and intellectual pleasures. Among the lesser devotees who later shone elsewhere were Frederick Law Olmsted, briefly but influentially an assistant editor, and William Dean Howells, hired when just back from Venice. Later fame also picks out Henry James, a frequent reviewer and essayist until ready for his major fiction, and William James, an infrequent but loyal contributor. Godkin, intent on impact, lined up a cadre of certified personages—not just professors but presidents of Ivy League campuses, not just venerable American poets but British authorities on legal theory. Inevitably the next cohort came on slowly; in 1910 Stuart Pratt Sherman’s essay on Mark Twain almost looked misplaced.

Because *The Nation* lasted in the slippery parade of magazines, it can demonstrate either continuity or change. The question of how long it stayed ideologically fixed while the economy moved from small-scale enterprise into corporate finance neglects the fact that any weekly leading off with three or four pages of topical analysis had to keep up somewhat with the ongoing realities. By 1886, nevertheless, nimbler minds conceived the monthly *Forum*, also focused on broadcloth-suited opinion while committed to policies more effective than appealing to the conscience of the rich. In 1914 the *New Republic* began building on the forthright principle that reforms would come not from enlightened laissez-faire but from planning through a centralizing government. Perhaps in rejoinder, *The Nation* advertised itself in 1916 as “the exponent of sane progress, of wise Conservatism.”

In spite of its political stodginess, Garrison’s successors made its format more inviting, allowed a few signatures on essays, and reviewed more American instead of foreign books. Villard, while respectful of *The Nation’s* past, moved to review more books of “wider current interest” (Carl Van Doren, “Books and the *Nation*,” *The Nation* 121 [1 July 1925]: 11). Likewise he favored immediate causes rather than “deep political knowledge” or the “laws” of economics (Oswald Garrison Villard, “The *Nation* 1865–1925,” *The Nation* 121 [1 July 1925]: 7–9). For the first time *The Nation* sounded pro-labor. Riskier still, it opposed U.S. troops for the First World War, pleaded against a punitive peace, and condemned violating civil liberties at home. By September 1918 the Postmaster General tried to ban it for the system. By 1919, bolder than Godkin’s prospectus of 1865, it billed itself as “the foremost exponent of uncompromising liberalism in America.”

While intellectuals may have overrated the influence of *The Nation*, it keeps bobbing up in biographies, personal letters (those of Theodore Roosevelt, for instance), and memoirs. At the least, its history helps to pin down one phase of that protean term “liberalism.” It documents how some professed liberals reacted to specific crises in the postbellum United States and how awkwardly their abstract system fitted concrete problems, as when they had to choose between the demands of the labor unions and the owning classes. Knowing the recorded pattern of *The Nation* can orient us more generally toward the attitudes of its readers. It is more dependable still as a guide to the cultural-political values of its insiders.

*See also* Editors; Periodicals

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Secondary Works**


Louis J. Budd

**NATIVE AMERICANS**

*See Indians*

**NATURALISM**

From its late-nineteenth-century beginnings, critics of American literary naturalism have disagreed, often violently, about its nature and value. Was the movement an exotic offshoot of a decadent French culture or was it a truthful response, after a quarter-century of “lying” by an older generation of writers, to the actual conditions of late-nineteenth-century American life? Did naturalism posit a human condition in which the
individual was a powerless cipher at the mercy of natural forces, including his own animal brutishness, or did it permit the individual to retain at least vestiges of both free will and human dignity? And finally, was naturalism the last gasp of a naive nineteenth-century belief that experience could be objectively represented or did it look forward, in its significant components of the impressionistic and the surreal, to the nonrepresentational aesthetic of twentieth-century literary modernism?

