

The Anglo-Saxon Beginning

Nedra Collins

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Ms. Kollais

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The Influence of Realism on Literature

After World War I, American people and the authors among them were left disillusioned by the effects that war had on their society. America needed a literature that would explain what had happened and what was happening to their society. American writers turned to what is now known as modernism. The influence of 19th Century realism and naturalism and their truthful representation of American life and people was evident in post World War I modernism. This paper will try to prove this by presenting the basic ideas and of these literary genres, literary examples of each, and then make connections between the two literary movements. Realism Modernism not only depicted American society after World War I accurately and unbiasedly, but also tried to find the solutions brought upon by the suffering created by the war (Elliott 705).

The realistic movement of the late 19th century saw authors accurately depict life and it's problems. Realists attempted to "give a comprehensive picture of modern life" (Elliott 502) by presenting the entire picture. They did not try to give one view of life but instead attempted to show the different classes, manners, and stratification of life in America. Realists created this picture of America by combining a wide variety of "details derived from observation and documentation..." to "approach the norm of experience..." (3). Along with this technique, realists compared the "objective or absolute existence" in America to that of the "universal truths, or observed facts of life" (Harvey 12). In other words, realists objectively looked at American society and pointed out the aspects that it had in common with the general truths of existence.

This realistic movement evolved as a result of many changes and transitions in American culture. In the late 1800's, the United States was experiencing "swift growth and change" as a result of a changing economy, society, and culture because of an influx in the number of immigrants into America. Realists such as Henry James and William Dean Howells, two of the most prolific writers of the Nineteenth-century, used typical realistic methods to create an accurate depiction of changing American life. William Dean Howells, while opposing idealization, made his "comic criticisms of society" (Bradley 114) by comparing American culture with those of other countries. In his "comic" writings, Howells criticized American morality and ethics but still managed to accurately portray life as it happened. He attacked and attempted to resolve "the moral difficulties of society by this rapid change." (Elliott 505). He believed that novels should "should present life as it is, not as it might be" (American Literature Compton's). In the process of doing this, Howells demonstrated how life shaped the characters of his novels and their own motives and inspirations. By concentrating on these characters' strengths as opposed to a strong plot, he thematically wrote of how life was more good than evil and, in return, wanted his literature to inspire more good. On the other hand, Henry James judged the world from a perspective "...offered by society and history..." (704). He also separated himself from America to create an

unbiased view of it as a "spectator and analyst rather than recorder" (Spiller 169) of the American social structure. He wrote from a perspective that allowed him to contrast American society with that of Europe by contrasting the peoples' ideas. By contrasting social values and personal thought about America in America, he presented to the people the differing motivational factors that stimulated the different social classes (Bradley 1143). Overall, these writers managed to very formally portray America as it was while adding their own criticisms about it in an attempt to stimulate change.

The naturalist movement slowly developed with most of the same ideals as those of the realists in that it attempted to find life's truths. In contrast, Naturalists, extreme realists, saw the corrupt side of life and how environment "deprived individuals of responsibility" (Elliott 514). Literary naturalism invited writers to examine human beings objectively, as a "scientist studies nature" ("Am. Lit." Compton's). In portraying ugliness and cruelty, the authors refrained from preaching about them; rather they left readers to draw their own conclusions about the life they presented. Generally, these authors took a pessimistic view to portray a life that centered on the negative part of man's existence. When dealing with society directly, naturalists generally detailed the destruction of people without any sentiment. To do this, they wrote more open about society's problems in a more open manner usually using nature as a symbol for society. Naturalistic literature, like realistic, served as a catalyst for change but, in contrast, was a little more like propaganda.

Even though only twenty years may have separated them, the transformation from realism/naturalism to modernism was a long one in terms of how much society had changed. The aforementioned rapid change in American society and America's relation with the rest of the world left America in disarray. After the first World War, American society was divided and left without definition. This called for a new age of literary expression to control and document the "isolationist fears", "corruption", and "disenchantment" (Bradley 1339-1340) caused by the war. Authors looked to explain their generation and to respond to the "social and moral confusions" (1340).

The World War broke down America's fundamental institutions by dehumanizing the people that provided their strong foundations (1339).

War diminished the individual identity and the society as a whole. The human personality was "dwarfed" as much by the "...dehumanizing magnitude of modern events..." as by natural laws that controlled man to their own destiny.

Authors after World War I created a new literature "of enduring merit...that shattered conventional taboos in their expression of physical and psychological actuality." (Bradley 1339) This was the beginning of modernism. Modernism, although strongly influenced by realism and often referred to as an extension of naturalistic values, was the answer to America's new-found problems. Modernism promoted and combined the scientific aspects of naturalism along with a psychological examination of the individual and the culture. By being so experimental (1340) and intense (1337), modernism was able to unite America after a period of crisis. Modernism centered on "explorations into the spiritual nature of men and the value of his society and institutions." (1337) Like realism, modernists focused on changes on society (Elliott 699) and used symbolism, although in this case spiritual, to draw their fiction (Bradley 1340). Modernist writers, like most Americans, were amazed at the destructive power of war on the common man.

