

CHARACTERISTICS (tenets) OF NATURALISM (Naturalistic Fiction)

Naturalism in Literature

Naturalism is a literary movement that drew much from Darwin. Some general characteristics of Naturalism include the following:

- **An objective, rather than an imaginative and escapist, study of human beings**
- **A belief that a person is governed by his or her passions, heredity, and surroundings, and often is subordinate to the social environment of which he/she is a part**
- **A base, often pessimistic, view of life**

Literary Elements and Naturalism:

Characters: Frequently but not invariably, ill-educated or lower class characters whose lives are governed by the forces of heredity, instinct, and passion

Setting: Frequently an urban setting

Topics (become themes): Survival, Determinism, Violence, and Taboo

Other “things” to look for in Naturalism:

1. **In the individual- strong and often warring (conflicting) emotions: passions, such as lust, greed, or the desire for dominance or pleasure; and the fight for survival in an amoral, indifferent universe**

**So, conflicts are often: Man/Woman vs. Nature
 Man/Woman vs. Himself/Herself**

2. **Nature as an indifferent force acting on the lives of human beings.**

In what ways is Naturalism different than Realism?

- 1. Naturalism is sometimes seen as an extreme form of Realism—reality in its most brutal form.**
- 2. Naturalist fiction tends to be an objective, almost scientific presentation of a situation.**
 - **The writer is simply a recorder of what happens without much judgment or interpretation.**
 - **Readers become “witnesses” to these events, left mostly to draw their own conclusions and form their own opinions.**
- 3. Naturalist fiction deals with situations and settings that take away the free will of the characters. Even though they may want things to be different, characters in Naturalist fiction do not seem to have any choices about their own lives--they are trapped by social, economic, emotional, hereditary or environmental forces.**
- 4. Naturalism resembles Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” (natural selection) theory—the strong and fortunate survive and thrive; the weak become victims of their environments and circumstances.**
- 5. Characters often must resort to basic human instinct and desperate or degrading behaviors and situations in order to survive.**
- 6. The setting (social and cultural surroundings and landscapes) are commonplace and un-heroic; life for the characters is made up of dull routines of daily existence in order to make a life in harsh surroundings.**
- 7. Naturalist characters usually exhibit one “fatal flaw”—a character flaw that affects the character’s decisions and actions and usually leads to negative consequences. *Hubris* (exaggerated pride, self-confidence and/or arrogance) is sometimes that fatal flaw, but it can be something else, as well.**
- 8. The controlling forces are society and the surrounding environment.**
- 9. Characters’ lives are conditioned and controlled by their environments, their family situations, heredity, chance, or instinct, yet they fight to hold on to their lives, self worth and individuality. Characters in Naturalistic fiction possess qualities that make them seem heroic in their struggles to maintain their dignity and to survive in unforgiving or dehumanizing environments or situations. In true Naturalist characters, readers should be able to identify qualities that make the characters worthy of respect in some way.**