These issues have been in dispute for over a century. What is indisputable, however, is that a number of American writers, from approximately the early 1890s to the opening of the First World War, are conventionally identified as “naturalists.” This identification began in their own time either because a writer openly expressed enthusiasm for the work of Émile Zola, the principal theoretician and exponent of French naturalism (Frank Norris, e.g., occasionally playfully signed letters “The Boy Zola”) or because a writer’s subject matter of alcoholism, sexual passion, and personal disintegration closely resembled that of Zola (as was true of Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser). The term “naturalism,” whether broadly applied to the major new writing of 1890–1910 or used more pointedly to designate the nature of particular works during this period, has stuck, despite the fact that for much of its history the term has also often served as a sign of disapproval and opprobrium. To describe a novel or play as naturalistic was to indirectly accuse its writer of sensationalistic intent, shallow thinking, and inept artistry. Nevertheless, when used with sufficient care and discrimination, the term still serves the useful purpose of suggesting that a group of writers participated in similar ways in a specific cultural moment and that an attempt to describe these ways may cast light both upon their work and the moment.

AUTHORS ASSOCIATED WITH NATURALISM

The leading American naturalists are traditionally held to be Frank Norris (1870–1902), Stephen Crane (1871–1900), and Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945). Within the brief period from 1893 to 1901, these figures wrote the seminal works of American literary naturalism: Norris’s Vandover and the Brute (1914; written 1894–1895), McTeague (1899), and The Octopus (1901); Crane’s Maggie, A Girl of the Streets (1893) and The Red Badge of Courage (1895); and Dreiser’s Sister Carrie (1900) and Jennie Gerhardt (1911; written principally 1901–1902). Of course, there were precursors—writers, for example, such as Rebecca Harding Davis (1831–1910), Harold Frederic (1856–1898), and Hamlin Garland (1860–1940)—whose fiction occasionally depicts the harsh and destructive conditions of the American farm or factory. But given the sporadic nature of these efforts, the movement does appear to arise suddenly in the early 1890s as a group of young writers born shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War come of age. And it seems just as suddenly to disappear around the turn of the century. Norris and Crane died tragically young, and Dreiser, dispirited by the reception of Sister Carrie (its own publisher in effect suppressed it), retreated from novel writing for over a decade. The early demise of the movement, however, is more appearance than reality. Dreiser did return with a number of major novels beginning with The Financier in 1912. The work of Jack London (1876–1916) during the first decade of the century, though earlier often dismissed as “popular,” is today receiving more and more serious attention, with his naturalism one phase of that interest. In addition, it is increasingly recognized that two of the major women writers of the period, Kate Chopin (1851–1904) and Edith Wharton (1862–1937), produced—in Chopin’s The Awakening (1899) and Wharton’s The House of Mirth (1905)—novels with powerfully rendered naturalistic themes despite the disparity between the upper-class worlds they portray and the conventional lower-class setting of a naturalistic novel. And finally, though the subject lies outside the range of this discussion, naturalism continued as a major thread in American fiction during the 1920s and 1930s—in the 1920s in the early work of John Dos Passos (1896–1970), Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), and William Faulkner (1897–1962), and in the 1930s in the novels of James T. Farrell (1904–1979), John Steinbeck (1902–1968), and Richard Wright (1908–1960).

Several characteristics of specific works by Stephen Crane, one of the earliest American naturalists, can serve as a useful introduction to the late-nineteenth-century phase of the movement. Crane’s sketches “An Experiment in Misery” (1894) and “In the Depths of a Coal Mine” (1894) vividly dramatize the overwhelming impact of post–Civil War industrialization and urbanization upon the nation’s material and psychic existence. In the first, a young man undertakes an experiment in urban reconnaissance. In the guise of a penniless bum, he journeys to the Bowery (New York’s infamous skid row) in an effort to duplicate for one night (and thus understand the nature of) the lives of the human debris inhabiting the slums and ghettos of America’s greatest metropolis. In the second, Crane, in the role of reporter, descends to the depths of a Pennsylvania coal mine and encounters the backbreaking labor, darkness, and cold that characterize the dehumanizing and almost satanic industrial processes of the age. Both sketches are constructed in the form of a
WE ANNOUNCE with pleasure and pardonable pride that we have acquired the publication rights for all of Theodore Dreiser's work. As a realist he is looked upon by an ever increasing audience as not only one of the first, but as perhaps the greatest exponent of the naturalistic school in American fiction.

