

# Definition of american literature 1865-1914



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American literature from 1865 to 1914 often receives a definition expressed in terms of the realistic movement, which is the attempt to depict subjects according to lifelike ways, without any particular interpretation or exaggeration. However, within this period, American literature seems to reflect a more fundamental philosophical view of the nature of art that implicates naturalism, which is the thesis that human life could and ought to be studied. Naturalism is a movement that emerged in response to the perceived excesses of Romanticism and Surrealism, particularly with reference to those styles' symbolic, idealistic, and optimistic views of the world and human nature. Nevertheless, while realism sought only to impose empirical value into art by portraying subjects in an earthly way, separate from the idealism of the early 19th century, the movement toward naturalism reflected more of a philosophical shift than an artistic one. Although naturalism is viewed often as an outgrowth of literary realism, it is the result from a leap further into the study of human nature, rather than a study of art. While realism attempted to portray human beings as they actually are, naturalism took a step further by first proposing a theory of human nature and then representing that nature in art. Part of this theory of human nature was determinism, or the belief that every event in the universe, including human behavior, is causally determined by previous events. According to one critic, "The new 'scientific novel' would be created by placing characters with known inherited characteristics into a carefully defined environment and observing the resulting behavior" (Brians). As a result, the experiment was no longer an attempt to pay homage to empirical facts of reality, but rather to confirm the hypothesis that history shapes protagonists rather than being shaped by them. In naturalistic literature,

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characters frequently come from lower-class backgrounds and are governed by the forces of passion or heredity, which means the exercise of free will is impossible. In Jack London's "To Build a Fire," the protagonist's free will is nonexistent as his life is challenged by the imposing foe of nature, which serves as the short story's antagonist. However, while nature is acting against the man and his survival, nature itself is not acting deliberately, which places the sole responsibility for the story's conflict and the protagonist's predicament on his shoulders. In this manner, the naturalist's theory that nature is indifferent is confirmed by means of putting an individual in a circumstance where he is doomed to fail. In addition, nature as an indifferent force in man's life is a theme that runs throughout naturalist writings in American literature from this period. In Section VII of Stephen Crane's short story "The Open Boat," the narrator contemplates, "This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent." The idea of a scientific method in constructing the characters and plots of literature seemed to strike a chord with readers in the early 20th century, especially given the social context in which the idea was developed (Britannica 71). The scientific appeal of the naturalist literature differentiated itself from other realist literature because even though the naturalists used the realists' techniques of accumulating earthly details, they had a particular object in mind when they selected the portion of reality they desired to portray, just like a scientist as he engages in empirical study. Thus, to lump naturalist writers

into an all-encompassing category that includes realists as such is an inaccurate representation of the complexity and philosophical nuance that occurred during this period in American literary history. From this analysis, it seems the purely realism interpretation of American literature from 1865 to 1914 is mistaken. A more naturalistic approach to understanding this period in American literature is a more productive route to take in exploring the themes, symbols, and motifs of this subset of skilled writers.

Bibliography  
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