Writers such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F.

Scott Fitzgerald spearheaded the modernistic renaissance by employing realistic and naturalistic techniques. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* details the principle of an "alienation from society that had been forced upon by the circumstances of the time" (Spiller 271). In this case, it describes a young boy alienated from society because of his involvement in World War I, the "...loss of faith and hope...", and "...collapse of former values..." that occurs (Hart 284). His earlier works can sometimes be described as containing "characteristic influences of naturalism" (Bradley 1339). This can be reflected in his "presentation of the strict relations between environment and fate..." (1339). Later in his career, Hemingway once again took the alienation from society route. This time, in the spirit of realist Henry James, he separates himself from American society to better judge it. With his novel *The Rolling Hills of Africa*, Hemingway compares American culture to that of another. At times, Hemingway "...began to seem like a little more than a modern realist..." (Spiller Lit His 1300).

William Faulkner, producer of some of the most important books of the twentieth-century, also draws the connection between environment and fate strongly. He combines naturalism and primitivism, a literary technique involving clear imagery, to create a sometimes confusing and complex detailed reading that involves "...people of all sorts wealthy and poor, evil and good, slave and free come into sharp focus in his writing." ("Faulkner" Compton's) This idea, much like that of realist James, provides the reader with the whole picture of society.

The novels and short stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald are famous for portraying the "lost generation" of the post-World War I era. Faulkner's moral values were "social rather than personal" ("Fitzgerald" Compton's). He believes that his writing should address the problems that society has and the problems that he has with society. Faulkner's prose is ornate and complex. His sentences are long and complicated, and many nouns and adjectives are used. Hemingway's style is quite the opposite. His sentences are short and pointed, and adjectives are used sparingly. The effect is one of great power and compression. By compressing his literary ideas in his writing, he makes his literature easily understood and direct to his readers.

Many connections can be made between the literature of the late 19th century realism and naturalism and that of post-World War I modernism. First and most importantly of all, modernists, like realists and naturalists, attacked society's problems by using symbolism to make their own judgments of the basic foundations of American life. Modernists, such as Ernest Hemingway, looked at American society and compared to that of other cultures of the world.

This technique had been extensively employed by such realists as Henry James. Modernism used the naturalist method of scientifically exploring the individual and the society. Stylistically, modernists, with the exception of Hemingway, wrote in a very formal, defined form.

Modernists and realists both attacked the moral dilemmas in society.

The only difference was that these dilemmas were different.

While that realists attempted to "give a comprehensive picture of modern life..." (502), modernists wished "express the whole experience of modern life." (Elliott 598). These authors of the

realistic and modernistic period had the same goals so naturally they wrote using the same ideas, methods, and principles. Realists focused on different literary aspects to detail how American culture was effected by these changes. They detailed characters shaped by society

and tried to convey the good and evil aspects of life. Mirroring this technique, modernists portrayed people alienated and rejected from society because of the effects of the first World War. Both focused on detailing problems facing their characters, externally and internally, while not focusing on plot development. Thematically, both groups of authors conveyed the good and bad aspects of a changing American society. Both rallied for change and both asked for the unification of society, but both still lingered more on the presence of corruption in America.

The only thing that separated the two movements was the societies around them. While both societies were experiencing major change quickly, they were so different. The two literatures had to be distinguished not because of their content and character, which was for the most part the same, but instead because of the differing conditions that existed around the literature. Even though both wanted to accurately depict life, they were written in two very distinct times in American history. In one, American culture was expanding and adapting. In the other, life was being oppressed by the dehumanizing agents of warfare on a large scale. As we know, culture influences literature. Even though these two literary movements may have only been separated by about twenty years, in these twenty years, focus shifted from the interior of American society to how American society was effected by a conflict created as a result of opposing cultures. This idea of differing cultures producing differing literatures provides the basis for the differences in the movements.

Modernism after World War I was influenced by the realistic/naturalistic movement of the late Nineteenth century. The literary goals, techniques, and principles of the modernists and realists/naturalists were the same. Both wanted to paint an unbiased, accurate picture of society by confronting the problems of the individual and of the society. To do this, most of the time they resorted to the same techniques. They created literature that combined scientific reasoning, unidealistic views, and physical and psychological examination that painted a portrait of society that could be used to help American society adjust, define, and heal. Realists of the late Nineteenth century and modernists of the 1920's wrote alike but were divided on the basis that their respective societies were so different.

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