Many younger writers are Dreiser's disciples. Realism today has become almost a cult, but the discerning reader turns ever to the master mind.

Historically Dreiser has his companions, for he belongs with the movement toward naturalism and realism which came to America when Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and others were dissenting in their various dialects from the reticences and the romance then current.

Mr. Dreiser is an eminent spirit brooding over a world which, in spite of many condemnations, he deeply and soberly loves.

"Sister Carrie" should find a permanent place upon your shelves beside M. Zola's "Nana." $2.50

Toronto Transcript

"Jennie Gerhardt" is a real, artistic creation, a masterpiece that presents a great creative and imaginative vision.$2.50

Boston Transcript

The Financier

"A vivid panorama of American life in its more material aspects, a truly great book in its scope and power." $2.50

The Titan

is the story of a Mirabeau of finance, a typically American phenomenon, like the skyscrapers of New York.$2.50

Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural

highly imaginative—grim—poetical—and satirical.$2.00

A Hoosier Holiday

An automobile tour through old haunts in Indiana revealing much of Mr. Dreiser's early life.$5.00

Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub

a book of the wonder, the terror, and the mystery of life.$2.00

Free and Other Stories

"One only finds in Russian literature art more real, or life more vividly portrayed." $2.00

The Hand of the Potter

a tragedy in four acts a classic drama of gargantuan proportions.$1.75

Twelve Men

"One of the most unusual books in our literature and certainly one of the best books that Dreiser has given us." $2.00

A Traveler at Forty

It is a book about a more or less candid Theodore Dreiser and what he thinks happened to him in England, France, Germany, Italy, Holland and some other lands which he saw for the first time just as he had turned forty. Unlike anything else of its kind, because nobody else ever wrote exactly like Dreiser.$1.50

A Book About Myself

Matchless courage, complete honesty, Not since the "Confessions" of Jean Jacques Rousseau has there been such a book. A fragment of the author's life but with all the force, unity and color of a novel.$3.50

To be republished August 15, 1923

THE "GENIUS"

A new and complete edition of Mr. Dreiser's celebrated novel will be published August 1st. Originally published in 1915 it was suppressed because of the fear of the original publishers that they would be prosecuted. It is difficult to understand upon what intelligent grounds such action could be taken. The work is often frank, sometimes audacious, but behind this is that rugged sincerity always found in Mr. Dreiser's writings.$3.00

To be published October 1, 1923

THE COLOR OF A GREAT CITY

This is a different kind of book—different from any of Mr. Dreiser's other volumes—different from any book of which you can think. Thirty-eight poetic studies of the New York that flourished between 1900 and 1914—before the war. And with thirty-eight interpretive studies by C.B. Falls, the distinguished illustrator. A gem of book making.$3.50

Theodore Dreiser: His Books. A 1923 advertisement in which the publisher Boni & Liveright claims that Dreiser is America's leading naturalist writer.
venture into an unknown world by a worldly young man who is nevertheless shocked by what he finds—shocked, that is, not that there are flophouses and mines but that their actual conditions, their vermin and cold, for example, bite deeply both into the body and mind of someone actually experiencing them. In these conditions, he realizes, human beings have no “higher” life—no capacity for art, religion, or love; they exist almost entirely in response to the terrible physical demands of the moment. Humans have become, as in Edwin Markham’s famous poem of the period, “The Man with the Hoe” (1899), a kind of brute.

