

Naturalism

American literature during the second half of the 19th century was influenced by some thinkers and philosophical theories: Social Darwinism developed in the late 19th century and transposed Darwin's theory of the „survival of the fittest“ from nature to society. Social Darwinists believed that people, like animals, compete for survival and, by extension, compete for success in life. Individuals who become rich and powerful are the fittest, the lower socioeconomic classes are the least fit. Social Darwinists came to believe that human progress depends on competition. An elaboration of the Darwinian thesis that the survival of the fittest is a basic law of nature was advanced by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who claimed that so called moral conduct is necessary only for the weak. Nietzsche maintained that human behaviour is motivated by a will to power and this drive shapes our lives. Another influential thinker was Karl Marx, German political philosopher. He developed the theory of the exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class, and the theory of the necessity for workers to seize the political power by armed insurrection.

NATURALISM developed out of realism and shares some of its characteristics: it places events in contemporary time, aims at accurate reproduction of speech, manners, landscape, and psychologically valid motivations. Unlike realism, however, literary naturalism is conscious of its philosophical foundations, especially Darwinism. The human person is regarded as a highly developed animal, controlled by all the animal hungers and aiming above all at survival. The fittest survive in the life struggle, the less fit go down. Naturalistic literature also holds to the philosophy of determinism. It conceives of man as controlled by his instincts or his passions, or by his social and economic environment. Naturalism follows the biological determinism of Darwin's theory, or the economic determinism of Marx. Since in this view man has no free will, the naturalistic writer does not attempt to make moral judgements and tends toward pessimism. If free will does not exist, ethical choice becomes an illusion. Behaviour cannot be judged in terms of good and evil, right or wrong. This is the basic difference between realism and naturalism: in realistic writings characters have free will, while in naturalistic writings characters are absolutely determined, motifs and decisions are shaped by the environment. Characters in naturalistic literature are helpless individuals caught in the grip of social, economic or natural forces. They are frequently the rural poor, the working class people, or people from the underclasses of the cities. The naturalistic world is often full of violence.

American naturalists used carefully controlled points of view. The reader is often confined inside the mind of a single character, limited to that character's understanding of events, with the result that truth, or ultimate meaning, becomes relative and often problematic. This escape from the omniscient point of view also suggests a scepticism of authority. What is conveyed is a sense that truth, and also morality, is subjective, dependent upon particular experience.

Stephen Crane (1871-1900) introduced naturalism into American literature. He believed that environment counts for a great deal in determining human fate. Nature is not hostile, he observes in „The Open Boat“, only indifferent. His most famous novels are *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* and *The Red Badge of Courage*. *Maggie* is a story of almost illiterate slum girl, who is seduced and then abandoned by her lover. She becomes a prostitute, which is, under given circumstances, her only possibility. However, she is unable to succeed in this occupation and commits suicide.

Frank Norris (1870-1902) believed in social Darwinism. Major themes of his writings are economic force as natural law and the destructiveness of greed. His most famous novel is *The Octopus* (about the struggle between California wheat farmers and the railroad company).

Jack London (1876-1916) was a radical socialist, aware of the class struggle and economic determination. But his commitment to the socialist ideas conflicted with his individual temperament, and at the age of 40 he committed a suicide. London's naturalism followed from reading Darwin, Marx and Nietzsche. He wrote simply and chronologically in the vocabulary of common speech. The fiction, with few exceptions, is created from his personal experience. Most famous novels: *The Call of the Wild* (a story of Buck, a dog taken to the Alaskan Klondike, where he must retrieve ancient instincts in order to survive); *White Fang*; *Martin Eden* (a semi-autobiographical novel about the struggles of a writer)

- **Theodore Dreiser** (1871-1945) had German parents, suffered poverty and had a first-hand knowledge of the lower classes. He was the purest naturalist among American writers. He was interested in the conflicting worlds of the rich and the poor. He presented his characters as they were, with no moral commentary, no ethical dimensions. His characters are passive puppets shaped and influenced by the society. Their deeds are results of environmental, social and economic factors over which weak human nature has little control. Novels: *An American Tragedy*, *Sister Carrie*