

NATURALISM IN DREISER & OSBORNE AND EXPLORING THE EXISTENTIAL ANGST

By

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Abstract

*The article discusses the basic tenets of Naturalism as prevalent in the twentieth in connection with the twenty-first century New Historicism. The concept of “angry young man,” becomes the cult image of the twentieth-century democratic society where the lead characters, or rather the anti-heroes of Osborne, Wesker, Dreiser etc. try to pull down the social mores while striving to make cataclysmic changes in the dogmas and conventions. Society and individuals influence each other and are responsible to each other. Jimmy Porter, the lead character of Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, and Clyde Griffiths, the protagonist of *An American Tragedy*, are rebellious against all forms of bureaucracy and are not successful to materialize the “American Dream” (Adams, James Truslow, 1931) (1). They are popularly called the anti-heroes because unlike heroes they are successful in life, they are brought up in modest families and struggles for higher education, blames the social codes that are partly responsible for their failures, neither are they powerful enough to change the existing codes but only reveals their sarcastic vituperations. The last section of the essay deals with the philosophy of existentialism with reference to some texts. The protagonists of these texts however influenced the masses because they became the paradigms of the millions who have tried hard but still failed to live up to their expectations.*

Keywords: *naturalism, new-historicism, positivism, anti-hero, existentialism.*

Introduction

Naturalism, a tangential offshoot of realism, advocates the idea that individuality is influenced greatly by the existing social conditions. The way in which a person thinks or acts, is in response to his/ her circumstances in which he has grown up, where he is working or living. The sordid, grim, lurid visions of life and disillusionment are recurring features of this genre of

writing. The picturesque description of disintegration, the darker aspects of life are focused upon in a pessimistic strain that gives the reader not much hope about the future. The factual evidences highlight the gruesome existence comprising poverty, inequality, harshness, injustice, violence, corruption, discontentment, dogmatism, racism, diseases, misery and perhaps the list of social maladies

remain endless, nothing escapes the photographic lenses of naturalism. The world is pictured as a fallen Eden where human beings are doomed to live till death; it provides no refuge, no succour from agony and pain.

Since the 1860s “Naturalism” was in vogue among the writers and critics who generally commented on the working class conditions. Hippolyte Taine was one of the French advocates of Naturalism and he considered “race, milieu and moment,” as the three important nodal points on which any piece of writing is based. He believed that literature is influenced to a great extent by the author’s environment. This idea is re-visited and re-oriented by the twenty-first century New-Historicists. New Historicism originated in the United States under the leadership of Stephen Greenblatt. Its main objective is to capture the circumstances in which the text was produced and consequently consumed.

Objectives

Reading literary texts of different ages ensures better understanding of the society. Literature is interdisciplinary in nature and mirrors society.

Secondly, the interdisciplinary nature of the texts helps us to determine the contemporary milieu and to make a comparative study of the same at different ages. The texts are the applied forms of the reading of a text is determined by the “position” from which the reader reads it and the “context” in which the text is written. In *Marvellous Possessions*, Greenblatt suggests that the energy that emanates from socio-cultural matrix consumes the author. The “invisible bullets” (Mark Derdzinski, 2002) (2) released from the society influence the author. Taine did not mean to suggest “race” as a particular section of people but rather to him it connotes a collective socio-cultural disposition that governs the individuals. “Moment” (Hippolyte A. Taine, 2008) is suggestive of the accumulated experiences of the individuals living in a society. Naturalism later terminated into the Decadent Movement that sees life without any illusions and its seamy aspects are gradually intensified. Sociological Naturalism draws a parallel between the natural and the social world which are identified with each other. This idea is explored in Auguste Comte’s theory of “Positivism” (Positivism, 2021). It analyzes an aesthetic work with a scientific

approach and prioritizes sensory experiences. Etymologically it is derived from the French word, “positivisme” that means to “impose on mind through experience” (Positivism, 2021).

The narrator appears to remain detached while portraying the morbid happenings of the world, which he reports objectively. Most of the times the narrator refrains from revealing his/her personal opinions. The characters are aware that “struggle for existence” and “the survival of the fittest”(3) is the right approach to survive amidst a nature that is indifferent to human atrocities. It is antithetical to Romanticism that manifests a subjective reaction to the world and bestows its faith on nature, the ultimate source of bliss to mankind. To the Romantics all forms of art are “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions”(4), while Naturalist writings are well studied; the plot is contrived on vivid observation of facts. If Emerson and Thoreau find nature to be benevolent and seek solace away from the cacophony of the city, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville plumbed the depths of human mind but the naturalists like Dreiser, William Dean Howells, Osborne or

Wesker draw their raw materials from sleazy realities of life. Most of the times the characters are shown to be victims of schizophrenia, split / multiple personalities, psychic disorders and paranoia. The degrading behaviour or mental states are the outcome of social maladies.

Discussions

The hackneyed milieu focuses on filth and dirt both in society and in the minds of the people that poison existence as a whole. The bleak and pessimistic view of the world can be related to Schopenhauer’s philosophy that highlights suffering as the inevitable issue of existence. To quote from his studies: “Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance. Each separate misfortune, as it comes, seems, no doubt, to be something exceptional; but misfortune in general is the rule (5).” The only consolation in a world where there is no refuge from suffering is to be

satisfied with partial mitigation of some imminent pain or by acknowledging that other beings are in worse state of plight. The “angry young man”(6) generation championed by John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, John Wain and Arnold Wesker can be exemplary of this genre of writing. Human beings might feel frustrated to be stifled by a mundane routine that allows no scope for heroism and neglects the essence of humanity.