Crane’s major novels also participate in this naturalistic desire to make known to an unknowing, largely middle-class audience the new and often ignored truths of life in post–Civil War America. In Maggie the reader is immersed in the day-to-day struggle for existence of a Lower East Side Irish American family whose drinking, physical bullying, and moral blindness accompany their downward path—a family for whom, as Crane wrote in several inscriptions to the novel, “environment shapes life regardless.” And in The Red Badge of Courage, Crane fictionalizes an actual Civil War battle not as a specific historical event but as the permanent condition of youth encountering, and not entirely overcoming, such tests of mind and spirit as fear, anger, and self-doubt. For Henry Fleming the battle often takes the shape of an opposition of huge, almost anonymous forces in which the powerless individual combatant feels himself to be—as the powerless might feel in many late-nineteenth-century social contexts—“in a moving box” bound by “iron laws of tradition and law” (chap. 3, p. 40).

The work of Frank Norris suggests another aspect of the naturalist writer as “truth teller” about contemporary American life. Whereas Crane principally uses metaphor and symbol to carry the burden of thematic expression, Norris, while he too relies on this device, wishes the reader to know more fully and openly the scientific, philosophical, and social truths underlying his specific portrayals. Émile Zola, in his essay on the scientific origins of naturalism “The Experimental Novel” (1880), maintained that the modern scientific—that is, naturalistic—novel not only depicts the actual conditions of life but does so, for the first time in history, armed with a full and truthful—that is, scientific—explanation of these conditions. And since contemporary science had proclaimed that it was the combined forces of heredity and environment that determined any human condition, it was the function of the novelist to create a kind of scientific experiment: characters would be provided with a specific heredity and environment and the novelist would observe and record their response to these forces. Norris probably did not read “The Experimental Novel,” but he did read and admire two of Zola’s novels in which he adapted his stark theory into vivid fiction—L’Assommoir (1877) and Germinal (1885). In the first, members of a working-class Paris family are decimated by hereditary alcoholism; in the second, a miner and his family are destroyed while participating in a futile strike against all-powerful mine owners. Norris’s McTeague portrays the San Francisco dentist McTeague and his wife, Trina, as they are brought low by hereditary defects—alcoholism for him, greed for her. And in The Octopus, the first novel in his incomplete Trilogy of the Wheat, a ruthless monopolistic railroad crushes the wheat farmers of California’s San Joaquin Valley. Norris in both novels is at pains to introduce themes that complicate and mitigate the stark naturalism of a belief that humankind is completely at the mercy of biological conditions or social power. Yet the naturalism present in his explicit commentary on these conditions, as well as in such climactic scenes as the drunken McTeague murdering his wife or wheat farmers shot down by railroad agents, is nevertheless central to each work.

Inseparable in Norris’s mind from his conviction, expressed in his essay “The Responsibilities of the Novelist” (1903) that “the People” must receive from a novelist “not a lie, but the Truth” (p. 8) was his belief that the truth about life included human sexual experience. Of course, literary expression had always included sexual elements, though usually as an adjunct of themes of high romantic passion, burlesque humor, or moral purity. For Norris and other naturalists, however, sexual desire or fear and the social pressures and consequences attendant on sexual expression—these and other issues arising from sex as a principal arena of biological and social experience—became major fictional strains in their own right. Maggie must sell herself on the streets to live, and Carrie learns that her sexual attractiveness can serve as a path to freedom and success. Hilma Tree (in Norris’s The Octopus) and Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt are feminine fecundity personified, and though McTeague desires Trina and Hurstwood desires Carrie sexually, neither man is condemned for this desire. Aided by a Darwinian climate of forthrightness (after all, Darwin had written a full book on the importance of sexual selection in evolution) and by a gradual loosening of Victorian proprieties, the naturalists now sought, as Dreiser noted in his 1903 essay “True Art Speaks Plainly,” to write within the broad claim that “the extent of all reality is in the realm of the author’s pen, and a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic whether it offends the conventions or not” (p. 156).
Because of Dreiser’s long career (his last two novels appeared in the mid-1940s) and the acknowledged greatness of *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* (1925), his work has served for almost a century as a focal point in discussions of American literary naturalism. His fiction is also especially significant because he introduced into American naturalism the theme of authenticity that was to play an important role in its twentieth-century phase. Both Crane and Norris had middle-class, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant roots. Their visits to slums, mines, and factories were in the form and spirit of “research,” and their fiction occasionally reveals in its irony and condescension their distance from their subject matter. Dreiser, however, stemmed from an immigrant, German Catholic background. During his youth he and his large family were poor and struggled to survive, whether in small Indiana towns, working-class Chicago, or down-and-out New York. Carrie’s and Jennie’s stories derive from those of his sisters Emma and Mame, who had worked in menial jobs and had had affairs and gotten pregnant, and they also reflect his own experience of hardship, insecurity, and the fear of going under. When Dreiser wrote in “True Art Speaks Plainly” that “the sum and substance of literary as well as social morality may be expressed in three words—tell the truth” (p. 155), he was echoing Frank Norris’s belief that the novelist must be a truth teller. But for Dreiser the “truth” was not only the subject and themes of literary naturalism but also a deeply felt response to these conditions.

