves against the might of a world as remote and alien and pulseless as the abysses of space” and, in the vast wilderness, “they perceived themselves finite and small, specks and motes, moving with weak cunning and little wisdom amidst the play and interplay of the great blind elements and forces” (72). Furthermore, London also incorporates into his work the old pioneering values associated with exploration and adventure, but restated unsentimentally for the twentieth century. In *White Fang*, the she-wolf observes the fights for her favours between the male wolves—fights which end in death or mutilation:

She was made glad in vague ways by the battle, for this was the love-making of the Wild, the sex-tragedy of the natural world that was tragedy only to those that died. To those that survived it was not tragedy, but realisation and achievement. (96)

In some ways, this echoes the attitude of Dreiser’s *Carrie*, who is indifferent to the fate suffered by unsuccessful suitors. London’s extensive travels and his Nietzschean and Marxian philosophical leanings did not alter the fact that his literary voice was unerringly American, and his novelistic settings were the wilderness and the frontier where romanticism could be given full rein.

As discussed earlier, the defining impulse in the literature of the *fin-de-siècle* was the establishment of an American voice, but one with a universal appeal. In historical terms, Modernism was sweeping Europe, and many American men and women of letters were once again looking to Europe for an artistic lead, as they had in the nineteenth century. The Expatriates seemed to show a lack of interest in furthering the cause of home-grown American literature.

Norris and Crane had gleaned artistic impetus from their experiences in Europe, then returned to America to write. The importance of this is that they could still draw on external influences whilst simultaneously avoiding accusations of foreignness. The literary criticism of Frank Norris, much of which continued to be published after his death, was crucial to an understanding of what would be expected of a new generation of novelists. Stephen Crane had written the most compelling and cogent expression of American slum fiction; Norris had set out an aesthetic argument for romantic fiction with a naturalistic philosophy as its underlying rationale, and Dreiser had used expressionism—becoming an authorial participant in his novels—as a vehicle for portraying American society in a naturalistic mode. Norris, Crane, and Dreiser had thus set out a template for American deterministic fiction at the turn of the century.

Of the three most significant pioneers of American literary Naturalism, Dreiser was the only one to survive beyond 1902, and it is Dreiser who links the nineteenth-century break from the Genteel Tradition with a purposeful social(ist) realism suited to the twentieth century. A cursory glance at a chronology of American Naturalism would show that Dreiser published *Sister Carrie* in 1900 and published no more fiction for eleven years. In fact, *Sister Carrie* (and its author) was little known in America until its republication in 1911. William Heinemann had published it in London and although it received a mixed reception, there were some favourable reviews. Dorothy Dudley recounts the visit of William J. Locke, English author and an admirer of Dreiser's to New York in 1908. He asked after Dreiser, but the waiting reporters did not know the name:

“The author of *Sister Carrie*!” — They did not know it.

“Americans do not know,” he said, “that England looks upon *Sister*

*Carrie* as the finest American novel sent over in the last twenty years, and to Dreiser as the biggest American novelist who has sent us anything, and is waiting for its successor?" (Dudley 234)

American publishers were sufficiently impressed with *Sister Carrie*'s reception abroad to consider republication; the novel was re-issued, and Dreiser's reputation as a novelist grew to a respectable level, even if the novel itself had a mixed reception. He had been earning a good living as a literary journalist and planning his next novel, which would eventually be entitled *Jennie Gerhardt*. He wrote some forty chapters immediately after the publication of *Carrie*, but did not resume serious work on *The Transgressor*, as he originally called his novel, until he had put both his personal and professional life into some sort of order. *Jennie Gerhardt* is not as accomplished as *Carrie*, nor is it as self-consciously naturalistic. It does, however, offer an interesting insight into the direction in which Dreiser was moving as the twentieth century got under way. Dreiser continued to experiment with fiction throughout his career, and whilst a naturalistic thread runs through much of his work, there is much evidence that he was never satisfied with any one particular approach.

In *Jennie Gerhardt*, Dreiser chronicles religious dogma, poverty, and Victorian morality. As T.G. Rosenthal notes in his introduction:

That Dreiser intended the book to be a kind of abstracted moral commentary on late nineteenth century morals and manners, with his heroine as an archetype rather than an individual, is clear from his first title when the book was barely begun. (*Jennie Gerhardt* 6)

However, it becomes apparent that Dreiser moves away from the abstract, and the finished novel becomes, like *Sister Carrie*, an exploration of society's inequities

and injustices. However, even as Norris, Crane, and Dreiser, the influential giants of *fin-de-siècle* American literature, were formulating a new expression of the American literary voice, a new generation of naturalistic writers was already emerging: Jack London and Upton Sinclair, in particular. American society was more than ready for reform, and Naturalism was perceived as the literature of Progressivism and the reform movement. Dreiser, though, with his new found reputation, was to remain a literary force for some time, and many young authors were now coming under his influence.

Having published *Jennie Gerhardt* in 1911, Dreiser went on to produce his most outstanding novel in 1925. *An American Tragedy* is arguably Dreiser's most artistically accomplished novel. During the years of World War I, Dreiser had made the acquaintance of several of America's most influential writers and poets. The Chicago group with whom Dreiser associated consisted of such luminaries as Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, and Ezra Pound—Anderson and Masters, in particular, were great admirers of Dreiser. Perturbed by the relatively mediocre reception of *The Titan* and *The Financier*, compared with the success of *Jennie Gerhardt*, followed by the lamentable failure of *The "Genius"*, Dreiser did not continue with his proposed trilogy of "business" novels, of which *The Financier* and *The Titan* had been the first two, despite encouraging words from Anderson and Masters and the ever-faithful and supportive H.L. Mencken. (*The "Genius"* was suppressed by the publishers for some years, owing to a threatened court case for profanity, but they eventually published it). The third was to be called *The Stoic*, but was only published posthumously in 1947. However, in the nineteen-twenties, Dreiser had started work on *An American Tragedy*, a fictional re-working of a newspaper story which

had hit the headlines in 1906. In this novel, Dreiser reverts to a more “traditional” type of Naturalism, but now attributes the actions and reactions of his characters to “chemisms”—an ungainly word, but one which he started to use some years after encountering the works of physiologist Jacques Loeb.

Dreiser had been studying the theories put forward by Loeb, who was Professor of Physiology at the University of Chicago at the same time as Thorstein Veblen was there in the 1890s. Loeb moved to the Rockefeller Institute in 1910, and it was there, according to Ellen Moers in *Two Dreisers*, that Dreiser sought him out whilst drafting *An American Tragedy*.

During those years, Loeb’s influence at Rockefeller was helping to provide a path for the convergence of the life sciences with the physics and chemistry of the twentieth century, and under his guidance Dreiser moved along the same path somewhat better informed than the majority of his literary colleagues. Loeb’s mechanistic approach to motive, consciousness, and the human condition shaped the ideas behind *An American Tragedy*. (Moers 242)

Dreiser was profoundly influenced by Loeb, as he had been by Spencer, Huxley, and Tyndall. One of the possible reasons for Loeb’s attraction to the author is that he found Loeb’s scientific papers immensely readable, as they were “presented in a lucid prose that Dreiser appreciated” (Moers 243). It is no coincidence that the works of both Veblen and Loeb, who were friends as well as colleagues, gained currency among literary people: firstly they were accredited scientists, and secondly they knew how to communicate their ideas to a non-scientific, but receptive, audience. “Chemisms” form part of Loeb’s mechanistic explanation of

biological actions, but Dreiser could have found the word in any number of scientific articles and essays. It is a word to which Trilling took exception in “Reality in America,” but Dreiser uses it in much the same sense as the word “synapse” is commonly used nowadays to denote the site of biochemical brain processes. In his eagerness to embrace contemporary science and scientific language, Dreiser may have been unaware how much scepticism he would arouse. He was plainly on a mission to take literature into the twentieth century, and for this reason, he quite deliberately incorporated into his work not only Loeb’s ideas, but those of psychiatrist Abraham Arden Brill, who translated Freud, and neurologist Horace Westlake Frink. Ellen Moers recounts that “[i]n order to write the murder scenes at the center of the novel, Dreiser had to draw on new technical resources, and, largely through his relationship with Brill, he must have found them” (267). Freudianism also provided a language which Dreiser could use to describe the forces driving Clyde to commit his crime:

Like the appearance in the *Tragedy* of phrases such as “sex-inhibitions,” “a powerful compulsion,” “masochistic yearning,” “sadistic trait,” and “the repressed and protesting libido,” the appearance of “chemism” should probably be considered a symptomatic residue of Freudian jargon. (Moers 261)

Dreiser demonstrates, therefore, one way in which Naturalism is ready to take on the demands of the twentieth century; the author maintains the naturalist aesthetic, but incorporates innovations in the life sciences which will reinforce his point and provide an explanation as to how science attempts to explain human motives in a mechanistic way. The genesis of the plot of *An American Tragedy* has been well chronicled. Donald Pizer, in *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, notes



that Dreiser had, in his youth, read magazine stories chronicling the American myth of success—that of the

[. . .] poor young man who marries well and thereby achieves prominence and luxury [. . .]

