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The Naturalist Meaning behind the Words

Charles Darwin changed the face of biology and science when he published his groundbreaking work of scientific literature, *On the Origin of Species*. He proposed that all organisms are related and that a force, known as natural selection, acts on all living things. This book opened a whole new world for biologists everywhere. But it also brought about a change in the philosophy of literature, which is known as the naturalist movement. Writers began to believe that humans and animals are, in the end, the same- they are affected by similar forces and have the same instincts. Novels such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* clearly show how Darwin influenced the writing of the time. However, some novels that came out of this era do not fit as cleanly into this category. Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* seems to suggest many of the same ideas, but goes about it in a more delicate way. She doesn't write with the grisly realist detail of naturalism, yet she still gives the reader a sense that Darwin's natural selection is playing a role in the lives of her characters. Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* is a naturalist text because although it lacks many of the stylistic features of naturalism, it conveys the same idea- that humans are simply another type of animal- through the subtle comparisons she makes between humans and animals and the eventual outcome of each of her characters.

To analyze whether or not a work of literature is naturalist, it is necessary to find a representative of the movement- Crane's *Maggie* provides just such an example. To begin, the literary techniques and style of writing in *Maggie* are typical of naturalism. Naturalist writers

often draw parallels between the natural world and human society, and *Maggie* abounds with metaphors that connect humans to animals. The fight between Pete and Jimmy alone contains numerous animalistic metaphors: “They bristled like three roosters” and “The bravery of bulldogs sat upon the faces of the men” are just a few examples (Crane). Aside from the writing technique, Crane conveys the main idea of naturalism through Maggie’s downfall and death.

Darwin stated that those with the best hereditary background, best genes and best environment will outlast the less fortunate- a main tenant of natural selection and survival of the fittest.

Maggie was born into a terrible family with bad social conditions and therefore had little chance of surviving. Even though she was an innocent flower, she unfortunately “blossomed in a mud puddle” (Crane). The natural forces took over her life and ended up killing her- a truly naturalistic ending.

When analyzing Cather’s *A Lost Lady*, one finds that, superficially, the novel seems to have very little in common with naturalism and Crane’s *Maggie* in terms of style. Cather rarely compares her characters to animals. Instead, she uses relatively romantic metaphors and similes that compare people to other human things- for example, “Captain Forrester looked like the pictures of Grover Cleveland” (Cather 39). She also lacks gruesome detail. It is as if she tried to shelter the reader from reality with her descriptions- something a naturalist writer would not consider because it suggests that humans are more supreme beings who shouldn’t have to deal with demeaning things like blood and gore. Instead of describing Niel’s broken bones in horrific detail to show that people can break and feel pain just like animals do, she presents the whole scene euphemistically; Niel “turned a somersault in the air, and bumped down on the grass” (Cather 18). In this respect, *A Lost Lady* doesn’t seem like a work of naturalism.

However, style is not the main factor that plays into naturalism. The ideas and principles of the literary movement and *A Lost Lady* are the same. One of the main tenants of naturalism is that humans have the same basic instincts as animals do. Many characters in Crane's *Maggie* clearly display these instincts. Jimmy had a primal need to accumulate wealth because "when he had a dollar in his pocket his satisfaction with existence was greatest" (Crane). Compared to this blunt statement, Cather's characters seem like very human, dignified people. Cather says that "there could be no negative encounter, however slight, with Mrs. Forrester," which implies that she is above everyone and everything, especially things in the animal kingdom (Cather 26). However, her characters still have evidence of the instincts of sex and need for power. Mrs. Forrester has a primal need for sex which is exemplified in her affair with Frank Ellinger. Ivy also has many basic desires- his assertive control when he slits the woodpecker's eyes and his dishonest business tricks show his need for money and power.