It was this aspect of Dreiserian naturalism—his demonstration that one did not have to “travel” to become a writer, that whatever the seeming poverty of one’s background one could explore it in detail and depth and find significant meaning—that made naturalism so potent a force in later twentieth-century American writing. Two social groups in particular—racial and immigrant ethnic minorities—adopted Dreiser as a model of authenticity, of the legitimacy of their efforts to represent the specific conditions of their own lives. During the 1930s this Dreiserian model is clearly reflected in two “classics” of twentieth-century American naturalism—James T. Farrell’s portrayal of Chicago Irish life in his *Studs Lonigan Trilogy* (1932–1935) and Richard Wright’s account of African American South Side Chicago in *Native Son* (1940).

Another significant aspect of Dreiserian naturalism is his confirmation of the tendency, already apparent in Norris’s novels, to make the naturalistic novel openly and heavily a vehicle of ideological expression. Norris, borrowing fully from contemporary evolutionary ideas, had constructed his first two novels, *Vandover and the Brute* and *McTeague*, in relation to beliefs about the persistence of the animal in humankind, and his last two, *The Octopus* and *The Pit* (published posthumously in 1903) on complementary beliefs about the role of natural forces in human affairs. Dreiser, deeply influenced by Herbert Spencer’s concept of social evolution, depicted urban life as a complex, heterogeneous, competitive maelstrom in which the strong swim and the weak sink—as in the rise of Carrie and the fall of Hurstwood, for example. For the two novels of the Cowperwood Trilogy that he finished during his early career—*The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914)—Cowperwood, who is an amoral Nietzschean manipulator of people and money, is portrayed as an inevitable end product of Spencer’s concept that all life is a struggle for existence.

American naturalism thus offered itself, as it emerged in the work of a group of brilliant young 1890s writers, as a fresh perception of a new world. Free from the restrictions of previous generations concerning both the proper subject matter of literature and the conclusions about life that could be drawn from that subject matter, they believed that they could and should depict the actualities of American experience—not only the ways that most people lived in cities and farms and shops and factories but what they thought and felt as they lived their daily lives. This belief contained not only the assumption that there was value in rendering in detail and with precision, somewhat as a scientist might, the observed characteristics of American life but that there was a causal connection between these conditions and the nature and destiny of an individual life.

Once said, however, this statement demands immediate qualification, since it appears to imply a “school” with some agreement as to method and purpose, as was indeed true to some degree of the group of French naturalists who gathered around Zola and his philosophy of literature in the 1870s. American naturalism, however, was from the first leaderless, centerless, and without a governing body of belief. In responding to a common condition and a common felt need, the first generation of naturalists often struck similar notes but seldom in any harmony.