When Dreiser was a young reporter in St. Louis, he began to notice the prevalence of a crime which suggested the perniciousness of this myth, given the weaknesses of human nature. For in instance after instance, a young man resorted to murder when faced with the insoluble dilemma of a socially desirable match and an obstacle to that match. (203)

The plot has echoes of *Sister Carrie*, in that the central character is seduced by wealth and position, falling from grace as a result. Clyde Griffiths, whose family are the poor relations of the wealthy Griffiths family, goes to work for the wealthy relatives after a chance meeting with his uncle. He becomes embroiled in family politics and social niceties which he ill understands; he yearns, however, for the social status of the wealthy relatives. He forms a relationship with a factory girl, Roberta Alden, but Clyde becomes aware that his future in the circle of the wealthy Griffiths is in jeopardy if he does not marry someone of their class, such as the socially acceptable Sondra Finchley. He is falling in love with Roberta, but he sees her as an obstacle to his aspirations to social eminence:

[H]e could see now how he could be very happy with her if only he did not need to marry her. For now his ambition toward marriage had been firmly magnetized by the world to which the Griffiths belonged. (258)

At this point in the novel, Clyde is torn between his genuine affection for Roberta and his ambition, but he knows that social status is a reality to be faced if he is to make his way in the world. When Roberta becomes pregnant, Clyde becomes desperate and contemplates murder as a way out. Like Dreiser, he has read a story in a newspaper about a girl who has perished whilst out boating with her boyfriend. The story upon which Dreiser had based Clyde's "crime" was well known to the American public as the celebrated murder trial of Chester Gillette. However, Dreiser leaves some doubt as to whether Clyde really meant to murder Roberta when the moment comes. As F.O. Matthiessen notes:

Yet Roberta's actual death was accidental, since the boat into which Clyde lured her upon the lake overturned at a moment when he had not willed it. The ultimate range of Dreiser's theme thereby became the terrible and baffling problem of justice. (Matthiessen 192)

After he has been arrested for the murder, Clyde mentally goes over the events in the boat and how much he should tell the police:

That he knew Roberta, of course, had been up there with her, for that matter—but that he had never intended to kill her—that her drowning was an accident. For he had not struck her at all, except by accident, had he? (*An American Tragedy* 563)

Dreiser had read Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in 1916 and was greatly impressed, especially by the character of Raskolnikov. However, Clyde is not a Raskolnikov figure; he does not question society, but is swept along by it. Throughout the novel, Dreiser seems resolved not to allow Clyde responsibility for any of the events in his life and portrays Clyde as a victim of forces outside

himself. Apart from the posited effect of “chemisms,” which would preclude Clyde’s having free will, there are socio-political determinants, too. The trial, which occupies the last third of the book, is a political contest between the Republicans and Democrats, who are represented by the prosecution and the defence respectively. In the same way as Upton Sinclair’s Lithuanian immigrants are unable to secure justice because of their unfamiliarity with the language, Clyde Griffiths is equally disadvantaged, simply through his being an outsider, in so far as the American justice system is itself a closed world. Dreiser examines the justice system and finds it lacking; a person can be sentenced to death without even understanding the mechanism which enables such a punishment to be carried out.

The politics of justice are also under scrutiny in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), when Bigger Thomas is defended by a Communist lawyer, Max. A victory for Max would be a feather in the cap of the legal branch of the Communist Party of America. Bigger Thomas, like other characters in naturalistic literature, is swept along through life, always subject to forces outside his understanding or control. Wright’s ability to present Bigger as a victim of social forces was not, however, accepted by all critics; James Baldwin took issue with the implicit assumption that Wright, as a black man, could take the objective naturalist stance. Irving Howe paraphrases Baldwin’s objections:

What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what could it be in this country? How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried? (Howe 1)

It seems that Baldwin and Howe are asking if a black man can write in what they see as a naturalistic mode if the author is too conditioned by his background to write dispassionately and without violence. Baldwin feels that violence is too much a part of the Afro-American experience to absent itself from novels by black writers in America. In *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin discusses at length the violence to be found in what he calls "The Revival of Naturalism" of the 1930s. He suggests that the left-wing writers of this period fell back on Naturalism because its aesthetic permitted, demanded even, a violence that would have been out of place in alternative modes of expression. James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, and Erskine Caldwell are three authors whom he describes as "tough-guy naturalists;" their Naturalism, asserts Kazin, stems from writing about a country in crisis. America had just emerged from the Depression and Europe was in disorder; America's involvement in World War I meant that cultural isolationism was no longer an option. War had become a universal theme, but one which could be adapted to local or national responses. Dos Passos wrote, as would be expected, from a specifically American perspective. *U.S.A.*, a hybrid of modernist style and naturalist aesthetic, is not an anachronistic throwback to Norris and Dreiser, but is very much a novel of the thirties. However, the author does not let the reader forget the reformist origins of American literary Naturalism; Paxton Hibbert, one of the central characters "believed passionately in Roosevelt, and righteousness and reform, and the antitrust laws, the Big Stick that was going to scare away the grafters and the malefactors of great wealth and get the common man his due" (Dos Passos 485). The young writers of this era wanted to write muscular prose; no longer was literature seen as effeminate; if anything, it was the articulation of a new version of the "strenuous life," in which violence, street-life,

crime, and passion were allowed full rein. Kazin sees this new Naturalism as a break from the mechanistic thought behind the Zolaesque tradition, but one which, nonetheless had the philosophical determinism of the nineteenth-century predecessors.

An important component in the new Naturalism was something upon which Norris had insisted—disdain for “literariness” and pretension. Literariness in this sense may be construed as the placing of literature in an Arnoldian, sterile place, on an elevated platform to which only the elite have access. Writers such as Norris and London, Dos Passos and James T. Farrell, wanted literature to be the expression of life as it is lived, not an idealised version of life, where good always conquers evil and justice prevails.

Dos Passos and Farrell not only write about passion and violence, they write with passion and violence. By doing this, they are living the strenuous life through their literature; the concerns that Howells and James had about “literature” being effete and effeminate are not the concerns of the new naturalists. They already have the confidence to write the stories of the mean streets without holding back. Furthermore, their attitude towards reform and amelioration seems to be that of Dreiser: the harsh facts of life are in the novel, and if they are unpleasant, society must seek the solutions, not the novelist.

The reasons for American literary Naturalism’s comparative success become more transparent. In simplistic terms, America was ready to embrace a literature which advocated, however implicitly, a reassessment of what America should be doing socially, in order to reaffirm its pre-eminence in Western civilisation. Mere economic success was not enough, if the price was a disenfranchised underclass, such as the one Jack London had found in the slums

of London. As Malcolm Bradbury has noted, the literature of the 1890s, as well as reflecting the enormous changes taking place in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, was paving the way for the literature of the new century:

The decade also pointed in two important directions for the future.

One was to the growth of naturalism as a native American philosophy suited to the nation's evolution, as its experience moved towards city life, technological development, social Progressivism and the world of the immigrant melting pot. The other was to a concern with aesthetic form and psychological consciousness, which looked beyond the material world into the flux of feeling and sensation and the potential of art. (Bradbury 23-24)

The most significant phrase in this quotation is “naturalism as a native American philosophy”; Naturalism has been described so often, both by its defenders and by its denigrators, as a French “movement” or “school”. As mentioned earlier, however, different national literatures adapted the French model to their own cultural needs. By the turn of the century, American literature had found a vehicle which could properly express American literary concerns about evolution—not simply that of a species, but of a country. America had already experienced revolution, and was now ready to evolve. Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman had already foreseen that America had much upon which to draw if the American experience were to be defined, but theirs was an America steeped in rural, pioneering, frontier values. In 1882, Whitman extols the virtues of naked mudbaths and sunbathing, something not possible for city-dwellers; he describes the urban population as “pure, sick, prurient humanity in

cities” (Whitman 269). However, in the same year, he found himself in New York; he noted that “the brief total of the impressions, the human qualities of these vast cities, is to me comforting, even heroic beyond statement” (272). Whitman is not, however, contradicting himself; he is acknowledging that rural and urban values do not equate. There are, in the vastness of America, rural idylls, in which man and Nature may happily commune; by contrast, the cities possess qualities of communal heroism. In the same way, Dreiser positively celebrates the city in terms of its vibrancy, its variety, and, in particular, its innovation. Equally, he brings the reader’s attention to the inequities, the cruelty, and the price to be paid for urbanisation. Hungry men are pressed into service as strike-breakers, pitting worker against worker; women work in sweat-shops in order to pay excessive rents for cramped accommodation and learn to commodify their sexual favours. Out of sight of the glittering façades of the swanky restaurants and department stores stood the ugly tenements, breeding ground for disease, alcoholism, and vice. These were the facts of city life in modern America at the end of the nineteenth century, and the comfortable middle-classes were becoming increasingly aware that there was a problem. In literary terms, American writers had finally shaken off the colonial yoke; whilst dealing with problems at home, it was equally important to incorporate into fiction America’s place in international trade and politics.

American writers had been consciously trying to divest themselves of the English imperial legacy, in the arts as well as ideologically, for many years. The difficulty, quite naturally, lay in the sharing of a common language. However, to borrow from Saussure, where the *langue* remained largely similar, the national *paroles* established a cultural difference. The language used in American

literature at the turn of the century was the language of a confident world power: the venture-capitalist, Cedarquist, in the last few pages of *The Octopus* tells Presley of his plans: “Tell the men of the East to look out for the men of the West. The irrepressible Yank is knocking at the doors of their temples, and he will want to sell ’em carpet-sweepers for their harems and electric-light plants for their temple shrines” (455). The language here is reminiscent of that of Drouet, the itinerant “drummer” in *Sister Carrie*. The message that Cedarquist is conveying is that America can supply the consumer needs of the world; what may seem to be simple household goods in America can be marketed as cultural accessories in other parts of the world. At the same time as the American salesman is persuading the Oriental to buy American goods, he is patriotically spreading American consumerist imperialism; cultural otherness will be subsumed by Western-style capitalist hegemony. Strangely, though, Cedarquist has described this inevitability as part of an Anglo-Saxon impulse, rather than American. “We’ll carry our wheat into Asia yet. The Anglo-Saxon started from there at the beginning of everything, and it’s manifest destiny that he must circle the globe and fetch up where he began his march” (455). Cedarquist is voicing something that Norris may feel is a justification for the anticipated hegemony of the English language. Norris may have got this idea from John Fiske’s *American Political Ideas* (1885), in which Fiske “stressed the superior character of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ institutions and peoples. The English ‘race,’ he argued was destined to dominate the globe” (qtd. in Tindall & Shi 904). Whilst it is true that Indo-Germanic languages have their origins in pre-Sanskrit India, there is no reason why Anglo-Saxon peoples in general should subscribe to the concept of John Louis O’Sullivan’s pronouncement in 1845. The idea of “manifest destiny” is very



much an American justification for expropriation of territories and an imperialist ethic. Using Cedarquist as a mouthpiece, Norris is inserting a piece of Fiske's racial Darwinism, and there is also something Kiplingesque about it, but it hardly seems an inclusively "American" sentiment. The reader who believes that Cedarquist is Norris's voice of capitalist rationality may well infer that Norris sees some sort of determinism in the continuing expansion of Anglo-Saxon culture, and, like Kipling, believed that imperialism was simply the way of the world. This time, though, the imperialism is based on trade, rather than military conquest.

