**Types of Realism**

1. **Psychological realism**

Psychological realism was popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It focuses on the internal [dialogue](https://www.studysmarter.us/explanations/english-literature/literary-elements/dialogue/) or thoughts and convictions of characters. Through psychological realism, authors can explain why characters do the things they do. How the authors shape these characters and their convictions is often a reflection of societal and political issues.

An example of psychological realism is the [novel](https://www.studysmarter.us/explanations/english-literature/literary-devices/novel/) *A Portrait of a Lady* (1881) by [Henry James](https://www.studysmarter.us/explanations/english-literature/novelists/henry-james/). The protagonist, Isabel, has inherited vast wealth. She is a woman who does not conform to societal norms, and the [novel](https://www.studysmarter.us/explanations/english-literature/literary-devices/novel/) details her thoughts on the experiences she has in life, such as the possibility of her marrying and who she will choose to marry.

1. **Social realism**

Social realism showcases the conditions and experiences of the working class. Social realism often critiques power structures that dictate the world the working class have to survive in. It can show how the working class lives in poor conditions, whilst the government or ruling classes live in exponentially better conditions, profiting from the labour of the working class.

[*A Christmas Carol*](https://www.studysmarter.us/explanations/english-literature/novelists/a-christmas-carol/) (1843) by [Charles Dickens](https://www.studysmarter.us/explanations/english-literature/novelists/charles-dickens/) is a well-known example of social realism. The Cratchit family features in the novel, and Dickens shows their struggle for survival as a poor working-class family. [Protagonist](https://www.studysmarter.us/explanations/english-literature/literary-elements/protagonist/) Ebenezer Scrooge is an example of a man who has the wealth to live in better conditions than the Cratchit family but chooses to leave them to their fate.

1. **Naturalism Definition**

*Naturalism* (NATCH-rull-ihz-uhm) is a late 19th-century literary movement in which writers focused on exploring the fundamental causes for their characters’ actions, choices, and beliefs. These causes centered on the influence of family and society upon the individual—and all the complications that exist therein—resulting in a view that environmental factors are the primary determinant of human character. Naturalism is in many ways interconnected with [realism](https://www.supersummary.com/realism/), but realism is primarily a style of writing, while naturalism is a philosophy in writing.

French author Émile Zola first adapted the term *naturalism* to describe a specific type of literature and designed many of the theories behind the movement. Though its prominence ended around the turn of the 20th century, naturalism left an ongoing impact, as many modern writers incorporate naturalist features into their work.

1. **The History of Naturalism**

Jules-Antoine Castagnary, a French art critic, first used the term *naturalism* to describe a style of lifelike painting that became popular in the early 1860s. Émile Zola then applied the term to literature. Zola’s seminal essay “The Experimental Novel,” published in 1880, presents a detailed examination of the novel as a preeminent naturalistic literary art form.

Zola laid out three main arguments in the essay. First, writers could incorporate French physiologist Claude Bernard’s method of scientific inquiry to their works. Bernard stated that controlled experiments could either prove or disprove a hypothesis regarding the tested phenomena. Zola posited that a writer could use this same approach, with the characters functioning as the phenomena. Second, Zola said this experimental method separates naturalism from realism and [romanticism](https://www.supersummary.com/romanticism/). Finally, Zola presented an argument challenging his critics’ assertions that his work was immoral and offensive.

Zola’s 20-novel series *Les Rougon-Macquart*, written between 1871 and 1893, is one of the most significant contributions to naturalist literature. It centers on the lives of two fictional French families—one privileged, the other destitute—throughout five generations. Environment, heredity, and the challenges of life in the [Second French Empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Second-Empire) ultimately lead each family to ruin.

American author Frank Norris was another formative figure in the naturalism movement. Like Zola, he viewed his characters as experiments; he exposed them to certain stimuli or phenomena and recorded their reactions. The result blends literature and science, marrying a writer’s gift for character and description with a scientist’s detached observations on proven or disproven hypotheses. Stephen Crane, the author of [*The Red Badge of Courage*](https://www.supersummary.com/red-badge-of-courage/summary/) and other works, employed a similar approach and contributed greatly to the canon of American naturalism.

Naturalism as its own distinct literary movement largely ended around 1900, when American magazine *The Outlook* published a tongue-in-cheek obituary for naturalism. The publication went so far as to deem Zola’s efforts to craft a new form of scientific literature a total failure. This stance is debatable, especially because countless writers since 1900 have infused their works with heavily naturalistic elements. Ernest Hemingway, Edith Wharton, and Jack London are just a few who carried naturalism into the 20th century.