On the contrary, most of the characters of the older generation suppress their inherent instincts. These characters followed the etiquette, chivalry, and honesty of the older pioneering age. Captain Forrester's name itself "promised security and fair treatment" to the people who knew him, and he stuck by the old traditions of being polite and gentlemanly at all times (Cather 74). Niel, although part of the younger generation, inherited the etiquette of the old generation through his time spent with the Forresters. These older generation characters thought of others before fulfilling their own needs of power and sex.

At first glance, these characters' behaviors seem to fly in the face of naturalism. However, there is a definite divergence between the fates of those who follow their instincts and those who actively stifle them. Those of the older generation "were poor, and even the successful ones were hunting for rest" (Cather 144). As soon as Captain Forrester selflessly gives away

most of his money to victims of a bank disaster, he suffers multiple strokes and dies. Meanwhile, Ivy, through his underhanded tricks in the lawyer business, begins to acquire a fortune.

This polarity between the fates of Cather's characters can be easily explained when viewed through the mind of an evolutionary biologist. In nature, those who squander their resources, don't take advantage of a beneficial situation, or exhibit altruistic behavior have a much smaller chance of surviving. Crane connects this thought to human society when Maggie walks in search of a place to stay. No one was willing to assist her because everyone knew that doing so would lower their position of power and end up hurting their chances of getting ahead in the world. Even the man who signified the "Grace of God" denied her in order to "save his respectability" (Crane). In Cather's novel, those who tried to do good at their own expense were punished while those who disregarded etiquette and old-time morals benefitted. The fact that Cather subscribes so heavily to the idea that natural selection plays a strong role in the lives of normal humans is definite evidence for a naturalistic interpretation of *A Lost Lady*.

Although there are no outright exceptions to this natural selection rule, Mrs. Forrester is a more ambiguous case. It isn't obvious to the reader whether she should be considered part of the new or old generation. Technically speaking, she is part of the older generation. She married Captain Forrester and is one of the adults of the novel. The reader feels that it would be fitting if she died gracefully with the rest of her peers; Niel himself thinks that she should "immolate herself... and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged" (Cather 145). Yet later in the novel she acts as if she belongs in the new social order. Mrs. Forrester disrespects her marriage in her affair with Ellinger- a sex-driven decision which suggests new age values. She also moves her assets away from Judge Pommeroy to Ivy after the Captain's death- a money driven, instinct

based decision (Cather 128). Because of this complicated set of characteristics, the fate that Mrs. Forrester is meant to have according to the previous patterns isn't apparent.

However, if the novel is read with naturalism in mind, these discrepancies are easily explained. Mrs. Forrester is in fact a member of the old generation but is slightly altered. One can think of her as an organism that has behavioral adaptations which allow her to live a happy life. She is capable of adjusting to a new situation, which is the most important characteristic of a healthy being in the natural world. She is able to accept the fact that times are changing- "she preferred life on any terms" (Cather 145). This deviation from the norm can be attributed to a number of things. She was born in California and Cather alludes to her free spirit and more lenient values throughout the book (106). She is twenty-five years younger than Captain Forrester, which also suggests that she is a transitional being stuck between two eras and two modes of thought (Cather 6). In the end, although Mrs. Forrester seems to break the naturalist pattern, she strengthens the idea that humans and animals are similar on an even deeper level.

Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* portrays naturalism in a non-traditional, unique way and still effectively expresses the idea that humans and animals are essentially the same. Comparing *A Lost Lady* side by side with *Maggie*, the two novels seem very different, but this is simply a style issue. The main idea that comes across is the same. In accordance with natural selection, a force which acts on all animals, characters in *A Lost Lady* either act according to their instincts and profit or suppress these instincts and disintegrate. Mrs. Forrester is a complex, unique example of how the naturalist movement can play out in a text and connects humans and animals even further. Naturalism can come in many forms and styles. The messages behind the plot are what unite these seemingly separate creative works into one movement of literature, and *A Lost Lady* is certainly part of that movement.

Works Cited

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