The success of American Naturalism appears, therefore, to be a triumph of socially committed writing, coupled with a Zolaesque insistence on truthfulness, however unpleasant. In addition, the writers of the twentieth century had already been alerted to the importance of maintaining an American literary voice, as well as giving a universality to their fiction. One of the elements of American writing would be that fiction as "literature" did not have to be the stylised delicacy of James and Howells, but could be, and ought to be, a reflection of the toughness and harshness of the twentieth century, coupled with an American belief that the individual had an innate capability to overcome the obstacles placed by a mechanistic and unfeeling universe. On the other hand, there would always be those who were unable to overcome these hazards; the unfortunates who were incapable of withstanding environmental pressures would be the victims, either morally or materially. The winners, too, could be divided into those who lost their soul or integrity, or lost material wealth, and only appeared to win; even White Fang survives only as a trained pet of "the gods". However, the failure was not theirs alone; society failed them, despite their best efforts. The naturalist's deterministic pessimism is a comment on society, not on the individual, and the

individual is shown as always striving to overcome mechanistic forces over which he cannot have control, but only hope to temporarily subdue. In this sense, American naturalism will always be a romantic depiction of the individual struggle to prevail against both a hostile environment, wherein the laws are those of the human jungle, and the natural antagonism of an indifferent universe whose physical laws are beyond the control of any man.

In the concluding chapter there will be further discussion on the role of romanticism in American naturalistic fiction. A common misconception regarding Naturalism is that it is a philosophical view of mankind in general which fails to deal with the individual; in fact, the opposite is true. Whilst Zola and many French naturalists tended theoretically to concern themselves with the typical, the novels themselves were tightly focused on the individual as representative of the type. In the American version of Naturalism, the depiction of the individual engaged in a struggle against mechanistic forces emphasises the romanticism inherent in American literature of the period.

## **Chapter 7 - Conclusion**

"Greatest has been the service of the Naturalistic school to the cause of labor and the cause of women" - Roger Sherman Loomis.

"What was once a means of treating material truthfully has been turned, through a long process of depreciation, into a mere convention of truthfulness, devoid of any significant, or even clearly definable literary purpose or design." - Philip Rahv.

In a study such as the foregoing, which surveys different national literatures over several periods, a question which frequently arises is that of the canon and its dependence on, or relationship with, genre. There are a significant number of writers who, in their day, enjoyed great popularity, both critical and commercial, and whose literary reputation has not survived. One such example is Alphonse Daudet: with the exception of a recent book about his sufferings when he succumbed to tertiary syphilis, there has been remarkable little written about him in the past two centuries, except in the context of his friendship with Zola. If he is known at all by Anglophones, it is only for *Letters from my Windmill* and, less so, for *Tartarin of Tarascon*. Frederick Davies notes in his introduction to *Letters from my Windmill* that "[a]part from Anatole France, it is difficult to think of any French literary figure of such international eminence during his life whose reputation has suffered such an eclipse since his death" (Davies 9). In English literature, Arthur Morrison is little known outside Victorianist circles, yet his *Tales of Mean Streets* and *Child of the Jago* sold well; he enjoyed a solid reputation, and his work provoked as much outrage as that of the other naturalists of his period. This conclusion will show that one reason for the decline of formerly solid reputations is the later categorisation of works and the influence of genre on reader reception.

Both Daudet and Morrison are frequently mentioned in studies of Naturalism and its offshoots, yet neither has achieved lasting recognition. There are many others, of course, who could be included in such a list, but these two authors are, in many ways, representative of those authors who become victims of canonical vagaries. Jack London could have become another example, but for his immense fame; *People of the Abyss*, however, in at least one college library, is not to be found in the American fiction section, but is indexed under the Dewey classmark for “Social Studies”. Whilst there are good reasons for such classification, the fact remains that fictionalised, or dramatised, accounts of real events fall between two stools—they have characteristics of both reportage and fiction, and could be read as either. Zola would have been pleased to see his “human documents” on the sociology shelves among the other “natural sciences”; Comte had coined the term “sociology,” and Zola had followed Comte’s positivist philosophy and tried to apply scientific methodology to literature. Therefore, the contrast between naturalistic fiction and observable reality, as discussed below, became less distinct.

The Victorian era was an age in which scientific discovery and innovation were assuming a respectability and mystique, despite there being no professional specialists who were called “scientists” as such. Hence, many writers of fiction sought to invest their works with theories—scientific, pseudo-scientific, or simply fanciful—which reflected the new age of discovery. George Moore, in *Literature at Nurse*, raged at Charles Mudie that he hated him for a number of reasons; one, said Moore, was that “you feel not the spirit of scientific inquiry which is bearing our age along” (Freeman 91). Conan Doyle, as another kind of example, is said to have based Sherlock Holmes on Scottish physician Joseph Bell, but also made his detective a gentleman polymath, with

many counterparts in Victorian society. Doyle was not merely inventing a new kind of detective; he was writing in the spirit of the time and found not only a contemporary receptive audience, but also achieved critical and commercial longevity for a variety of reasons. Holmes made science a tool of detective work and reduced its application to a matter of knowing the right kind of science to apply, without intellectualising, but using simple logic to explain it; Conan Doyle presented the use of science as an inevitability. Using what is now known as a science, Arthur Morrison, although ostensibly writing fiction, based his short stories on research in London slums; his short stories, whilst rightly categorised as fiction, were based on the results of sociological case-studies. In the same way, some of Stephen Crane's journalistic pieces were also based on time spent in the Bowery gathering information and reporting on conditions in the slums of New York. These social studies were taken as being serious reportage and seen as a responsible and respectable journalistic enterprise. However, the novelistic versions of studies of this type, called variously "slum fiction" or "new realism"—both of which were naturalistic in content—were subject to a different set of criteria. Regardless of the novelist's conscientious reporting of minutiae, and however factually correct the events, the product presented for criticism was a novel. The Goncourts and Zola might contest the nomenclature, which, in French, of course, has cognates and connotations of Romanesque, romance, romanticising, and so on, but they were stuck with the genre of the novel itself. Genre is at the heart of the formation of the canon and has an important part to play in how critics, the academy, and the reading public variously influence the way in which certain works become canonical.

One of the aims of genre is to influence the way in which the reader approaches a piece of work; genre produces expectations, and whilst, as Jauss explains in *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory* (1967), the “horizon of expectations” will inevitably shift, the reader and the critic approach a certain genre of work with pre-conceived ideas about its likely content and purpose. Jauss’s theories on reader reception are particularly appropriate to the early reactions to literary Naturalism and to the formation of the genre:

[T]he specific reception which the author anticipates from the reader of a particular work can be achieved, even if the explicit signals are missing, by three generally acceptable means: first by the familiar standards or the inherent poetry of the genre; second, by the implicit relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical context; and third, by the *contrast between fiction and reality*, between the poetic and the practical function of language, which the reflective reader can always realise while he is reading. The third factor includes the possibility that the reader of a new work has to perceive it not only within the narrow horizon of his literary expectations, but *also within the wider horizon of his experience of life*.

(Rice & Waugh 86) [Emphasis added]

Jauss’s theory is particularly applicable to this study of naturalistic literature for a number of reasons: firstly, because the perception that a new genre has been formed is entirely dependent on critical consensus. The way in which Jauss’s statement relates the poetics of the Goncourts and Zola’s theoretical prescriptivism to reader reception has implications both for the perceived literary nature of Naturalism and for the re-definition

of the novel *qua* genre. In the preface to *Germinie Lacerteux* the Goncourts ask the reader to suspend previous expectations as to what a novel should be when they say that “the public loves false novels; this is a true one.” Zola asks that the novel be considered a “human document” and that the novelist is taking on a scientific role; the Goncourts declare that the novel is “contemporary Moral History”. However, the reception of their works, and those writing similar types of fiction, is based on literary merits; the works are judged primarily by literary scholars, and only incidentally by scientists or historians.

Secondly, many of the works of slum fiction which have been discussed in earlier chapters challenge the boundaries between fiction, fact, reality and reportage. It will often be necessary to re-define the criteria being used to locate the work in one genre or another in order to accommodate the genre to the work or vice versa. For example, the journalistic pieces by Stephen Crane, whilst appearing as factual reportage in a newspaper, may find themselves in an anthology of naturalistic short stories, sitting comfortably alongside fictional pieces. The literary reader may or may not be concerned with whether any or all of the works are fictionalised accounts of actual events or realistic accounts of fictional events. The historian may have a rather different view; the slum fiction of Arthur Morrison or Jack London’s *People of the Abyss* provide perfectly acceptable accounts of London slum dwelling and the lives of the poor, but the historian is more likely to seek out dry historical surveys rather than literary works, however accurate their depictions and portrayals. The reader’s expectations of “history” are different from those of “fiction,” and it is in the reader’s expectations that the distinction made between fiction and reality is made. Therefore, when Zola declares the naturalistic novel to be above genre, or outside its purview, he denies the reader the opportunity to

assess naturalistic works as a part of a literary tradition, which begs the question as to how, then, the critic should judge such works. Fortunately, Zola's exhortations as to genre have been ignored by successive generations of critics, and naturalistic works have become part of the tradition and development of fiction.