**CRITICAL RESPONSES TO NATURALISM**

Despite this lack of cohesion among American naturalist writers, early critics often sought to identify a single controlling belief within the movement, one usually phrased as a form of “pessimistic determinism.” Vernon Louis Parrington, for example, in the third volume (1930) of his extremely influential *Main Currents in American Thought*, wrote that “Naturalism is pessimistic realism, with a philosophy that sets man in a
mechanical world and conceives of him as victimized by that world” (p. 325). This belief—whether stated flatly (as by Parrington) or metaphorically (as by Malcolm Cowley in the title of his widely read essay “‘Not Men’: A Natural History of American Naturalism,” 1947)—was almost universally accepted until the late 1950s. Its general effect on discussions of American naturalism was to suggest that the naturalism it described was a kind of taint in writers whom it had infected and was therefore responsible for whatever was superficially sensationalistic, thinly realized, and inadequately thought out in their work.

In 1956, however, Charles C. Walcutt published American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream, a critical study that stimulated a fresh look at naturalism in America. Walcutt held that despite Zola's acknowledged role in the origin of naturalism wherever it is found, the American phase of the movement also owes much to the persistence in American belief of earlier nineteenth-century Romantic strains, especially that of transcendentalism. American writers of the 1890s and later, Walcutt argued, accepted much of Zola's premise that humankind lived in a material universe in which it was controlled, often negatively, by the material conditions of existence. But, he went on, these writers also maintained an often contradictory (or at least paradoxical) belief, epitomized by Emersonian transcendentalism, in our capacity to direct the course of our own lives and in the social progress that can flow from that capacity. Walcutt then examined the work of American naturalists from Crane through the 1930s and concluded that there were few instances of "pure" naturalism. Rather, most putative naturalistic works comprised an uneasy mix of the two "streams" of early- and late-nineteenth-century thought, in which the competing claims of each stream upon the themes and form of the work produced novels that were in effect failed efforts to write naturalistic fiction.

Walcutt's reading of American naturalism represented several advances over previous efforts to interpret the movement as a whole. Rather than starting from the premise that naturalism in America was an intellectually thin and formulaic offshoot of French naturalism, he introduced into his account of its origins a firm basis in American thought and thus provided a clearer understanding of the popularity and longevity of the movement in America. And in positing a central and unresolved conflict in American naturalism between two competing systems of value, Walcutt helped promote the premise that specific works of American naturalism were far more complex thematically than had been held and that it was necessary to accept complexity as an aspect of American literary naturalism if works in the movement were to be properly understood.

It was no historical accident that Walcutt's study appeared when the New Criticism was at its height of popularity as a form of literary analysis; Walcutt's close reading of the interrelation of form and theme in specific naturalistic novels owes much to that method. Indeed, over the next two decades Crane's short stories and novels, because of their intricate interplay of irony and symbolism, received countless New Critical readings. The Red Badge of Courage became a kind of showpiece of the New Criticism applied to the novel form. Walcutt's thesis was indirectly supported by criticism of this kind in that much of it posited a novel whose author appeared to be uncertain whether he was affirming a universe in which individuals were mechanistically controlled or self-determining.

By the late 1970s a number of critics, responding to Walcutt's insights, had reexamined the basic naturalist texts for thematic strands related to earlier American beliefs and for their shaping of these into complex wholes. The criticism of Donald Pizer, from the early 1960s to the late 1990s, also played a role in this critical reorientation. Although stimulated by Walcutt's premise, Pizer, in books both on individual naturalists and on the movement as a whole, modified it in two important ways. Walcutt had argued that American naturalists were hindered from reaching their naturalistic goals by vestiges of older ideas in their beliefs; Pizer, however, held that the various impulses present in a naturalistic novel were a source of thematic density and fictional strength, and that a definition of American naturalism should therefore accommodate to the mixed nature of the movement. And unlike Walcutt, who had centered on early-nineteenth-century transcendentalism as the source of the "positive" element in American naturalism, Pizer found in specific naturalistic texts aspects of humanistic belief that varied in nature from work to work.