1. **The Elements of Naturalism**

The major elements of naturalist works are determinism, objectivity, pessimism, [setting](https://www.supersummary.com/setting/), and plot twists.

* **Determinism**

This is the philosophical belief that external causes are responsible for all the events in an individual’s life. Fate, nature, or heredity explain why a character’s journey unfolds the way it does. Forces beyond one’s will and control predetermine everything.

For example, in William Faulkner’s short story “[A Rose for Emily](https://www.supersummary.com/a-rose-for-emily/summary/),” the central character’s insanity is a foregone conclusion. It is a natural byproduct of the oppressive control her father exerted over her, her codependent relationship with him, and the self-imposed isolation she maintained her entire life. It’s clear to the reader that there was never any hope for Miss Emily—her fate was determined by her circumstances.

* **Objectivity**

Naturalist writers maintain an objectivity in their storytelling. They detach themselves from the emotional components of the story and serve more as impartial observers of what transpires. When discussing emotions at all, the focus is on primitive emotions of survival, usually in a hostile world.

In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane describes a battle scene with a cool remove:

The men dropped here and there like bundles. The captain of the youth’s company had been killed in an early part of the action. His body lay stretched out in the position of a tired man resting, but upon his face there was an astonished and sorrowful look, as if he thought some friend had done him an ill turn.

* Rather than drawing readers focus to the viscerally disturbing realities of battle, he takes an almost lackadaisical approach to depict the scene. The [imagery](https://www.supersummary.com/imagery/) it evokes is commonplace—describing dead men as bundles or resting—rather than violent.
* **Pessimism**

Authors of naturalist works typically possess a cynical or fatalistic worldview, wherein they don’t see their characters as having much power over their lives or decisions. These writers view life as a glass-half-empty prospect.

An example of this appears in Jack London’s classic adventure novel [*The Call of the Wild*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-call-of-the-wild/summary/), in which the central character is a dog named Buck. “Thus, as token of what a puppet thing life is,” London writes, “the ancient song surged through him and he came into his own again.” Calling life a “puppet thing” is a pessimistic way of viewing the human—or animal—experience.

* **Setting**

Naturalism puts great emphasis on the impact of environment, so location tends to play a significant role in these works. The setting often becomes a character in and of itself.

This is the case in Frank Norris’s novel [*McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*](https://www.supersummary.com/mcteague/summary/). The downfall of the title character and his wife plays out against a California backdrop, from San Francisco to Death Valley, where the shattered dreams of the gold-seeking miners reflect the shattered dreams of the McTeagues.

* **Plot Twists**

Many naturalist works include a [plot](https://www.supersummary.com/plot/) twist or some type of intense gut-punch at the end of the story. This underscores the futility of the character’s struggle and the fixed quality of their destiny. For instance, Kate Chopin’s novel [*The Awakening*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-awakening/summary/) ends with Edna Pontellier drowning herself in the Gulf of Mexico after rebelling against the societal role assigned to her.

1. **The Function of Naturalist Works**

The function of naturalism is to present the world as it is—without embellishment, idealization, or romance—and illustrate the dominance of environmental conditions in human life and on individual characters. This [perspective](https://www.supersummary.com/perspective/) allows the author to comment on the darker sides of human nature.

Subjects like poverty, disease, racism, and prostitution often make their way into literary naturalism. The gritty vantage point on the human experience can sometimes be bleak, but authors write this way in service of a higher purpose. They aim to improve the condition of the world by highlighting the dire, uncontrollable circumstances with which everyday people typically live.

1. **Naturalism vs. Realism**

Naturalism is an outgrowth of [realism](https://www.supersummary.com/realism/). The latter is a literary technique in which an author describes the way things are, but naturalism significantly expands upon this idea by delving into how the way things are influences a character’s behavior and nature.

The characters in realist works have more agency. While they’re products of their environments, they have the freedom to counter their environments and influence their own futures. This differs significantly from naturalist works, where characters enjoy no such autonomy from their circumstances. The hard reality of their lives, defined by genetics, nature, or just the cruel hand of fate, is the sole deciding factor in what happens to the characters.

There is also a scientific component to naturalism. The movement coincided with the first publication of many of Charles Darwin’s theories, which may explain the movement’s tendency to portray a survival-of-the-fittest mindset and a lack of personal, independent choice in one’s fate. Hand in hand with this idea is the presence of the more primitive or animalistic emotions in many naturalist characters.

