

# Naturalism

## Definition of Naturalism

Naturalism is a literary [genre](#) that started as a movement in late nineteenth century in literature, film, theater, and art. It is a type of extreme [realism](#). This movement suggested the roles of family, social conditions, and environment in shaping human [character](#). Thus, naturalistic writers write stories based on the idea that environment determines and governs human character.

We also see use of some of the scientific principles in naturalistic works, and humans struggling for survival in hostile and alien society. In fact, naturalism took its cue from Darwin's theory of evolution, which holds that life is like a struggle and only the fittest survive.

## Naturalism vs. Realism

Both naturalism and realism are literary genres and interlinked. However, there are some differences between them:

Naturalism suggests a philosophical pessimism in which writers use scientific techniques to depict human beings as objective and impartial characters; whereas realism focuses on literary technique.

Realism depicts things as they appear, while naturalism portrays a deterministic view of a character's actions and life.

Naturalism concludes that natural forces predetermine a character's decisions, making him/her act in a particular way. Realism poses that a decision of a character comes from his response to a certain situation.

## Examples of Naturalism in Literature

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**Example #1:** *The Grapes of Wrath* (By John Steinbeck)

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John Steinbeck is one of the most popular writers coming from the school of American naturalism. Steinbeck, in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, portrays the Joad family and its changing environment from the naturalistic [point of view](#), during the Great Depression in the United States. He depicts the Joad family as insignificant, instinct-bound, and small creatures bound to seek a paradise they might never find.

Initially, when the Joads leave home, they are very simple and animal-like people, who could barely understand their plight. They face constant opposition from two powerful predators – society and nature. However, as the [narrative](#) progresses, they begin to adapt to new circumstances.

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### **Example #2: *The Open Boat* (By Stephen Crane)**

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Stephen Crane, in his short story *The Open Boat*, portrays men on a boat, representing human endurance against indifferent nature, where they feel themselves helpless. Thus, it contains a [theme](#) of naturalism. Whenever a huge wave of water arrives, it shuts everything from the men's view, and they imagine this particular wave would be the final outbreak of the ocean, like in the following lines:

“If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven gods, who rule the seven seas,?”

This lays emphasis on their struggle for survival and lack of choice. Besides, *The Open Boat* symbolically represents human place in the huge universe where man struggles against nature. Then we see a definite determination, as men cannot play any part in their outcome, which results in unexpected death of Oilier, despite being an expert sailor.

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### **Example #3: *The Awakening* (By Kate Chopin)**

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Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, gives an example of a perfect naturalistic novel, as its leading character, Edna Pontellier, lives in a world where no one understands her. Neither does she fit in the Creole society. This often causes misunderstandings in her life, as she can't understand its people.

*“Edna wondered if they had all gone mad.”*

Then, she realizes that she has chosen the wrong man as her husband:

*“...taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. She stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it ...”*

In addition, we see the determination by individual traits and by societal forces inside the family. Consequently, Edna becomes a victim of her sociological pressures.

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#### **Example #4: *To Build A Fire* (By Jack London)**

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The theme in Jack London’s novel, *To Build A Fire*, is man versus nature; thus it is another good example of naturalism. Naturalism in this novel shows how human beings need to be careful at every corner, as death could reach them anywhere, waiting for them to commit a mistake and take their lives. We see the story is about a man with his dog trying to survive harsh, cold weather by building a fire. In fact, the author uses the Darwinian Theory of “survival of the fittest” in his work.

#### **Function of Naturalism**

The impact that naturalism has left on literary writers is colossal, leading to the evolution of the modern movement. Generally, naturalistic works expose dark sides of life such as prejudice, racism, poverty, prostitution, filth, and disease. Since these works are often pessimistic and blunt, they receive heavy criticism. Despite the echoing pessimism in this literary output, naturalists are generally concerned with improving the human condition around the world.