A third significant phase in the interpretation of American literary naturalism arose in the early 1980s, influenced by the emergence of the New Historicism and cultural studies as major critical strategies. In reaction to the ahistoricism of much of the theoretical interpretation that had dominated academic literary studies since the 1960s, both the New Historicism and cultural studies stressed that expression of any kind was inseparable from the culture that produced it. The writer, in a sense, did not write but was rather written upon, in ways usually unknown to himself, by the beliefs, values, and practices of his historical moment. This Marxist premise, which had been discredited in the 1930s by the crudity of its application, was now
reinvigorated by the technique of an extremely close and sophisticated reading of the “cultural poetics” of a work—that is, its involuntary expression, through the language used to engage a cultural moment, of the underlying systems of belief of that moment.

Although this approach to the study of American naturalism has restimulated interest in the movement, it has also often had the less beneficial effect of returning its study to an emphasis on determinism. Earlier, during the first half of the twentieth century, critics had almost universally held that naturalistic writers consciously sought to impose a Darwinian-derived determinism on their material. The New Historicist or cultural critic modifies this notion to the belief that it is the culture itself that imposes its underlying values upon the naturalistic author and thus on the portrayal of characters. The weakness in this later conception as a critical strategy is that it usually has its origin in the critic’s belief about conditions of race, class, gender, and similar issues during the period the critic is examining. Finding the culture flawed in these areas and assuming that the novelist is equally flawed, the critic invariably demonstrates the ways in which the novel unconsciously endorses the cultural hegemony of its day. Thus, for example, Walter Benn Michaels, a New Historicist critic, believes that Dreiser unconsciously expresses his support for a capitalistic economics of accumulation in Sister Carrie because Carrie desires, early in the novel, the material things that capitalism has to offer. But Carrie, later in the novel, after she has grown intellectually and emotionally, has desires beyond those for things and money, a complication in the interpretation of her character in its cultural setting that Michaels largely ignores.

**AMERICAN NATURALISM AS A LITERARY MOVEMENT**

These various ways of interpreting late-nineteenth-century American naturalism—from explanations that depend largely on its origins in French naturalism or on its deep roots in earlier American intellectual history or on its immersion in the culture of its own moment—suggest that the movement cannot be dealt with primarily on its own terms as a truthful representation of social reality. The naturalist, like all writers, is responsive to the literary conventions of the time—in this instance those that claim the superiority of a literature that accurately renders contemporary experience. But in functioning within these conventions, writers introduce into their effort strands of personal belief, value, and experience that have little to do with their supposed aims. Their works are not a mirror in the roadway, as Stendhal said of the French realist novel, but rather, like any other art work, a product of the complex interaction between a human intelligence and imagination and the specific world in which these function. The naturalists in this sense are no more “truthful” than any other novelist, except perhaps in expending greater attention to closely rendered social detail and to probability of motive. Other than these, their “truths” lie in the ability of their novels to convey believably the response of a distinctive mind and temperament to a distinctive condition.

Nevertheless, the major fiction by the major new writers of the 1890s, while not as easily characterized as is implied by Dreiser’s and Norris’s admonition that the writer should simply tell the truth, does share several significant elements of theme and effect and thus can be construed as participating in a specific literary movement. One such shared element is the one implied by the shock and outrage that greeted much of the new writing of this period, a response that arose from the writer’s dramatization of the disparity between the life led by most Americans and the conventional rhetoric of the American Dream. Whether Hamlin Garland depicting an exhausted, beaten-down midwestern farmer or Dreiser detailing the mechanical, empty existence of a factory girl or Norris portraying the ruination of workers and small landholders by a huge monopoly, American naturalists openly challenged the premise that the nation was a land of opportunity, equality, and freedom. Since this premise was so deeply held as to constitute, in the words of later historians, a “civil religion,” it is no wonder that those challenging it were accused of a form of heresy. Norris and Dreiser had their early novels delayed or suppressed, Crane had to publish Maggie privately, and cries of dismay greeted almost all their work on its appearance. (“We must destroy this race of Norrises,” one reviewer cried after reading McTeague.) Much of this early negative criticism also stemmed, of course, from the naturalists’ violation of contemporary standards of what was proper in fiction. But then as now standards of taste are often inseparable from ideals of decorum which are themselves based on deeply held social and political beliefs. Naturalistic fiction shocked much of its middle-class audience not merely because (as one critic complained) it portrayed characters one would not invite to dinner but because its depiction of a dysfunctional society was a threat to both the material and psychic well being of this audience.

