

4-1-2012

Why *A Lost Lady* is Naturalist

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Recommended Citation

Liu, Judy '14, "Why *A Lost Lady* is Naturalist" (2012). *2012 Spring Semester*. Paper 4.
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Literary Explorations II

9 March 2012

Why *A Lost Lady* is Naturalist

In Steven Crane's *Maggie*, people survive in a downcast world, where desperate people squelch the hope of those around them. This hopeless environment reduces the characters, even the once innocent, beautiful Maggie, into a creature that is more animal than human. This situation is also seen in *A Lost Lady*. Instead of having happy, idealized events, both novels are realistic and often pessimistic, with characters whose descriptions and behaviors do not match up with what is expected of a human being. Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* is a naturalist text due to the dehumanization of the characters through animalistic descriptions, emphasis on the three biological needs of man, and casual announcements of life changing events as also seen in *Maggie* by Crane.

As shown in *Maggie*, naturalist texts often exemplify mankind's needs of food, accumulation of possessions, and sex through the characters. Nellie displayed her compulsion for possessing items and eating food when she took advantage of men to buy things for her. This behavior was evident when she and other women persuaded Pete to buy them drinks in a saloon (Crane 835). As the women coaxed and encouraged him, Pete let down his guard until he gave himself and his money to Nell "with the trembling fingers of an offering priest" (Crane 774). This exemplifies that he was gladly willing to give everything to Nellie because of her sly determination to obtain things from him, like an offering priest behaves toward God. Pete also drunkenly stated, "Yehs knows, damn it, yehs kin have all got, 'cause I'm stuck on yehs, Nell, damn't, I--I'm stuck on yehs, Nell--buy drinksh--damn't" (Crane 774). His nonsensical language

shows how degraded and broken Nellie made him. Conversely, she selfishly benefited from her trickery and did not care about Pete's fate at all. When Pete became so drunk that he slumped into sleep, the women recoiled in horror and Nellie called him a fool (Crane 874). After Nell got her drinks, she did not care about Pete because she only wanted to satisfy her need for food. The men that buy Maggie satisfy their need for sex, seen in one man's "small, bleared eyes, sparkling from amidst great rolls of red fat, [sweeping] eagerly over the girl's upturned face" (Crane 789). After encountering and trying to lure several men among the streets, Maggie finally found the described man, someone who was willing to give up some of his money to fulfill his sexual desires. He was not very rich, as his clothing was ripped and soiled, but fulfilling one biological need was more important to him than money or other institutions of society (Crane 789).

In *A Lost Lady*, the characters also gave in to their biological desires. After Mr. Forrester died, Mrs. Forrester invited Ivy Peters, Annie Peters, Niel, and a few more young boys for a dinner of duck (Cather 135). After witnessing Mrs. Forrester's unsuccessful attempts at conversing with the other boys, Niel realized that the men only went for the food, and didn't care at all for the conversation (Cather 139). Before this occasion, Mrs. Forrester fulfilled her need for sex with Frank Ellinger. Her affair is implied early in the novel, when Ellinger is invited to the Forresters' residence. Just before the two are about to sleep in their separate rooms, "the train of her velvet dress caught the leg of his broadcloth trousers and dragged with a friction that crackled and threw sparks" (Cather 49). This unusual interaction hints to the reader that there was something hidden going on between Mrs. Forrester and Frank Ellinger. The fact that actual sparks were produced prompts the reader to think that they were romantically involved, as sparks are often used as a symbol for love. Mrs. Beasley and Molly Tucker exemplified their need for accumulation of possession when they bargained for and talked about obtaining the Forresters'

kitchen ware. After Mr. Forrester had his second stroke, the two women barged into his home on the pretense that they were taking care of him. However, once they were inside the house, they gossiped amongst themselves and envied the Forresters' possessions. Mrs. Beasley noted that "there's a chest full of double damask upstairs, every tablecloth long enough to make two" (Cather 119). Molly Tucker thought to herself "if there is a sale, I've a mind to bid in a couple of those green ones, with the long stems, for mantel decorations" (Cather 119).