As has been shown, the beginnings of Naturalism as a literary mode were apparent some time before Zola formulated its aesthetic aims. Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers had laid the foundations upon which Zola would build, and Balzac's realism had provided the impetus to write from life as observed by the novelist. Throughout much of the nineteenth century in French and English literature, the emphasis was on the novelist's observation rather than on imagination. This emphasis became increasingly significant as the "scientific" approach assumed greater importance in the role of the realistic novelist; imagination and creativity were seen as obstacles to and distractions from the truthful depiction of "real" life. However, whilst Balzac had been observing and commenting on the world of the *petite bourgeoisie*, the Goncourts wanted to concentrate their observations on the lower echelons—the streets. They were curious to know if "the misfortunes of the little people and the poor could arouse interest, emotion, and pity to the same degree as the misfortunes of the great and rich" (Becker 118). This query appears in "On True Novels," where the Goncourts also state that the novel has become "contemporary Moral History [*sic*]" and that its job is to teach compassion. Zola, too, believed that novelist's task was to arouse social awareness and, as he put it, to "regulate" life and society. Given these publicly declared aims, the modern literary historian might ask why the naturalistic novel generated such opprobrium and was so denigrated by religious bodies, politicians, and literary critics. As noted earlier, one answer is that it



attacked many of the myths that allowed injustice and corruption to be perpetuated, but these were also part of the same mythology upon which society depended for morality; attempts to undermine the myths, therefore, were perceived as antisocial and evil. A small sample of the naturalistic novels mentioned in earlier chapters demonstrates the extent of Naturalism's iconoclasm: the myths of the family as a safe refuge, of the state as benevolent patriarch, of material success through honest effort, are all exploded. Social and political stability depends on the persistence of such myths, so it is particularly significant that there was political opposition in France to the naturalist novel. Critical opposition very often stemmed from an aversion to the representation of the ugliness of life as art, whereas political opposition arose out of a desire to suppress the representation of French life at the lower level as sordid; such a portrayal obviously reflects badly on those who allow such ugliness to exist. Charles Floquet's attack on Zola, "calumniator of the people," decried Zola's depiction of the working classes as wretched and bestial in his novel, *L'Assommoir*. Such a novel, thundered Floquet, would only "arm the forces of reaction" (Deffoux 39); quite what the reactionaries would do when armed is not made clear. There was no movement to suppress the working class, and the poor would simply remain wretched, despite Floquet's implication that they should be otherwise depicted.

After Naturalism's initial successes in France, there were critics who were only too keen to announce its demise. Whilst it is true that much of the energy of the French naturalist movement had dissipated by the 1870s, its influence remained. From Zola's statements, this train of events would only confirm his belief that Naturalism was not a school, simply a progression of the novel. It was to be expected that the novel would make further progress and that Naturalism, or the scientific method, would be another

step forward in a developmental process. Roger Martin du Gard, though, was an author who emulated Zola in the twentieth century with his *roman-fleuve* about one family, the Thibaults, and incorporated many of what would still be considered to be naturalistic elements. In France, however, his work was eclipsed by more forward-looking writers, including the Modernists and the Unanimists, and Naturalism did, indeed, appear dated.

In England, also, a variety of Naturalism persisted for a while, but did not have popular appeal. Works appeared which bore the hallmarks of Naturalism, but their authors were not naturalists in any philosophical or theoretical sense. Most English authors gave the appearance of suppressing “French tendencies” in their work. One exception was Arnold Bennett, whose influences were the Goncourts and Maupassant; in this respect, his literary models were similar to those of George Moore. Bennett was a special case, however; he was not consciously modifying earlier works and anglicising them, as Moore had sought to do, but applying an English aesthetic to a Continental model of the novel. In 1923, Bennett’s *Riceyman’s Steps* was published; in many respects, this novel can be considered the last truly naturalistic English work.

Significantly, it remained out of print for some years and, although an edition was published in 1983 in America, is not likely to be re-issued; however, a number of other Bennett works have been considered of sufficient importance or interest to remain in print since their first appearance, but these works were realist, not naturalist. Thus, the critic and historian encounter another anomaly in canon formation and genre allocation: when most of the works of a well-known author are of a kind there is a tendency to make assumptions about all of the works in a given period of the author’s career, unless the work is an obvious departure, such as the travel writings of George Gissing. In popular

fiction, it is a commonplace for the author to use different pseudonyms to flag up a different genre to the reader. However, in “literary” fiction, this is not so frequent, and the result is that some works are artificially forced into genres where they clearly do not belong. Quite *why* Bennett should have reverted to an outdated novelistic form after having written his earlier realism is irrelevant to the genre student; the fact remains that he did.

A similar example of a naturalistic work by an author not principally known as a naturalist is Maugham’s *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), which is frequently mentioned in scholarly works on the English naturalist period, but rarely elsewhere. At the time of its publication, it should be noted, this novel was seen, by some critics, as depicting unalloyed misery, without allowing that the poor and wretched find moments of joy in their humble existence. Novels about the poor, it need hardly be said, do not need to dwell solely on the miserable aspects of life, nor do they have to be patronising; Walter Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole* (1933) compassionately describes a working-class community in the North of England and displays many of the characteristics of naturalistic writing. Greenwood, usually described as a “proletarian” writer, took the theme of working-class poverty, which is shown to be a root cause of moral compromise and decline. There are many similarities of plot and character with naturalistic novels; Greenwood describes a “holy trinity” of false hopes:

Price and Jones’s pawnshop stood at one point of a triangle; the other two points were occupied respectively by a church and a palatial beerhouse, each large, commodious and convenient. (27)

Thus, the inhabitants of Hanky Park, the gloomy Northern setting of the novel, are offered ready money, redemption, and oblivion within a few short paces. The book is set in the years of the Depression, and Greenwood depicts his principal characters unsentimentally, but not without affection. The Hardcastle family, central to the plot, have many echoes of the Johnsons in *Maggie*, with their indignant claims to respectability; the Marxist union organiser, Larry Meath, becomes a sacrificial lamb, like Hurstwood; Sally Hardcastle is reminiscent of both Carrie Meeber and Maggie Johnson, when she finds that making moral compromises will enable her to find a job for her father and enjoy relative prosperity herself. Consumerism and false expectations, in the form of window-shopping for furniture and household goods, is represented almost exactly as in *Sister Carrie*. Despite all of these similarities, however, critics have not been eager to categorise *Love on the Dole* as anything but “proletarian” or a novel of the “working class”. This novel stands as a prime example of what might be called genre re-allocation; Naturalism in British literature is assumed to have died out in the early years of the twentieth century; therefore, novels which appear later are assigned some other classification. This type of re-allocation, bearing in mind Jauss’s statements about reception, may occur even if the familiar signals are present; this time, though, the work is appearing in the “wrong” or inappropriate, literary-historical context. Later critics, those taking a view from a longer perspective, have the benefit of hindsight; critics writing contemporaneously have to make certain judgements based on contemporary criteria.

One of the central platforms of this study has been to compare the reactions of different generations of critics to naturalistic fiction, especially from the point of view of

looking for categorisation of certain fictional works as “naturalistic,” “realistic,” or as a kind of fictional reportage that is either outside genre, or is a new genre of its own. In contrast to Jane Findlater’s “The Slum Movement in Fiction,” an article which appeared in 1900 in the *National Review*, Walter Allen, writing a full half-century later, places Arthur Morrison in the “Cockney school,” along with William Pett Ridge, Edwin Pugh and Frank Swinnerton. “The early Wells, too, has his associations with the school,” declares Allen (286). Unfortunately, this assessment is misleading for several reasons; the first of which is that Arthur Morrison, like Gissing, is not using the poor as comic characters in some larger canvas. Jane Findlater goes some way to explaining the different levels at which the naturalistic novel appealed to the late-Victorian readership and, more importantly, where it lost its appeal:

*Liza of Lambeth* saw the light in 1897. It is a story of brutal frankness and sickening import, and has, alas, too surely set a fashion for this sort of thing. We are spared nothing: the reek of the streets; the effluvia of unwashed humanity; but worse than all these outside things is the hopeless moral atmosphere in which the characters move. There are no wandering lights here, the moral darkness is unpierced by so much as a ray of brightness. (Findlater 452)

By contrast, however, Gissing finds favour with Findlater, who has divided slum fiction into two categories—the “school of pity and terror” and the “school of brutality”. What she means by the former is that some writers are writing to show life’s terrors as a warning and that the victims are to be pitied. In this category, she includes both Arthur Morrison and George Gissing, who write with compassion, and allow that there is relief

in the slum world from unremitting misery. However, Gissing, as noted earlier, disdainfully remarks in *The Nether World* that the slum-dwellers “love vileness,” and authors such as William Pett Ridge, in *Mord 'Emly*, proposed a sentimental model of the lower-classes who, having escaped the drabness and misery of slum dwelling, were eventually overcome with a *nostalgie de la boue* and yearned for the squalor of the life they had left behind. The difference between Pett Ridge and Gissing is that Gissing is frequently in ironic mode, whereas Pett Ridge seeks to be a latter-day Dickens, depicting the unprivileged as “poor but happy” caricatures, revelling in the day-to-day drudgery of inner-city poverty. The difference between Pett Ridge and Dickens, as Findlater saw it, was that Dickens was using depictions of the poor to give a moral lesson, in an early realist tradition. By the 1890s, however, literature had moved on, and the Dickensian model had been supplanted. For Pett Ridge to emulate this tradition appears, from a modern standpoint, anachronistic and reactionary; moreover, novelists cannot ignore the effect which literary progress has on intertextuality. The works of Pett Ridge have to be seen in the context of the way in which realism has adapted to the changing times.

