

ENGL W3632:
The Science of Fiction: American
Naturalism, 1890-1940
Spring 2016
309 Hamilton Hall | Tuesday, 10:10 - 12:00

Professor: Grant Wythoff
(gw2290@columbia.edu)
Heyman Center 304
Office Hours by appointment



This syllabus is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Skip to the schedule...

Description

While literary realism was inspired by the work of nineteenth century painters, naturalism was a movement that emerged from the new sciences of biological, economic, and technological determinism found in the writings of Darwin, Spencer, and Marx. Characters in naturalist fiction were no longer the seamlessly depicted individuals who seemed as if they could step off the page, but rather the expressive products of vast networks of biological and economic forces. Amid the expansion of quantitative methods in social and psychological research, novelists sought ways to count, measure, categorize, and classify those elements that previously were assumed to lie outside the novel's scope.

This course will explore how literature imagined itself as a form of data collection, with stories that catalogued the tiniest details of daily, bodily life, and showed

how these infinitesimal moments were all integrated into part of much larger, aggregate social systems. Novelists like John Dos Passos, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Mary Wilkins Freeman explored the relationship between data and fiction, both in terms of the stories we tell about data as well as the data produced by stories.

We will take “experience” as our primary topic of inquiry. What was the experience of a) these new kinds of fiction for the reader, b) the networks through which characters and readers moved, and c) the landscape of new media like cinema, the phonograph, and wireless telegraphy in which these novels found themselves? There is much critical activity today surrounding the way that naturalist fiction speaks to the contemporary enthusiasm for “Big Data.” The goal of this lecture course will be to explore one of the truly unique contributions of naturalism: how we can use the category of the individual and individual experience to think about the construction of data as a form of social knowledge.

Guiding questions

- literary realism: what were the roots of naturalism, what was it responding to?
- infrastructure: how did new social and technological configurations allow for new kinds of stories?
- quantitative methods: what developments in the social sciences were drawn on by naturalist writers?
- wireless media: how did the experience of reading fiction compare and respond to the user experience of new media like the telephone, phonograph, cinema, and wireless telegraph?
- experimentation: why was naturalism able to tinker with the representational frameworks of their stories, while the mechanics of storytelling remained in the background for realism?

Course objectives

Students will 1) gain a greater understanding of individual experience as a category of data epistemology, 2) be introduced to methods in the quantitative analysis of literature, and 3) historicize literary naturalism within its wider social, technological, and cultural contexts.

Grade breakdown

10% participation in class

Seminar discussion: your thoughtful participation is required. I do not expect everyone’s manner of thoughtful participation to be identical. In addition, each

student will give a **brief presentation** (of no more than 10 minutes) once during the semester to open up our readings to discussion. Your presentation can involve a close reading of a particular passage, a short activity, or a complication of one of the points made by our authors. You are not expected to present original research—if it feels like you’re writing a full-on essay in preparation, then you’re probably going too far. Think of the presentation as a way of communicating to the class your thought process as you went through the week’s readings. How did this text sync up with ideas from previous weeks, or with the overall themes of the course thus far? What were some particular moments you loved, or had a real problem with? In other words, you will lay out a series of guideposts and questions that will help orient us in the discussion to follow.

20% weekly updates

Students are required to post an update to the CourseWorks blog by 6:00 am every Tuesday. These updates can take the form of a) an explanation, questioning, or complication of the week’s readings, b) an update on your research project, c) an interesting document, resource, or text (primary or secondary) that you’ve found related to the week’s readings. There are no length requirements or expectations. This is simply a means of reading and thinking alongside one another as we work through these texts.

More specific exercises may emerge throughout the course of the semester, about which there will be further instruction provided.

20% midterm

A written midterm exam, due to my inbox on the Friday before spring break (**March 11**), will consist of a selection of conceptual keywords that have emerged throughout the semester. You will be asked to define these keywords in brief explanatory essays. Please note that we’re not looking for a dictionary definition, but rather an elucidation of the term as we have used it in the context of the class: in our discussions, in our readings, and in our project work. You will be expected to cite relevant authors (though not exact quotes or page numbers) as well as class discussions.

50% final paper

A final paper of 15-20 pages (due **Tuesday, May 3**) will engage with theoretical questions raised throughout the course, secondary texts either from the syllabus or of the student’s own choosing, and one of our novels. Because so much of the grade rests on this final paper, I encourage you to use your weekly updates to rehearse your arguments, and speak with me frequently throughout the term about your ideas.

Policies

Weekly attendance in seminars is expected. If you must be absent from a session for a serious reason, then you should contact me before the missed class and

explain why you will not be in attendance. Cases of continuous, unexplained absence will result in a penalty to your grade or your ineligibility to complete the course. Attendance and active participation in discussions are part of fulfilling the course requirements. I will notify an advising dean if you have three or more unwarranted absences.

No extensions will be given except in extreme (and verifiable) circumstances. These circumstances include reasons of health and extenuating circumstances, such as death of a family member.

Course texts

All books are available for purchase on Amazon at the following link: <http://tiny.cc/ENGLW3632>

- Stephen Crane, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893) | ISBN: 1517158818
- Frank Norris, *McTeague* (1899) | ISBN: 0393970132
- Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899) | ISBN: 0393960579
- Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900) | ISBN: 0393927733
- Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1915) | ISBN: 0679743626
- John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) | ISBN: 0618056815
- Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940) | ISBN: 006083756X

Schedule

January 19

Preliminaries: realism and naturalism

- Gustave Flaubert, from *Madame Bovary* (1856)
- Émile Zola, from *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883)

January 26

Zola and Data

- Claude Bernard, from *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (1865)
- Émile Zola, “[The Experimental Novel](#)” (1880)
- Henry James, “[Émile Zola,](#)” *The Atlantic Monthly* (1903)
- Rosenberg, “[Data Before the Fact,](#)” in *Raw Data is an Oxymoron* (2013)
- boyd and Crawford, “[Critical Questions for Big Data,](#)” *Information, Communication, and Society* (2012)

February 2

- Stephen Crane, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893)

Secondary:

- Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* (Winter 1986)
- Donald Pizer, "'Maggie' and the Naturalistic Aesthetic of Length," *American Literary Realism* (Fall 1995)

February 9

- Frank Norris, *McTeague* (1899)

Secondary:

- Dana Seitler, from *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity* (2008)

February 16

- Norris, *McTeague* (continued)

February 23

- Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899)

Secondary:

- Georg Lukacs, "Narrate or Describe?: A Preliminary Discussion of Naturalism and Formalism" (1936/1971)

March 1

- Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900)

March 8

- Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (continued)

FRIDAY MARCH 11 MIDTERM DUE

MARCH 14-20 SPRING BREAK

March 22

- Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1915)

March 29

- John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (1930)

April 5

- Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (continued)

April 12

- Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)

April 19

- Wright, *Native Son* (continued)

April 26

Project presentations + wrap up / catch up

TUESDAY MAY 3 FINAL PAPERS DUE