

Literary naturalism: a  
comparison of  
maggie: a girl of the  
streets and to build  
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For centuries, philosophers have debated just how much truth can be found in the concept of free will. As humans, we tend to favor a viewpoint that grants us more control, that is, that we are capable of determining our future with our actions. However, with the movement of literary naturalism came the counterargument: with the forces of economics, biology, and psychology, humans are left with no free will. This concept has been explored in naturalist writings, including *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *To Build A Fire*, which both explore the extreme control one's environment can have on life. Though the texts use contrasting settings, both are set in worlds of harsh cruelty closing in on the protagonist. While both works prove to be exemplary examples of literary naturalism, using similar characterization and thematic techniques, differences lie in how the natural forces are used to leave protagonists without control or hope.

Both works feature a theme of environmental determinism. In *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, protagonist Maggie is surrounded by rampant poverty, crime, and alcoholism. Though Maggie imagines growing up and out of this world she knows, this proves impossible. No matter how honest her actions are, Maggie's environment sets her back enough so that she is constantly fighting to survive, emotionally and physically. No character is pardoned: Jimmie opens the story by getting in a street fight to maintain his reputation, and grows up to be a womanizing drinker like so many men around him. The economic environment of poverty stunts the growth of all characters, preventing them from making choices to overcome this hardship.

Likewise, in *To Build A Fire*, the environment of the wild Yukon determines the fate of the man, no matter what self-sustaining actions he takes.

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Throughout the story, the man must endure a horribly harsh winter climate with no respite in sight. Despite being cognizant of the dangers of the Yukon and doing his best to overcome them, the man continually falls victim to the ultimately more-powerful forces of nature. In one scene, after the man has successfully built a fire that he so desperately needs for survival, snow falls from a tree and extinguishes it. Like Maggie thinking Pete might be her ticket out of poverty, the man sees his small fire as a chance to survive the wintry tundra. However, the environment ultimately asserts control: just as Pete leaves Maggie, the fire leaves the man. Though both characters fight to rise above circumstances, ultimately their environments dictate their fates.

Perhaps due to the comparably difficult environments of these stories, the protagonists are characterized in similar methods. Both Maggie and the man become numb to their environments, demonstrating the toll their surroundings have taken on them. When Maggie watches Pete leave the bar with Nellie, she does not respond by calling after him or ranting and raving. Instead, she calmly decides to go home. Maggie has been beat down by her circumstances so severely that she is numb to pain, and has lost any inclination to defend herself. In *To Build A Fire*, the man is physically numb due to the cold. As he is attempting to light the fire, the match begins to burn his hands. The only reason he notices is due to the smell of burning flesh; his hands are too numb to even feel such pain. The cold environment has robbed him of basic self-preservation instincts, leaving the man at risk to himself. Both characters are depicted as victims of lost sensation, both emotionally and physically.

Another similar characterization can be found in the rejection of social norms. Acting in desperation, both characters are forced into situations that would appear amoral, or at least socially unacceptable. After Maggie has been rejected by both her family and Pete, she turns to prostitution. Though morally questionable, this profession appears to be the only way for Maggie to survive. Similarly, in *To Build A Fire*, the man finds himself increasingly numb and unable to build a fire, arriving at the conclusion to kill the dog for warmth. In Western cultures, dogs are perceived as beloved pets and companions, and the idea of killing one's own dog and inserting body parts into its body seems horrific. Yet the man sees this as a solution to his rapidly falling body temperature. Though he does not kill the dog because his hands are too numb, the mere act of considering such behavior is socially unacceptable. However, like Maggie, the man is a victim of a desperate environment.

A key component to literary naturalism is the use of forces to explain why characters have no free will. Though *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *To Build A Fire* do not use all forces in the same way, both apply the force of biology. Maggie is a pretty child who grows up to be a beautiful woman. Though facial beauty is usually seen as a blessing, in her environment of patriarchy and chauvinism, this is a disadvantage. Maggie is prone to having men lust after her, and she falls victim to their womanizing ways. In *To Build A Fire*, the man suffers from simply being human, the ultimate biological curse. As his feet and hands go numb, the man is forced to watch the dog curl up with its furry coat for warmth. No matter how many layers the man

wears or how big a fire he can build, his biology forces him to submit to the cold.

Despite these similarities, significant differences can be found in how these two texts explore naturalism. Perhaps the most obvious difference is the choice of setting: While *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* takes place in a slum of New York City, *To Build A Fire* is set in the frigid Yukon wilderness. Both environments prove to be harshly antagonistic towards the main characters, though in differing ways. Because Maggie lives in a crowded area, running rampant with underemployment and alcoholism, she is damaged primarily by the people around her. Other humans who exemplify the characteristics of the neighborhood punish and scathe her, leaving her isolated and desperate. However, in *To Build a Fire*, the man's only companion is the dog. Because of the natural setting in the Yukon, the man is not betrayed by humans, but by nature itself. The cold air, falling snow, and icy springs inhibit any progress he can make. With such drastically different settings, these two works show their characters falling victim to their environment in directly opposing ways.

In terms of natural forces asserting power, these texts take two starkly different approaches. While *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* does incorporate the biological force of Maggie's beauty, this is not the central focus. Rather, economic forces are what primarily dictate the fate of Maggie's life. Maggie is raised in the working class, experiencing poverty, crime, unemployment, and alcoholism. Though Maggie is a pretty girl, she is surrounded by equally impoverished men, giving her a skewed perspective on romantic interests.

Economics forces led her to Pete, who she considered to be financially stable  
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and successful, in relative terms. In contrast is *To Build A Fire*, which prioritizes biological forces. Throughout the text, the man is focused on the painful numbness of his body. His face is covered in ice, his hands are too cold to be useful, and his feet are wet and giving way to frostbite.

Biologically, the man is ill-equipped for this climate. No matter how hard he works, he can never overcome the biological forces of being a human.

Though both of these works use thematic development and characterization to exhibit literary naturalism, specific contexts differ. Contrasting settings and natural forces show the reader a lack of free will in two completely different realms. Between the two works, the literary naturalist movement makes a clear point: an attempt to defy the determined fate is futile.