According to David Trotter, the contrary view was defended by the author himself:

Dickens, not Zola, was the model. Addressing the Boz Club, William Pett Ridge claimed that Dickens had revealed the ‘romance’ and the ‘cheerfulness’ in the lives of ‘hard-up people’. Some writers, he went on described the poor as though they were ‘gibbering apes’. But such ‘Naturalism’ was outmoded. (*English Novel* 128)

One can assume that Pett Ridge was not being ironic and that he genuinely believed that it was more important to portray the lower classes as enjoying their

accustomed surroundings than to describe their lives as squalid and miserable, with little hope of escape. In the Social Darwinist account, however, society should evolve to a point where this misery is alleviated. It was to be expected that literature whose central platform was Darwinism, in its various forms, might offend the sensibilities of Victorian clerics and similar religious reactionaries. However, it is clear that Naturalism had also touched a secular political nerve; those who were charged with guiding social policy could see society's shortcomings exposed and desired the suppression of naturalistic literature because of its critique, whatever their purported objections on the grounds of obscenity. Naturalism was not, of course, solely concerned with reform, but with the necessity to report on the human condition; consequently, there were two aspects of Naturalism's crusading vision. On the one hand, there existed, in the artistic soul of the authors, the desire to take the novel forward with a new aesthetic, and, on the other, a feeling that the readership could be educated into an awareness of society's shortcomings by writing the novel of social awareness.

In England, those writers most associated with the naturalist cause were not of a kind. The works of George Moore and George Gissing are frequently categorised as possessing similarities which locate the authors in a particular genre and their works in an Anglo-naturalist nexus. However, their philosophical aims were quite different, as their later works attest, and Gissing emerges as the more likely candidate for inclusion in a list of significant English naturalists. Although Moore originally espoused the tenets of Zola and was considerably influenced by French literature, Gissing's writing bears many more of the hallmarks of naturalistic philosophy than does Moore's. Gissing's works are also aesthetically closer to French Naturalism than those of Moore, if only for their more

profound portrayal of the human and social condition. This may be partially explained by the fact that Gissing had spent more time living amongst, or close to, the characters who appear in his novels. However, as noted earlier, critics have described Moore as being the only British writer who could be called a naturalist in the Zolaesque, or French sense. This assessment, in so far as it goes, may be correct, but Naturalism is not a solely French—let alone Zolaesque—province. In the course of the foregoing chapters, there are examples which demonstrate that Naturalism varies from culture to culture; one of the principal characteristics of Naturalism as a literary genre is that it has the capacity to mutate, evolve, and adapt, depending on the national literature of which it becomes a part, without the need to redefine its philosophical limits. Even the English version, the most problematic to theorise, maintained its aesthetic integrity, despite an unwillingness on the part of many of its practitioners to fully acknowledge that the literature was rooted in the scientific philosophies and theories of Schopenhauer, Taine, Darwin, and Comte, much less the literary theories of the Goncourts and Zola.

Pierre Coustillas, among others, is of the opinion that Gissing would not have relished being associated with Naturalism, especially in the later years of his life<sup>\*</sup>, but much of Gissing's antipathy arose from his judgement that French Naturalism was gross and sordid, dwelling on the physical wretchedness in life to the detriment of the literature itself. However, to the modern critic, his work epitomises English Victorian naturalistic fiction when judged by all but the most rigid criteria of what Naturalism entailed: in terms of literary history, Gissing's opinion of his genre counts for no more than that of the critic. From a historical perspective denied to the writer himself, the latter-day critic

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<sup>\*</sup> In conversation with the author – September 2001



employs and applies different standards, which are themselves informed by cultural changes. It is for this reason that Gissing's theoretical stance is almost irrelevant to the criteria applied by the modern genre critic; Walcutt notes in *American Literary Naturalism - A Divided Stream* that "the forms of naturalism may be assumed without the writer's caring much about its theoretical basis" (Walcutt 130). It is debatable that Gissing was unconcerned with the theoretical basis of naturalistic writing, but it is undeniable that he incorporated a naturalistic perspective into his fiction. English authors have always been loath to theorise, especially concerning their own work, and, with the notable exception of Hubert Crackanthorpe, particularly avoided the epithet "naturalist". Most critics agree that the use of this epithet implied too many uncomfortable connotations of foreignness (especially "Frenchness") for a commercially-minded English author; in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the "French" novel was regarded as rather distasteful and disreputable. American authors had no such problem; Frank Norris redefined Naturalism as a romantic novelistic form and, whilst certain authors distanced themselves from the naturalistic movement for various reasons, the American version of Naturalism suffered few ill-effects from its associations and origins. On the other hand, American literary Naturalism had not only to convince the readership of its worth and validity, but also to establish itself as distinctly American and not a European offshoot.

Senator Alfred Beveridge had declared that the twentieth century would be American and that the "regeneration of the world" had begun. The sense in which Beveridge meant this was imperialistic, but it could equally be applied to the American naturalistic novel. The aesthetic of the naturalistic novel was based on a verifiable world

and the novelist's selective artistic interpretation of what needed to be depicted; the decision as to what was depicted constituted the artistic impulse, and the interpretation of the reality was the aesthetic result. To use the criteria set by the Goncourts and Zola, if the novel was truthful, the intrinsic value of the art would reside in the truthfulness of the novel. Part of the "truth" to be depicted in the American novel, however, would have to include the notion of Americanness, and this was the main problem facing the early American naturalists. Reality in America, at the turn of the century, meant urbanisation, industrialisation, consumerism, and the demographic diversity that immigration had brought about. The geographical vastness of America also brought concomitant problems for the writer who wanted to appeal to a broad cross-section of the populace; regionalism and local colour were not appropriate material for the naturalistic author. Hamlin Garland's "veritism" was his way of distancing himself not only from the American naturalist movement, but also from the wider issues with which Naturalism concerned itself. As the century progressed, however, artists were looking inward as well, and Modernism would soon be competing with realism and Naturalism; the Modernists, by the end of the first decade of the new century, already held sway in Europe.

Although Modernism in art and poetry was being successfully imported from Europe, American literature was still debating the strictures and demands of the naturalists in the world of fiction. In the world of visual arts, the Armory (also known as the Post-Impressionist) Show of 1913 rendered any attempt to continue to emulate Victorian artistic values a cultural impossibility. The show toured New York, Chicago, and Boston, and met with mixed reactions. Similarly, at the turn of the century, Crane,

Dreiser, and Norris had shown that fiction had gone beyond what George Santayana was soon to label “the genteel tradition”. The realist “Ash-Can” art exhibited in the Armory Show had its literary counterpart (and predecessor) in Crane’s shocking slum fiction and journalism. Modernism in literature would successfully emerge in America with the advent of World War 1, but, in the first decade of the new century, Naturalism was to dominate fiction. As Malcolm Bradbury notes, Naturalism “developed, in the American fiction between 1900 and the First World War, into a familiar and inclusive usage” (Bradbury 37). The problem of inclusiveness is something that literary historians have to deal with; studies of American literature in this period have often used loose terms such as “realistic,” “social comment,” “reportage,” and so on, to describe attributes of fiction found in naturalistic novels. However, these terms mean little if the novel lacks the fundamental properties of naturalistic thought and perspective. Naturalism in fiction does not occur accidentally or by some osmotic process which entails absorption of certain philosophical characteristics through the mysteries of intertextuality; it is a conscious move on the part of the author to explain life in a certain way. One of the results of the naturalistic portrayal of life entailed the examination of certain myths.

The undermining of myths involves creating a new mythology as a replacement. Early American literature had depended on the myth of the importance of European cultural values; in turn, this myth was replaced by the myth of Manifest Destiny. This belief proposed a celebration of the American pioneering spirit as a justification for westward expansion and the God-given right to settle the whole continent. American authors and poets had struggled to rid themselves of a Eurocentric artistic culture in order to locate their work in an American ideological framework. However, divesting

themselves of excess European cultural baggage necessarily involved deciding which baggage to keep. Critics as diverse as Henry James and H.L. Mencken deplored a supposed American tendency towards parochialism, whilst still expecting that American writers would strive to create literature which takes the American condition and translates it artistically into an American literary form with its own specificity. Another myth to be explored was that of the traditional role of women. As Roger Sherman Loomis asserts in the quotation at the head of the chapter, Naturalism was concerned with the empowerment of women, and the New Woman question, in particular.

Women writers at the turn of the century were clearly examining the future role of women in the new century. Although they did not know it, women were to become voters before the new century was two decades old. The New Woman of the 1890s was due to become the new voter of the 1920s. However, at the turn of the century, Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton were exploring representations of women in literature and using a predominantly male mode of literature in order to do this. Hochman notes that “[i]t would be difficult to find a late-nineteenth-century fictional model more clearly associated with male authorship and “virile” fiction than the naturalist plot of decline” (Pizer *Cambridge Companion* 212-213). This attitude towards naturalistic fiction in American literature has resonances of Howells, James, and Norris’s concerns with the “masculinity” of literature, and of Pizer’s famous remark that Naturalism is a “young man’s game”. Whilst it is true that the decline plot, which is only one element in naturalistic fiction, has been used most frequently by male authors, it is equally true that Naturalism itself has been a male-dominated preserve, especially in American fiction.

Both Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton show strong naturalist influences in their work, but, since the rise of feminist criticism, the naturalistic impulse in their work has frequently been marginalised in order to accommodate judgements on the feminist perspective. Critic Nancy Walker published an essay on *The Awakening* entitled “Feminist or Naturalist,” which begs an important question: is it not possible, then, to be both? Women’s rights in the early twentieth century become a major issue, and in Europe, naturalist writers did not have a problem incorporating the New Woman question into their literature. George Gissing, in fact, is considered by many to be a leading “New Woman” writer. However, the American men writing in this period, especially Norris and London, were much more interested in proclaiming the masculinity and muscularity of fiction than in promoting the “woman question”. Women were writing about women, though, and this was yet another area in which the reformers were asking questions of the government. One of society’s “ills” in the nineteenth century was the treatment of women, and many naturalist writers addressed the problem, one way or another.