Naturalism is innately more socially conscious and political than realism. Characters usually live in hardscrabble conditions or face serious life-or-death decisions as a result of external factors rooted in society or circumstance. These conditions are essentially larger than the characters themselves, conditions with which many readers—sometimes, whole communities—can identify. So, on a fundamental level, naturalism deals with more socially relevant issues and bigger-picture perspectives than realism.

1. **Notable Naturalist Writers**

* Saul Bellow, [*The Adventures of Augie March*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-adventures-of-augie-march/summary/)
* Kate Chopin, [*The Awakening*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-awakening/summary/)
* Stephen Crane, [*The Open Boat*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-open-boat/summary/), [*The Red Badge of Courage*](https://www.supersummary.com/red-badge-of-courage/summary/)
* Theodore Dreiser, [*An American Tragedy*](https://www.supersummary.com/an-american-tragedy/summary/), [*Sister Carrie*](https://www.supersummary.com/sister-carrie/summary/)
* William Faulkner, [*As I Lay Dying*](https://www.supersummary.com/as-i-lay-dying/summary/), [*The Sound and the Fury*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-sound-and-the-fury/summary/)
* Ellen Glasgow, *Barren Ground*
* Ernest Hemingway, [*A Farewell to Arms*](https://www.supersummary.com/a-farewell-to-arms/summary/), [*The Sun Also Rises*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-sun-also-rises/summary/)
* Jack London, [*The Call of the Wild*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-call-of-the-wild/summary/), [*White Fang*](https://www.supersummary.com/white-fang/summary/)
* Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*, *The Crossing*
* Frank Norris, [*McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*](https://www.supersummary.com/mcteague/summary/), *The Octopus: A Story of California*
* Joyce Carol Oates, *Black Water*, *Childwold*
* Hubert Selby, Jr., [*Last Exit to Brooklyn*](https://www.supersummary.com/last-exit-to-brooklyn/summary/), *Requiem for a Dream*
* Upton Sinclair, [*The Jungle*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-jungle/summary/), *Oil!*
* Edith Wharton, [*Ethan Frome*](https://www.supersummary.com/ethan-frome/summary/), [*The House of Mirth*](https://www.supersummary.com/the-house-of-mirth/summary/)
* Émile Zola, [*Les Rougon-Macquart*](https://www.supersummary.com/germinal/summary/), [*Thérèse Raquin*](https://www.supersummary.com/therese-raquin/summary/)

**f- Examples of Naturalism in Literature**

1. Stephen Crane, [*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*](https://www.supersummary.com/maggie-a-girl-of-the-streets/summary/)

Crane’s 1893 novella is a gritty tale of a young woman named Maggie who can’t escape her miserable lot in life. This is one of the first major works of American naturalism, set in the rough Bowery of New York City.

Maggie grows up in a violent, alcoholic household. When she starts dating a bartender named Pete, her family kicks her out of the house. Later, Pete leaves her, and Maggie’s family refuses to let her return home. She lives on the streets, forced to become a prostitute. The book ends with Maggie’s death.

2. Richard Wright, [*Native Son*](https://www.supersummary.com/native-son/summary/)

Wright’s 1940 novel follows Bigger Thomas, a 20-year-old black man on Chicago’s South Side in the 1930s. He lives in a rundown, one-room apartment with his brother, sister, and mother. After accidentally killing his white friend Mary, Bigger goes on the run with his girlfriend Bessie. They hide out in an abandoned building, where Bigger rapes and ultimately kills Bessie.

The police apprehend Bigger after an intensive, citywide manhunt. His lawyer, Boris Max, defends him by saying Bigger’s destiny was inescapable. His is the embodiment of every black American’s fate: becoming a product of the brutal, oppressive system that created them. Proving this point, the jury finds Bigger guilty and sentences him to die—a verdict he comes to accept.

3. Hubert Selby Jr., *Requiem for a Dream*

Selby’s 1978 novel is an unflinching look at addiction and its consequences. Elderly Sara Goldfarb, her son Harry, his girlfriend Marion, and his best friend Tyrone are all searching for their own version of the American Dream. Sara, who wants to be on television, grows addicted to diet pills. Harry, Marion, and Tyrone, all heroin users, buy a large amount of heroin and plan to sell it at a huge profit to fund their respective dreams.

As expected, their addictions interfere with their plans, and they turn against one another. The novel ends with each character’s life in ruins. Sara receives electroshock therapy after addiction pushes her to insanity; Harry loses an arm after frequent heroin injections cause an infection; Tyrone goes to jail, where being a black man makes him the target of abuse; and Marion becomes a prostitute to support her habit.