Another shared characteristic of the writing of this period is related to a major difference between French and American naturalists. With the notable exception of Norris in McTeague, American naturalists did not adopt Zola’s stress, as in his Rougon-Macquart series, on hereditary causes of individual misery and failure. In American naturalistic fiction,
belaguered farmers, beaten-down workmen, girls from slums, and immigrant families—average lower-class figures—are trapped not by their unchangeable genes but by remediable social conditions. Almost all American naturalistic fiction, in other words, is written in the spirit of William Dean Howells’s ideal of critical realism, in which the novelist’s depiction of social inadequacies, while it does not contain specific proposals for their resolution, does imply a pressing need for action of some kind. Occasionally, as in Upton Sinclair’s sensationalistic exposé of the meat-packing industry in *The Jungle* (1906), it is possible to draw a direct line between a novel and corrective legislation. But more often, as Amy Kaplan argues in her *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988), the novelist is opening up and participating in a kind of debate in response to a large-scale social issue in American life, a debate in which both writer and audience agree that the problem can be solved. American naturalists thus responded to the threatening social issues facing turn-of-the-century America by simultaneously outraging their audience with the implication that the American Dream was inoperative for most Americans and yet placating this audience with the implication that these inequities within American life could be corrected.

A final common element in much American naturalism is its affirmation of a major aspect of democratic idealism even while seeming to deny the principal thrust of this creed. In his classic study of the Western literary imagination, *Mimesis* (1946), Erich Auerbach traces the democratization of the tragic impulse from its inception in Greek drama to modern fiction. With only a few exceptions, Auerbach points out, tragic protagonists in the long history of the form are drawn from the upper echelons of their societies. This convention begins to ease with the onset of French realism but collapses fully only in late-nineteenth-century naturalism. Thus the central characters in most late-nineteenth-century American naturalistic fiction—McTeague and Trina, Carrie and Hurstwood, Maggie and Henry Fleming—are not important or distinguished figures in any sense. All are of common stock, and some are lower class. But all have a capacity to desire and therefore to suffer—qualities that Dreiser in particular stressed as central to the human condition whatever its social circumstance. The pain of thwarted desire in these figures, whether or not it leads to death, is the residue of the tragic impulse in modern literature. There is no doubt an unconscious irony in the naturalist’s substitution of an equality of pain for one of opportunity, an irony epitomized by Clyde Griffiths, the sensitive but otherwise inadequate and unfulfilled central figure in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*. But as Dreiser’s late naturalistic classic suggests, the two themes in consort can serve as a powerful means of addressing the nature of American social life. The miseries and suffering of the average life are important, they appear to be announcing. Or, as is said in Arthur Miller’s *The Death of a Salesman* (1949) of a still later tragic protagonist who is a “lowman,” “Attention must be paid!”

*See also* Darwinism; *McTeague; Maggie, A Girl of the Streets; Realism; Sister Carrie*

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Primary Works**


NATURE WRITING


Secondary Works


Donald Pizer

NATURE WRITING

Depending upon its emphases and the period and genre in which it is written, literature concerned with the natural world is variously called natural philosophy, natural history, environmental literature, and nature writing. While “natural philosophy” generally refers to prescientific meditations on the human relationship to nature and “natural history” identifies later writing that is concerned primarily with describing flora and fauna, “environmental writing” usually indicates literature with a conservationist or preservationist agenda or sensibility. The broadest term, “nature writing,” includes all forms of literature whose primary concern is nature and the human relationship to it. As Thomas Lyon explains in *This Incomparable Land: A Guide to American Nature Writing* (2001), nature writing “has three main dimensions to it: natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature” (p. 20).