It is significant that from the beginnings of Naturalism, women, either by name or by description, have figured in the titles of a large number of works: *Madame Bovary*, *Germinie Lacerteux*, *Thérèse Raquin*, *Nana*, *Madame Meuriot*, *Esther Waters*, *A Mummer’s Wife*, *Thyrza*, *The Odd Women*, *Maggie*, *Sister Carrie*, and *Jennie Gerhardt* are just a few examples taken at random from French, English and American authors of note. (Yves Chevrel devotes an entire chapter to this subject.) Although many novels have been entitled with women’s names, these naturalistic works chronicle the lives of women who fall from grace or become the victims of forces which impel them to an unfortunate end, unlike the eponymous heroines of Romantic novels, Agnes Grey, Emma

(Woodhouse), Jane Eyre, Lorna Doone, and so on, who typically succeed against all probability. In the late nineteenth century, women, as a class, became consumers for the first time, both in the United States and in Europe, and many naturalistic novels used this new phenomenon as a platform for social comment. Those novels which depict women as somehow transgressing needed to empower their female characters, in order to make the transgression fit in with a naturalistic aesthetic; for example, Trina Sierpe's miserliness, whilst explained by her cautious Swiss-German upbringing, can only manifest itself when she has control of the family purse when she marries McTeague. Another example is Carrie Meeber, who becomes successful as an actress because of her physical beauty, but loses her moral probity. Maggie Johnson, however, is not a transgressor, but a victim, and Crane depicts her as such throughout the novel. Crucially, Carrie is not punished for her overweening ambition and remains in ignorance of Hurstwood's fate and what little it would have taken to avert his death. The contrast between Carrie Meeber's fate and that of Maggie Johnson, or Edith Wharton's Lily Bart, is that of the character's ability or otherwise to manipulate the system. In *The House of Mirth* (1905), Lily Bart is unwilling to use her sexuality to achieve her aims; it could be that she feels morally constrained. On the other hand, the reader could conclude that her circumstances are insufficiently straitened to need to make such a choice. Maggie Johnson, at the other end of the social scale, is simply unable to steer a successful course through life owing to lack of choices. Barbara Hochman points out, commenting on Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, that "life options were severely limited by convention" (Pizer *Cambridge Companion* 211). This was no less true of their characters, of course. The role of women was gradually changing, however, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, ratified in

1920 by thirty-six of the forty-eight states, was a significant step forward. The period following World War 1 saw the emergence of not only political re-alignments, but also a new world order. In many ways, Beveridge was right in forecasting America's rise in influence and power, which was especially rapid in this era.

The American naturalistic novel in the inter-war years was occupying a peculiar and specific high moral ground; it had lost any vestiges of the realist morality of the genteel tradition and was moving towards the angry polemic of the disenfranchised and unprivileged. The work of James T. Farrell, who was described by Alfred Kazin as "the most powerful naturalist who ever worked in the American tradition" (296), is but one example. Richard Wright's *Native Son* is even more overtly polemical and could be said to be using a naturalistic perspective to carry the activist message. The American naturalistic novel had adapted itself to a world in which art was not only expected to be socially relevant, but to carry a political or polemical message. Its literary purpose, contrary to what Rahv believed, was transparent and focused. In many ways it was still faithful to its origins in France's Second Empire and could still be called the "True Novel," in the sense of being a novel which reflected and represented a truth as perceived by the author. The "truth" which it claimed to represent, however, was not one which many critics had hoped to see revealed.

Much of the adverse commentary on Naturalism has arisen from its tendency to dwell on the seedier aspects of life: this is an understandable criticism from those critics who would prefer life to be depicted as cosy, as Anatole France would have liked; sedate, as Howells portrayed it; and just, in the sense in which Hugo depicted justice. However, morality in the real world is contingent on an acceptance of the way of the world at any

given time. If morality is based on consensus, the argument must hang on how the consensus is reached; naturalists will inevitably conclude that society has sanctioned and approves of contemporary morality, and that change will only come through an impulse to change society's view of what is moral. Artistically, the means of achieving such an aim is to demonstrate that consensual immorality is the cause of individual failure and degradation and that a positivist approach exposes cause and effect. The naturalist writer's preferred method of effecting change is to point out the deficiencies in society and leave the remedial work to society itself. There remain some Marxist critics, perhaps, who view Naturalism as a genre which uses determinism as a means of showing that change cannot occur without an effort of free will, and, since free will is denied, that naturalist writers accept the status quo and acquiescently describe it. However, this view relies on the concept that determinism precludes a Darwinian account of the evolution of society. If society evolves like any other organism, successful strands will multiply and prosper, whilst unsuccessful mutations will die off. The Marxian logic should be that if socialism produces a better and stronger society, then that society will become the most likely to succeed. Social Darwinism is at the core of the naturalist philosophy, even if pessimistic determinism condemns many of its characters to disintegration, degeneration, and decline. It was George Becker who coined the phrase "pessimistic materialistic determinism" to describe the doctrinal heart of Naturalism, but this has condemned generations of students to seeking out pessimism where it does not exist or is subtly hidden behind a vision of hope for a better future. Most novels of social awareness succeed best when the reader is offered some hope in the future of mankind and, however bleak the picture, when faith in the individual will to strive for a better world is



undimmed. This may explain why Norris's romantic Naturalism succeeded so well; one succinct expression of how Norris allowed romanticism into Naturalism is an example he gives in his "Weekly Letter" of August 3, 1901: "The romanticist aims at the broad truth of the thing—puts into his people's mouths the words they would have spoken if only they could have given expression to his thoughts" (*Criticism* 74). In other words, there are times when authorial intervention is appropriate; pure realism would allow no artistic intervention and becomes aesthetically bland—the result, to use Norris's oft quoted examples, is the "drama of a broken teacup" or "the tragedy of a walk down the block". On this point Norris is at odds with Lukács, who believed that realism was essential to the Marxian artistic ideal.

One particular judgement on Naturalism that needs to be laid to rest is that it was generically the "artistic and epistemological failure" that Lukács had declared it to be. In Marxian terms, most naturalistic writing achieved aims that were consonant with the impulse for reform and social comment. In the words of both Zola and the Goncourts, the novel must be a truthful depiction of an aspect of real life; the writer's duty was to be the medium through which the truth became a document. If it succeeded in these aims, then it had succeeded as art. By contrast, Lukács dismissed both Modernism and Naturalism; he claimed that neither form achieved the aim of depicting the individual as integrated into society. This objection begs the question as to the aesthetics of both Naturalism and Modernism; the fragmentation of society is central to Modernism's approach, and, from a different perspective, can be said to figure largely in certain types of Naturalism. Naturalistic works frequently depict individuals, or groups of individuals who demonstrate a wish to belong to the mainstream of society, but their heredity,

environment, or circumstances marginalise them. Where they are not marginalised, the characters are part of a society which is itself in need of manipulation into a notional ideal, one often implied by the author, but, equally often, mentally constructed by the reader.

The contemporary reader of *The Octopus* would almost certainly have known of the problems faced by the San Joaquin farmers and the scandal of the Mussel Slough affair. Given the atmosphere of reform, the reader could reasonably be expected to imagine an idealised society in which capitalism is regulated; some readers, of course, would imagine a society in which capitalism no longer exists, but Naturalism is not about Utopias. Even if some authors may have implied that a less corrupt society could exist, the pessimism which some readers and critics find in naturalistic fiction denies the likelihood of the ideal society; hence, the naturalistic novel is antithetical to the notions expressed in the idealistic novel.

One of the most significant conclusions reached in this thesis is that literary Naturalism allows that different national literatures will produce different varieties of the novel. The underlying aesthetic remains the same; by far the most important component of this aesthetic is that the art resides in the truthfulness of what is depicted, described, narrated, and portrayed in the novel. The definition of truthfulness, in this context, always refers back to the way in which the Goncourts and Zola meant it; the writer must use observations and experience to inform the events and characters in the novel. The artistic writer will not invent unlikely or fanciful scenarios or rely on imagination to supply details of plot or character—all should come from real life as observed by the author. Another component is that a wish for reform or amelioration is more or less

explicit in many naturalistic novels, as is the philosophy of determinism, and a Darwinist view of evolutionary tendencies; however, the extent to which any of these attributes is to be found in a given novel is often dependent on the nationality of the literature. For example, the American version succeeded because of a romantic thread running through a typically naturalistic aesthetic; once it is accepted that romanticism is the literature of reform, the naturalistic novel becomes the ideal vehicle. Later American naturalists, such as Dos Passos, Farrell, and Caldwell combined socialism with romanticism and Naturalism in a synthesis which was unmistakably American. In a way, achieving such a synthesis might be called a triumph of dialecticism. June Howard in *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* rightly argues for a genre called the "American Naturalist Novel"; this is not to say that she necessarily believes that Naturalism, as a movement, is in itself a genre. An analogy may be drawn between Baguley's distinction between the "realist mode" and the Realist genre. Naturalism as a mode then becomes a component of the American naturalistic novel. That is to say, the American naturalistic novel draws on features of Naturalism, such as, determinism, social realism, and non-intrusive moral stances and then incorporates these perspectives into a certain category of literature. The problem of specifying realism as a generic feature, however, lies in its vagueness of definition.

Nonetheless, Northrop Frye's point that the greater the appearance of realism, the verisimilitude, the greater the irony was something that Maupassant had stated in another way; he felt strongly that novelists of realistic fiction should be called "Illusionists," as their skill lay in giving only the illusion of reality. Put another way, if the great realist writers succeed in presenting a "slice of life" in fiction, as if it were real life, the irony

lies in their success. The compact between reader and writer becomes all the more ironic if the reader accepts the fiction. The success of French Naturalism, therefore, is based on a classical irony—mimesis has been mediated by the unspoken agreement between the author and audience that the story is true on its own terms, some of these terms being that the world represented in the novel is the same knowable world with which both author and reader are already more or less acquainted. The world that Zola, for example, describes to his readers is a mechanistic universe in which determinism and materialism rule supreme. The miners in *Germinal* live in deprivation, it seems, because that is how miners live. If there is a food shortage, they will starve; if there is industrial unrest, they will be involved and will suffer. Opposition to the system means confrontation with the mercenaries paid for by well-fed capitalists, bolstered by a corrupt political machine whose existence and longevity is itself a product of the same capitalist system.

