

The animal within: naturalism in a lost lady essay sample

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



History and literature have developed in a parallel manner, as organisms often co-evolve with each other. With the publication of Darwin's groundbreaking work, the *Origin of Species*, a new group of people, the Social Darwinists, applied the theory of natural selection to social hierarchy. A most notable Social Darwinist, Herbert Spencer, coined the term "survival of the fittest", implying that people in higher social groups were more "fit" to survive than those who were in lower social groups (Bannister, "Social Darwinism"). This idea of social evolution contributed to the dehumanization of people. More social theorists, scientists, and writers started considering humans with the characteristics of animals. This new era of thinking led to a new genre of writing known as Naturalism is defined by four characteristics which are exemplified in Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, one of the most prominent Naturalist works. Other authors also used elements of Naturalism in their writing, although in a more subtle manner.

Willa Cather *A Lost Lady* and Stephen Crane's *Maggie* utilize the three human desires as motivation behind characters' actions, an apathetic tone in which the author describes their characters, and an emphasis on the bestial side of humans with direct comparisons of characters to entities in nature. The main idea behind Naturalism is that humans are simply another species of animal; they are not "above" other animals in any way. Humans, like other beasts, are driven by natural instincts, instead of acquired knowledge. Naturalist writers portray humans as guided by three basic human desires. They claim that humans do not act upon heroic impulses or morals. The first basic human desire is the need to eat. In Crane's *Maggie*, Maggie's brother, Jimmie, and his friends are getting preached to while in a soup line, but they

completely ignore the preacher's ranting and continue incessantly asking for their soup tickets (Crane 155). The Blum brothers from *A Lost Lady* strike a parallel with Jimmie and his friends. The Blum boys, although minor characters in Cather's work, are from a lower social class, and therefore have to worry more about getting enough nourishment to survive.

This justifies their desire for food. However, when Adolf Blum catches Mrs. Forrester cheating, he does not act on her adultery and only worries about "fishing for cat... or... waiting for wild duck" (Cather 56). If he were guided by his morals instead of his desires, Adolf would have exposed Mrs. Forrester's adultery or tried to stop her. However, just like Jimmie ignores the preacher in *Maggie*, Adolf Blum turns a blind eye to Mrs. Forrester's sinful actions. It is the need to eat that propels both Jimmie and Adolf to act in a manner that is neglectful of their morals. By committing adultery, Mrs. Forrester shows how human actions are influenced by the second basic human desire; the desire to procreate, most often with the fittest people in their vicinity. This desire is manifested in Pete's pursuit of Maggie in Crane's *Maggie*. Pete only takes notice of Maggie after she grows up into a pretty girl, and he tells Maggie he loves her in order to get her to sleep with him (Crane 428). In a likely manner, Mrs. Forrester was initially attracted to Captain Forrester's strength and masculinity; when he rescues her from the mountain, he carries her through the toughest terrain (Cather 142).

However, shortly after Captain Forrester becomes invalid, we find Mrs. Forrester committing adultery with Frank Ellinger, a younger and fitter man. Mrs. Forrester shows an irrepressible desire to be loved and procreate;

therefore she breaks societal expectations that dictate marriage as a partnership where loyalty is held to the highest esteem. Both Pete and Ms. Forrester are driven by their sexual needs to act immorally. Pete's pursuit of Maggie is driven by his desire to procreate, however, Maggie's pursuit of Pete is propelled by the third basic human desire; the desire to accumulate possessions. Maggie's life is awful; she has a perpetually drunk mother and a careless, angsty brother who often take their frustrations out on her. She sees that Pete seems to have an abundance of money and worldly experience, and thus is fascinated with him and pursues him in an attempt to alleviate herself into his world and gain what she could have by his side. Pete is likewise influenced by this desire acquire possessions in his pursuit of Nellie, " the woman of brightness and audacity" (Crane 629). Cather's characters are also influenced by this desire to accumulate possessions.

