

# Elements of naturalism and realism in zitkala-sa's american indian stories



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American Indian Stories written by Zitkala-Sa in 1921 is a collection of biographical and autobiographical stories from Native Americans living in the Sioux reservation. In this work, the author describes her (and also other people's) personal stories of growing up. The narrators of these tales differ in age - this way we get the personal experience of transition of Indian Americans from early life to adulthood. The central focuses of the collection are the Native Americans' struggles and problems they had with the stronger force of the white society in America. The stories are written through the eyes of a girl. She describes how she learned about the customs of her culture and also portrays how she perceived the white society's treatment of her people. The collection of stories is written in styles that mostly portray characteristics of naturalism; however, due to different styles and perspectives of the circumstances described in the tales, an ambiguity of styles arises - some parts of the work tend to belong more to realism than to naturalism.

In the first section and the longest section of this essay, I discuss what characteristics of American Indian Stories fit into the literary era of naturalism. In the second part, I debate what characteristics tend to represent realism. In the final section of this essay, I present the difference between the two and interpret the importance of these variations between them. The content of the essay is supported by exemplification from the collection American Indian Stories and by Donald Pizer's Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature - these essays discuss the typical American naturalistic work in the nineteenth century and are exemplified by (what Pizer calls most typical works of this era) Frank Norris's

McTeague (1899), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). "A definition [of naturalism however,] drawn from these three novels will not be applicable to all late nineteenth-century naturalistic fiction." (Pizer, 12) In short, although not all works can be classified into naturalism with these novels, there are some characteristics that are, nonetheless, almost always true for this era and I try to identify them.

Let us begin with the characters appearing in the naturalistic works. While realistic novels portray the lives of the middle class, "[t]he naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. His characters are the poor, the unsophisticated. His fictional world is that of the commonplace and unheroic[.]" (Pizer, 10-11) In *American Indian Stories*, the main characters are Native Americans, who were living (are living) in poor conditions as it was - facing famine and poverty, but they were also exploited and oppressed from the side of the colonizers. The exploitation of these people (women in particular) shows that they belonged to the lower (lowest) class. "I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids." (Zitkala-Sa, 62-63) White people cutting their hair symbolizes how the exploitation of young girls in the reservations classifies them as the lower (lowest) members of society, someone different from the whites - othering of the Natives. Consequently, American Indians being the lowest members of society, places them in the commonplace (or even lower than common) environment and defines them as unheroic.

It is impossible to define naturalism without differentiating between realism and naturalism itself because these two periods are similar most of the time. As Pizer puts it: "A traditional and widely accepted concept of American naturalism, therefore, is that it is essentially realism infused with a pessimistic determinism." (Pizer, 9) In other words, one of the major differences between the two is that naturalists include (pessimistic) determinism in their stories - the characters' fates are determined from the moment they are born. "The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance." (Pizer, 11) Although in American Indian Stories the characters' lives are conditioned and controlled in many ways, the most prominent way is the one through environment and all other ways stem from this one. In this case, the environment is not the natural one but the social one - environment the Native Americans live in is the white community and the whites oppress them in such a way they are not able to achieve anything above lower class. Their economic, social and political position is virtually non-existing, and this controls them in a way that they are doomed to fail in life - pessimistic determinism. Their heredity is problematic for their destiny only in the sense that they are perceived as less developed than white people and consequently the "chance" for success that Pizer talks about is not possible for them because white people do not allow them to succeed (this is what I mean with the previous statement "all other ways stem from this one").

Another element of naturalistic works is symbolism. "In each of these novels *McTeague*, *Sister Carrie*, and *The Red Badge of Courage* there is a pervasive

and striking symbol which, in a sense, accompanies the protagonist on his adventures.” (Pizer, 35) The collection is full of symbolism, for instance, the symbol of cutting hair mentioned before. Another one is the symbol of the iron horse: “ I walked with my mother to the carriage that was soon to take us to the iron horse.” (Zitkala-Sa, 18) The iron horse here is what the Natives called a train - this symbolizes the Native Americans’ lack of technology and development. But the true symbol, the symbol that accompanies the protagonist on his or her adventures is the one of the red apples. These apples are misleading and also backstabbing - on one hand they represent some desires of young Natives, everything they want (their better future), because they do not have such pretty and tasteful apples themselves, but on the other hand they represent the way white people take their children from them. “ I had never seen apple trees. I had never tasted more than a dozen red apples in my life; and when I heard of the orchards in the East, I was eager to roam among them.” (Zitkala-Sa, 17) The main character is only concerned about how tempting the apples look and does not even think of the consequences. This symbol does not appear throughout all the stories, but does however, determine the whole destiny of the protagonist.

There are some characteristics in American Indian Stories that are not typical for naturalism. “ In McTeague sex is that which comes to all men and women, disrupting their lives and placing them in relationships which the sanctity of marriage cannot prevent from ending in chaos and destruction” (Pizer, 15). Sex is the theme that is missing in Zitkala-Sa’s work and this consequently puts the collection more in the sphere of realism. However, it could be argued that she decided not to include it because of the young age

of the characters. Another characteristic that is missing is the sad ending and pessimism throughout the stories – although pessimism is included, characters still seem to be somehow positive most of the time. As I have quoted before: “[Naturalism is] realism infused with a pessimistic determinism” and this is one of the aspects that is partially included but also partially missing from the stories.

Distinguishing between the two literary periods can be challenging at times. It is because: “ naturalism comes after realism, and [...] it seems to take literature in the same direction as realism, [but] it is primarily an “ extension” or continuation of realism only a little different.” (Pizer, 9) Since one is the extension of the other, it is impossible not to find traits of realism in naturalism. To distinguish between the two, we sometimes have to split hairs just to find the differences. As Pizer puts it: “ our difficulty as critics of naturalistic novels which are also philosophical novels stems in part from our professional intellectuality, since we tend to assume that writers, as intellectuals, do not make ideas but think them” (Pizer, 69) In other words, every author is different, every one of them has different styles and ideas what to write about, what to include in their stories and what not to. Zitkala-Sa included some aspects in this work that are not characteristics of naturalism and for some aspects it is hard to interpret why the author decided to do so. For this reason, primarily, it is hard to classify this kind of literature.

The differences between the two periods are important in general; however the differences arise due to different authors’ ideas what to write about, and these differences are often small and unnoticeable which (I hate to <https://assignbuster.com/elements-of-naturalism-and-realism-in-zitkala-sas-american-indian-stories/>

contradict myself) renders them insignificant. The two periods are in theory different. However, when we apply theory to practice, we get some works which are extremely naturalistic, some that are extremely realistic, but mostly we get works which represent realism and naturalism intertwined. Not all works can include every single trait, for instance, in American Indian Stories the element of sex is missing, but perhaps the author did not include it in due to the young age of the characters but that does not make it not naturalistic. In conclusion, the differences are in fact not significant - we fit the work in the genre of which the characteristics prevail in the work. To shortly conclude, American Indian Stories is - although it does include some realistic traits - mostly a naturalistic work.

## **Works Cited**

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