To take another example, Giovanni Verga's *I Malavoglia* (*The House by the Medlar Tree*) (1890) depicts a Sicily where a subdued, acquiescent population stoically accepts natural catastrophes, such as storms at sea, and political realities, such as doing national service. The villagers' stoicism is expressed in a litany of platitudes, and they have a saying ready for any and every disaster. There is no overt suggestion by the narrator that national service was anything more than a mere inconvenience to the families who needed the able-bodied men to do the heavy work at home. However, the reality is that national service was a political device employed by the Italian government of the day to bolster the idea of a unified Italy; the politically aware reader would certainly be conscious of such an important issue. The characters in the novel grumble about taxes and politicians, but ultimately display an apathy born of traditional

acquiescence and political disempowerment. Such a portrayal is an affirmation of Verga's endorsement of the broad naturalistic philosophy which Zola propounded. Society, environment, and heredity have conspired to condemn the peasants of Aci Trezza to a life of hardship, even though the hardships endured are relative. There is no difference between the hardships in the present from those undergone in the past, and central government from the Italian mainland, the reader must feel, is so remote as to be almost an irrelevance. The feeling of political disempowerment is tied in with a fatalistic view of their heritage. Sicily was invaded so many times, and the population became subject to so many different external rules of law, that the inhabitants could only shrug off any new imposition of law as being their fate. That is not to say that they regarded themselves as a doomed populace; on the contrary, the reader receives the impression that they will struggle on and survive, no matter what. Moreover, there is no indication that the author has any other agenda than to depict faithfully these Sicilians in their isolation—literally—from the external world of social reform and political change. In *Malavoglia* Verga employs a familiar and specific naturalistic usage, but the novel is still recognisably Italian, or Sicilian, in its social aesthetics. These aesthetic values are undeniably different from those of the French or English naturalists who were writing at the same time. In commercial terms, too, it makes sense to write about a world which is familiar to the intended reader of a realistic work. Therefore, whilst it should be possible to take any naturalistic novel and see in it some sort of universality, the location, characters, and historical setting combine to situate the fiction in a knowable and recognisable milieu.

The variety and versatility of literary Naturalism has enabled writers from many different cultural backgrounds to use it as an appropriate vehicle for depicting the human condition. In addition to the examples given throughout this thesis, Naturalism has been successful as a mode in the national literatures of Portugal, Spain, the Latin-American countries, Australia, Northern Europe and Scandinavia; it has also figured prominently in German and Scandinavian drama. In most cases, it is possible to confine its use as a form to a given period in the development of a country's national literature. The principal exception is in the literature of the United States. American literary Naturalism can be said to have been a major form of the novel from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the end of the 1930s, despite competing forms enjoying equal (and sometimes greater) measures of success. The rich variety of twentieth century novelistic forms in American literature has meant that naturalistic tendencies are to be found in many of them. However, critics over the years have ascribed naturalistic tendencies to so many different and diverse authors that the task of circumscribing a select few and rejecting others is all but impossible. Critics in certain periods have also been put in the position of deciding what is and is not naturalistic in terms of technique and perspective; this has proven to be less difficult. As stated in the early stages of this thesis, not all authors who have written naturalist works have confined themselves to this genre. However, using Naturalism as a mode is not the same thing as writing a generically naturalistic novel. Given the influence of Naturalism, especially on the American novel, it is not surprising that many critics see it in works whose primary aim is not that of the naturalists themselves. In order to write a naturalistic novel the author must first assume the naturalist position. Although Walcott states that the novelist may write a naturalistic

novel without “caring much about its theoretical basis,” the intention to write such a novel must come from a willingness to subscribe to its philosophical and literary aims.

The philosophical positions which Naturalism requires are embedded in the writings of Taine, Comte, Darwin and Spencer. Taine wanted writers of fiction to attend to “*race, milieu, et moment*” in order to provide a sociological study of the time; Comte asked for positivism—an affirmative view of society and its iniquities. Herbert Spencer’s influence on American literary Naturalism is indisputable. There are those who see Darwinian concepts of heredity as a negative and that atavism is inevitable; however, in Spencer’s theories, evolution carries mankind forward from one plateau of achievement to another and amelioration is achievable, if not inevitable. In “Naturalism and Robert Herrick: A Test Case” Walcutt describes Spencer’s theories thus:

Spencer boldly declared that Evolution was the law of process. Evolution as law controlled natural, social, and human process. Evolution, in his famous formulation, moves from a condition of unstructured homogeneity, where a great deal of what he conceived as chemical energy was available, toward a highly structured condition of heterogeneity, in which complex and *stable* forms have been achieved. As the forms become more complex, they become also more stable: the energy available in the cosmos evolves toward great complexity of life and society and great stability of form. (Hakutani & Fried 78) (Original emphasis retained)

Spencer and Darwin, (by association) are thus vindicated of the charge of inspiring naturalists to pessimistic determinism. The phrase “optimistic progressivism” as a description of supposed naturalistic writing first occurs in George W. Meyer’s essay

“The Original Socialistic Purpose of the Naturalistic Novel” which appeared in the *Sewanee Review* of October 1942. Charles Child Walcutt refers to this essay several times in his writings and an interesting contradiction emerges. The novel being discussed by Meyer is *An American Tragedy*, and Meyer makes the point that the thematic elements of the novel point to a pessimism which is not consonant with Naturalism. Walcutt’s introduction to *Seven Novelists in the American Naturalist Tradition* contains the following important paragraph:

New forms, in which the forces were the controlling actors, proliferated; but they could not exclude those bright vistas of human freedom that were the inspiration of the whole movement. Every naturalistic novel therefore seems to contain and even be dominated by ideas that are completely contrary to its philosophical base. It is this fact which has made the criticism of Naturalism so controversial. I may illustrate with just one powerful example. Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* presents a hero who is completely dominated by social and economic forces that finally destroy him. The novel has been labeled “pessimistic determinism” and therefore a perfect example of Naturalism (see Oscar Cargill, *Intellectual America*, 1941). But another critic has insisted that Naturalism is “optimistic progressivism” and that *An American Tragedy* therefore cannot be considered naturalistic at all (George W. Meyer, “The Original Social Purpose of the Naturalistic Novel”, *Sewanee Review*, October 1942). (Walcutt *Seven Novelists* 9)



The problem that arises is that Naturalism cannot be both pessimistic and optimistic at the same time; critics must decide. Walcutt, however, goes on to say that the conflicts exposed by these different views of the nature of Naturalism extend the limits of its range:

The critical impasse over this novel opens to a richer definition of naturalism if we consider the fact that the overwhelming power of the environment can be demonstrated only if it destroys the individual: one simply cannot demonstrate the forces that carry a man from rags to riches. The upward movement celebrates will and freedom: the downward movement demonstrates the power of the forces. (Walcutt 9)

At this point Walcutt's argument falls foul of Schopenhauer's concept of "will," because Schopenhauer believes that will and force are one and the same. The following quotation is from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*:

The concept of will has hitherto been commonly been subordinated to that of force, but I reverse the matter entirely, and desire that every force in nature should be thought as will. It must not be supposed that this is mere verbal quibbling of no consequence; rather it is of the greatest significance and importance. (Cottingham 163)

Walcutt's analysis, therefore, makes sense in its own terms, but cannot accommodate the philosophical background to naturalistic fiction, which owes much to Schopenhauer. Admittedly, whilst the pessimism of Schopenhauer figures in nineteenth-century naturalistic fiction, especially that of Gissing, it is not a prominent feature of American Naturalism. Nevertheless, the idea that the same deterministic forces work in two

different directions is antithetical to the philosophical approach which underpins naturalistic literature. The forces must be considered to be part of a mechanistic universe, in which all forces are subject to the same laws. The contradiction that arises is Meyer's implication that works which appear to be optimistically progressive are either not naturalistic or are naturalistic *in spite of their optimism*. On this point, the argument reverts to that of genre and definition. In "Naturalism and Robert Herrick" Walcutt extricates himself from this apparent contradiction by nominating the turn of the century as a turning point in the naturalistic perspective. Walcutt first describes the "exuberance" of Naturalism and the optimism and romanticism which can be said to inhere in its philosophy:

As we look at Spencer's application of Darwinism, we cannot miss the romantic exuberance that sustains it. We are caught up in a fervor of progress, inevitable progress toward stable beatitude. It is almost as if the timeless perfection of a Christian heaven has been brought down to earth and established as the goal of social evolution, where man and society have achieved an ideal balance. (Hakutani & Fried 79)

Walcutt may be overstating the Christian point of view, but the notion of implying an achievable goal is one that has been discernible in most naturalistic fiction. Schopenhauer's philosophy broadly denies the achievability of such goals, but does not deny the worthy aim of striving for such goals. Walcutt then goes on to make the following statement:

The exuberance did not last. The new thought moved over an emotional watershed about 1900 [. . .] It was the post-1900 sag in fervor that led the

early critics of naturalism to formulate its essence as “pessimistic determinism.” A generation or two later the reforming ardor of Zola and others was observed anew—and naturalism was re-defined as “optimistic progressivism”. (79)

Therefore, the literary historian will note that different generations of critics describe the same genre in opposing terms. Over time, according to Walcutt, its “essence” has been re-evaluated; however, this is a contradiction which essentialism does not permit. The most appropriate assessment to make is that the critical perspective changes over time and that the formation of genre depends on a gradual accumulation of consensual opinion about a body of literature.