Mrs. Forrester, for example, switches her business suddenly from Judge Pommerey to Ivy Peters without warning. She does this because Ivy promises to make her more money than the Judge can. Her desire to accumulate possessions is overruling her obligation to honor her and Judge Pommerey's friendship. Ivy himself is likewise driven by a desire to collect all that he can; he had always had an ultimate aspiration to own the Forrester's land and henceforth is the reason why he buys out the Forresters(Cather 89). The need to accrue wealth is shown as an influence behind the actions of many characters in Naturalist writing. Naturalist writing is also characterized by the apathetic tone that writers use to describe their characters with. Naturalist writers treat their characters as subjects of a scientific project, and therefore

write with a strictly observational voice. For example, Crane describes the setting of *Maggie* with sophisticated language, but the dialogue of the characters is often misspelled to remain accurate to the speaking style. Nature is also apathetic towards humans. Cather uses an observational tone in her writing.

The author herself never shares her personal opinion of the characters. However, she does let the reader know what her characters think of each other. This can still be considered being apathetic to the characters, because she is simply recording how her characters react in given situations instead of contributing her own personal opinion to the text. Nature is also indifferent to the blight of humans in *A Lost Lady*. When Mrs. Forrester falls from the cliff as a young woman, she breaks both her legs, and spends the night “ in the bitter cold, swept by the icy canyon draught” (Cather 142). No miraculous flora or fauna cushions her fall; and no extraordinary changes in weather make the night in the canyon comfortable for Mrs. Forrester. The environment, like the author, is simply an unbiased, unconcerned observer. Because Naturalist writers want to emphasize the bestial nature of humans, they often compare their characters to things in nature. Often times, the reader finds the author comparing his characters to animals. Crane describes Jimmie viewing pedestrians as “ mere pestering flies” (Crane 180). Likewise, Cather uses bugs to describe Niel and Ivy’s relationship as “ recognizing each other through antipathy, as hostile insects do” (Cather 89). It is this use of natural elements in the language that places emphasis on the primitive side of characters. Naturalist writers also compare their characters to plants.

In *Maggie* specifically, Crane refers to Maggie as a girl who “blossomed in a mud puddle” (Crane 207). Cather also uses flowers to describe Mrs. Forrester, especially her skin. As she ages, her skin, once having “the fragrant, crystalline whiteness of lilacs” dulls, “having the ivory tint of gardenias that have just begun to fade” (Crane 26, 94). Another instance where Cather uses flowers in relation to Mrs. Forrester is in a scene foreshadowing the destruction of Niel’s perception of Mrs. Forrester. Before Niel leaves Sweetwater to go to MIT, he cuts a rose for Mrs. Forrester. This rose was “stained with the burning-rose color which is always gone by noon... so intense it could not possibly last” (Cather 70). This rose can be compared to the romantic image that Niel has of Mrs. Forrester, and the description implies that the romantic view will not last. As predicted, shortly afterwards Niel finds out Mrs. Forrester is committing adultery. Cather’s artful use of the rose provides a subtle way to show that the idealistic image of Mrs. Forrester is only temporary. The use of flowers in nature to describe the main female characters of both works is used effectively to highlight their character development. Cather also incorporates the idea of social Darwinism into her writing.

Although Mr. Forrester is honorable, kind-hearted, and has a supportive circle of friends, he is not well adapted to live in the new era of business, in which honor does not matter. Therefore, we see he eventually dies an old, broke man. He literally has no money, and is mentally broken by the strain this lack of funding puts on himself and his wife (“A Lost Lady Study...”). On the other hand, although Ivy is unscrupulous and cruel, he rises as a

prominent but shady lawyer and ends up successfully turning the Forresters' land into profitable farmland. He succeeds in this new world of business, where people are driven and guided by selfish desires only. There is one case in which a character adapts to their surroundings.

Mrs. Forrester initially belongs to the "old generation of pioneers", seeing as she is married to Captain Forrester. However, she ends up adapting to the changing society. By switching her business to Ivy without warning, she shows that she can also be heartless and survive in the new world of selfish business. In the world of *A Lost Lady*, only the best adapted people can become successful. Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*, along with Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, exemplify the characteristics of Naturalism in their plot and form. The Naturalism in *A Lost Lady* is subtle, but still present in the text. Although some may argue that the Naturalist elements in *A Lost Lady* are too understated to be relevant, even these discreet references contribute to the flavor of the story. The main plot of the story revolves around the new, fitter generation beating out the old, less well adapted generation. This is social natural selection at its finest, and Naturalism at its most effective application.

Works Cited

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