Naturalist texts also often describe life altering events abruptly, making them almost forgettable. This is often seen when a death occurs. In *Maggie*, Jimmie and Maggie's baby brother Tommie died without comment from the other characters. The text did not mention that his family members had any reaction at all; there was only two sentences written about his death. Not only was his death briefly told, but the description of what was done to respect Tommie's life made the event seem ordinary. The child was placed in "a white, insignificant coffin, his small waxen hand clutching a flower that the girl, Maggie, had stolen from an Italian" (Crane 151). His coffin was cheap, and his family did not even bother to buy flowers for his burial. Additionally, the next sentence moves on from this occurrence and simply states that Maggie and Jimmie survived (Crane 143). This implied that Tommie's death was so insignificant that it did not impact the lives of the people who were supposed to be closest to him. When Mrs. Forrester died in *A Lost Lady*, a similar reaction occurred. Near the end of the novel, Niel meets Ed Elliot, who also grew up in Sweet Water and knew of Mrs. Forrester's fate (Cather 148). As the two talked about the woman whom Niel had loved, Niel asked Ed if Mrs. Forrester was still alive (Cather 149). Ed then told Niel of her death. Instead of denying or grieving about such news, Niel did not act fazed. In fact, he thanked God that she was taken care of throughout her life (Cather 150). Niel, the person who probably cared for her the most at the time, did not seem to

be affected by her death. Ed then assessed his response and expressed his relief that Niel felt the same way that he did, meaning that he, too, was not upset by her death (Cather 150).

Animalistic portrayals of characters are another key component of naturalism. For instance, Jimmie and the other children were shown fighting with each other in the first scene of *Maggie*. The youngsters fought barbarically and “howl[ed] [with] renewed wrath” when one offended another (Crane 2). The descriptions of these children could easily have been used for wild animals. Their injuries were depicted bluntly and vividly. When Jimmie’s mouth was struck with a stone, his “blood was bubbling over his chin and down upon his ragged shirt” (Crane 2). What’s more, all the children delighted in each other’s misery and “seemed to leer gloatingly at the blood upon the other child's face” (Crane 15). Children are typically regarded as pure and innocent, but Crane pictures them just as cruel and vicious as wild dogs. Years into the future, when Jimmie became a young man, he was angered at Pete for hurting Maggie. He and his friend then started a fight with Pete. However, Jimmie’s ally is addressed more times as a “companion” than a friend, especially when the two physically start to fight Pete (Crane 469). This implies that this man was not trying to help Jimmie because he wanted to support him as society said a true friend should do, but solely because of his desire to fight. In fact, this belligerence is evident in all three men. Their appearances were rough, like their “lips curled back and stretched tightly over the gums in ghoulish grins” (Crane 502). The descriptions of these three men hint at the similarities between how they fought and how animals generally fight.

Characters in *A Lost Lady* were also often portrayed as animals. Frank Ellinger looked like “a man who could bite an iron rod in two with a snap of his jaws” (Cather 36). He had “a restless, muscular energy that had something of the cruelty of wild animals in it” (Cather 37). Instead of having a cultured aura that one would expect from a refined human being, his

appearance was more like that of a wild beast. Mr. Forrester became more animalistic in a different way. As he had more strokes and his health deteriorated, his speech became blurred (Cather 82). He could not clearly enunciate some words, so he “avoided talking even more than was his habit” (Cather 82). Captain Forrester was gradually losing his ability to speak, the most prominent quality that separates humans from animals.

As seen in Crane’s *Maggie*, naturalist texts often accentuate characters’ animal-like qualities and their weaknesses to the three biological needs while overlooking life changing events. These attributes challenge the superiority and sophistication of the characters to prove that humans are really no different than animals. *A Lost Lady* by Cather also stressed the similarities between man and animals, making the novel a naturalist text.

Works Cited

Cather, Willa. *A Lost Lady*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. *Moodle*. Web. 21 Feb. 2012.

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