Romanticism, in the terms Walcutt describes above, is an important factor in the spirit of Naturalism. Norris certainly believed that the wish for reform to be found in early Naturalism could be equated with a romantic perspective; Richard Chase makes the following observation:

What strikes the historically-minded reader is the general similarity of Norris’s plea for romance to the earlier pleas made by Brown, Cooper, [William Gilmore] Simms, Hawthorne, and Melville. The significance of this similarity has not been understood, and Norris’s description of his fiction as romance has been taken to be merely vague and eccentric, if not positively perverse. [. . .] Before he died in 1900 at the age of thirty, he wrote books that departed from realism by becoming in a unified act of the imagination at once romances and naturalistic novels. (Chase 187)

To sum up, there is optimism and hope to be found in American literary Naturalism. The language used is the language of reform and the mode is a synthesis of realism and romanticism, as exemplified in the works of Jack London and Frank Norris. As the twentieth century progressed, so did the naturalistic agenda. The First World War changed the way in which artists viewed and depicted the world; the two opposing literary responses, Modernism and Naturalism, assumed different roles: Modernism self-consciously examined the role of the artist, privileging both the writer and the informed reader. Naturalism became the polemical voice of the disenfranchised and unprivileged and the appropriate vehicle for the novel of protest. In *U.S.A.* John Dos Passos showed, however, that it was possible to use the language of Modernism whilst incorporating naturalistic themes. Richard Wright's *Native Son* is a novel of Black consciousness which encompasses enough universality of theme to place it in the forefront of later naturalistic fiction. Different critics might argue for different boundaries to be drawn between the genres, but as this thesis has shown, these definitions can, and do, change over time.

From the earliest days of naturalistic writing in France through to its triumphant emergence as a truly accessible and relevant force in twentieth-century America, literary Naturalism has encountered opposition, opprobrium, and misinterpretation. Its aims have always been the amelioration of the human condition; far from being a passive and acquiescent reporter of what is wrong or unjust in a mechanistic universe, the naturalist author has alerted the reader to the romantic possibility that mankind is also a determinant. Naturalistic fiction does not propose simple *ad hoc* solutions, but posits the notion that evolution itself can produce a fitter society.

## Appendix

### CHRONOLOGY

1821 - Birth of Flaubert.

1840 - Birth of Zola and of Daudet.

1842 - Comte completes six-volume *Cours de philosophie positive*.

1843 - Birth of Henry James. Flaubert suffers nervous breakdown.

1848 - Publication of the *Communist Manifesto*. “Year of Revolution” in Europe.

1850 - Death of Balzac.

1852 - Birth of George Moore.

1853 - Taine, *Essay on the Fables of Lafontaine*. Harriet Martineau, trans. *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*.

1856 - Comte, *System of Logical Positivism*. *Réalisme* magazine begins publication and runs for six issues from November.

1857 - Birth of George Gissing. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*. Unsuccessful prosecution of author and publisher (the *Revue*) of *Madame Bovary* for “outrage to public morals and religion”. Death of Comte.

1859 - Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*.

1860 - Herbert Spencer first publishes *Programme of a System of Synthetic Philosophy*.

1862 - Spencer, *First Principles*.

1863 - Birth of Arthur Morrison

1865 - The Goncourts, *Germinie Lacerteux* (preface “On True Novels”). Taine, *Nouveaux Essais de critique et d’histoire*. Claude Bernard, *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*.

1867 - Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*.

1868 - Louis Ulbach (under the pen-name "Ferragus"), "Putrid Literature" in *Le Figaro*, 23<sup>rd</sup> January; new edition of *Thérèse Raquin* with Zola's preface in response. Manet, *Portrait of Zola*. Zola finally meets the Goncourts in person for the first time (14<sup>th</sup> December).

1869 - Flaubert, *L'Education sentimentale*.

1870 - Birth of Frank Norris. Franco-Prussian War (to 1871). Death of Jules de Goncourt.

1871 - Birth of Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane. Zola, *La Fortune des Rougon* (first of the *Rougon-Macquart* series). Darwin, *The Descent of Man*.

1873 - Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology*.

1876 - Birth of Jack London.

1877 - "The Trapp dinner" (16<sup>th</sup> April). Zola, *L'Assommoir*.

1880 - *Les Soirées de Médan*. Death of Flaubert from an apoplectic stroke.

Gissing, *Workers in the Dawn*. Zola, "Le Roman Expérimental."

1881 - Zola, *Les Romanciers naturalistes* and *Naturalisme au théâtre*.

1882 - Walter Besant, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*.

1883 - Married Woman's Property Act becomes law. Moore, *A Modern Lover*.

Mudie refuses to circulate *A Modern Lover*. Brunetière, *Le Roman naturaliste*.

1884 - Gissing, *The Unclassed*.

1885 - Moore, *A Mummer's Wife*, (published in six shilling edition as a gesture against Mudie's Library for censorship). Moore, *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals*. *L'Assommoir* and *Nana* published in translation by Vizetelly & Co. Vizetelly publishes *Piping Hot!* (George Moore's translation of *Pot-*

*Bouille* by Zola) in illustrated edition with 16 page engravings by George Bellenger.

1886 - Gissing, *Demos*; Isabel Clarendon. Vizetelly publishes *Madame Bovary* in translation. Moore, *A Drama in Muslin*. Vizetelly publishes *Piping Hot!* in Large Paper illustrated edition with 104 engravings by French artists. Besant, *Children of Gibeon*.

1887 - "Manifesto of the Five against *La Terre*". Gissing, *Thyrza*. First production of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Moore, *A Mere Accident*.

1888 - First English translation of *The Communist Manifesto*. Gissing, *A Life's Morning*. Sarah Grand (Frances Bellenden-Clarke), *The Heavenly Twins* (private publication). Parliamentary debate on "obscene" literature (8<sup>th</sup> May). November - first prosecution of Henry Vizetelly for "publishing an obscene libel." Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*.

1889 - Gissing, *The Nether World*. Premiere of Hauptmann's *Before Sunrise*. Second prosecution and subsequent imprisonment of Vizetelly.

1890 - Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*. Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia* (*The House by the Medlar Tree*). Gissing, *The Emancipated*. Sherman Anti-Trust Act.

1891 - Gissing, *New Grub Street*. Jules Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*. Zola, *L'Argent*. Huysmans, *Là-bas*. L. Bloy, "Les funérailles du naturalisme". Hamlin Garland, *Main Travelled Roads*.

1892 - Zola, *La Débâcle*. Gissing, *Born in Exile*; Denzil Quarrier. Max Nordau, *Degeneration*. Kipling, *Badalia Herodsfoot*. Norris, *Yvernelle* (Collection of poetry)

1893 - Death of Maupassant and of Taine. Crane pays for private publication of *Maggie*, using the pseudonym "Johnston Smith". Crane begins work on *The Red*

*Badge of Courage*. Gissing, *The Odd Women*. Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* re-issued in England by William Heinemann and in America by Cassell & Co. The "Columbian Exposition" (World's Fair) takes place in Chicago. Zola completes *Rougon-Macquart* series with publication of *Le Docteur Pascal*.

1894 - Newspaper version of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Moore, *Esther Waters*. Morrison, *Tales of Mean Streets* published as collected volume. Gissing, *In the Year of Jubilee*.

1895 - Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Gissing, *Eve's Ransom*; *Sleeping Fires*; *The Paying Guest*. Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Translation of 2<sup>nd</sup> German Edition). Gissing, "The Place of Realism in Fiction" in the *Humanitarian* (July).

1896 - Death of Edmond de Goncourt. Stephen Crane, *George's Mother*. Morrison, *Child of the Jago*. Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*.

1897 - W. Somerset Maugham, *Liza of Lambeth*. Stephen Crane, *The Open Boat*. Gissing, *The Whirlpool*.

1898 - Moore, *Evelyn Innes*. *L'Aurore* publishes Zola's "J'Accuse. . .!" on 13<sup>th</sup> January. Gissing, *Human Odds and Ends* (a collection of short stories); *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*; *The Town Traveller*. Norris, *Moran of the Lady Letty*.

1899 - Norris, *McTeague*; *Blix*. Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Crane returns to England. Gissing, *The Crown of Life*.

1900 - Death of Stephen Crane (June 5<sup>th</sup>). Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*. Norris, *A Man's Woman*.

1901 - Gissing, *Our Friend the Charlatan*. Norris, *The Octopus*.



- 1902 - Death of Frank Norris (25<sup>th</sup> October). Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*. Zola, *La Verité*. "The Novel of Misery" in the *Quarterly Review* (unattributed, but now known to be written by Warren Wright).
- 1903 - Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Death of Gissing (28<sup>th</sup> December). Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*; *The Call of the Wild* (originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post*). Ernest Alfred Vizetelly (trans.), *Truth* by Emile Zola. Norris, *The Pit*; *A Deal in Wheat and Other Stories*.
- 1904 - Death of Kate Chopin (22<sup>nd</sup> August). Gissing, *Veranilda*.
- 1905 - Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*.
- 1906 - Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*. Jack London, *White Fang*.
- 1908 - Birth of Richard Wright.
- 1909 - Jack London, *Martin Eden*. Norris, *The Third Circle*.
- 1911 - Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt*.
- 1912 - Dreiser, *The Financier*.
- 1914 - Dreiser, *The Titan*. Norris, *Vandover and the Brute*.
- 1915 - Dreiser, *The "Genius"*.
- 1916 - Death of Jack London (22<sup>nd</sup> November). Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology*.
- 1919 - Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*.
- 1921 - Dos Passos, *Three Soldiers*.
- 1923 - Arnold Bennett, *Riceman Steps*.
- 1925 - Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*.
- 1930 - Dos Passos, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*.
- 1931 - Death of Arnold Bennett
- 1932 - James T. Farrell, *Young Lonigan*. Dos Passos, *1919*.

1933 - Death of George Moore. Erskine Caldwell, *God's Little Acre*.

1934 - Farrell, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*.

1935 - Farrell, *Judgement Day*.

1936 - Dos Passos, *The Big Money*.

1937 - Erskine Caldwell & Margaret Bourke-White, *Have You Seen Their Faces?*

1938 - Publication of Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* as a trilogy.

1940 - Richard Wright, *Native Son*.

1945 - Death of Arthur Morrison. Death of Dreiser (28<sup>th</sup> December).

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