LITERARY NATURALISM

While scholars do differ in their opinions, most agree that literary Naturalism is an extension or continuation of Realism with the addition of materialistic determinism (see below).

Naturalism is

“... no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some Realists ... [that position being one of] a pessimistic, materialistic determinism.” — George J. Becker

Subject Matter of Naturalistic Fiction

• Experiences that reduce characters to (often degrading) behavior in their struggle to survive.
• The setting is often commonplace and unheroic; life is the dull round of daily existence.
• The controlling force is usually society and the surrounding environment

The Naturalistic Character

• Characters in naturalistic fiction are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, chance, and/or instinct.
• Emphasis is upon animalistic qualities, but Naturalistic characters do have humanistic values that affirm life; their struggle for life becomes heroic and they maintain human dignity.

“The primary goal of the late nineteenth-century American Naturalists was not to demonstrate the overwhelming and oppressive reality of the material forces present in our lives. Their attempt, rather, was to represent the intermingling in life of controlling forces and individual worth. The Naturalists do no dehumanize man.” — Donald Pizer

Literary Determinism

Literary determinism is an application of scientific determinism to fiction. Scientific determinism, which derived from Darwinian thought, is

*the belief that all supposed acts of the will are actually the result of external forces that determine those acts.*

In deterministic thought and Naturalistic literature, characters do not have free will; external and internal forces, environment, or heredity control their behavior. Determinists do not deny the existence of the will, but the will is shaped by deterministic forces, including random luck/circumstances.