Unlike existentialism Schopenhauer’s philosophy does not maintain that man exists by making “choice”(7). On the contrary, it shows how humans are prey to certain circumstances. The free will is trapped in the contemporary social milieu. The social forces determine actions of an individual. Determinism is a governing principle of naturalism, which advocates that our actions are determined by external forces: socio-political and environmental factors. Human beings are limited by their social circumstances but they strive to pursue infinitude and this leads to rueful consequences. Zender has argued that characters have two forms of identity: the “received,” which is given or forced upon and the “achieved”(8), which is acquired

spontaneously through individual efforts. In naturalist writings the characters mostly have “received” identities. Satire and irony are directed against the social institutions and governing bodies that misdirect the contemporary generation and paralyze the life force or the will power within us. Thus, in Well’s *The Invisible Man*, the protagonist thinks himself to be invisible because people around refuse to see him. This implies how society buries the innate potentialities in human beings by refusing them appropriate platform to manifest their talents.

“Hubris”(9) in the form of social institutions jeopardizes mankind who is left with the stark realization of the impracticality of his dreams and may go to the extent of immorality to achieve his material goals. Sudden outbursts of the protagonists reveal the human dignity within them and their rebellious attitude clamour to dismantle the existing conditions that try to dehumanize us. In Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) the protagonist Clyde Griffiths strives to achieve materialist goals but is compelled by his poor and devout parents to participate in street missionary activities. When he grows

up he takes up a job in a hotel and enters the licentious world of prostitutes, flirtations and alcohol and other sources of sensual gratification. After an accident in which a child is killed and Clyde was riding in a stolen car for which the police suspect him strongly, he flees to Chicago. Though he joins as a foreman in a garment factory, he is promoted to the position of a supervisor with the assistance of his wealthy, influential uncle. Clyde is attracted to Roberta Alden who worked under his supervision at the factory. He persuades her to secret rendezvous and gradually they get involved in clandestine meetings and coitus. However, Clyde's materialist ambition precludes marriage with a penniless girl. He begins to court Sondra Finchley, the daughter of an aristocrat who is evidently a friend of his uncle.

When Roberta insists on their marriage, Clyde is demoralized to such an extent that he conspires to murder her when she threatens to reveal their relationship and affair to Sondra. Clyde gulls Roberta and takes her in a boat ride in a remote area on Big Bittern Lake and tactfully upturns the boat so that Roberta drowns and he swims back to the shore. However, the investigations of the trail of incidents

reveal Clyde as a malicious convict. He is sentenced to death and executed. The tale of dream and ambition ends in pathos and loss. It is the portrayal of the banes of 'American Dream'(10) of unleashed prosperity and overvaulting ambition that might overwhelm a man's sense of morality. Is Clyde solely responsible for his destruction? It is left on the readers to decide how far nature and society have conspired to bring his downfall.

In John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), the protagonist, Jimmy Porter is popularly called an anti-hero. He is incapable of heroic deeds in the conventional sense of the term, is incompetent in existing social standards, unlucky and is given the vocation of failure. Osborne introduces him in Act1, exposition scene as "a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride...almost non-committal," (Osborne, 2004). Despite being a university graduate he is dispossessed of his normal pursuits and is alienated from the cultural life. He lives in a one-room flat with his wife Alison, the daughter of colonel Redfern, and Cliff, his friend with whom he runs a sweet stall. The vocation of Jimmy as a sweet stall

owner is a sarcasm on the society that cannot provide appropriate platform to a university graduate. It mirrors the society's failure to allocate its human resource. John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953) and Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954) also cast protagonists as self-centred, discontent with the existing social codes, disillusioned, alienated from social responsibilities.

In this study they can be regarded as rebels who defied the status quo, irreverent outsiders sniping at the existing structure of society with uninhibited disdain. They were regarded as cult figures of the contemporary young generation. In Osborne's play, Jimmy belongs to the category of a new breed of intellectuals who came from working-class or lower-middle class background. He shares an outspoken irreverence for the class-system and the drabness of the postwar welfare state. He marries into the upper-middle class almost as revenge and subjects Alison to continual onslaughts of bullying and abuse. Jimmy is a passionate idealist raging against the evils of the agencies of the Establishment. He is a crusader who protests against the insensitivity and hypocrisy in the Church and the State. Helena thinks that Jimmy is "born out of his time" (*Look Back in*

Anger, III. ii) and has the fervour of a French revolutionist. Initially Alison had a Romantic image of him as a knight in armour but later she thinks him to be a "spiritual barbarian"¹⁴ (*Look Back in Anger*, III. ii) who throws down the gauntlet at her. Jimmy does not have faith in the proceedings of the world and does not take Providence for granted and thinks to write an anti-Romantic book: "Written in flames a mile high. And it won't be recollected in tranquility either, picking daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth. It'll be recollected in fire, and blood, My blood," (Osborne, 2004). Jimmy's voice is manipulated to irritate the characters from lapsing into torpor. His outbursts are an antidote to titillate the inactive milieu. The tolling of church bells annoys him because he is reminded of his failure to change the conventional social codes. Alison claims that suffering has become an inseparable part of Jimmy's life and he cannot exist without it. He is transformed into a cynic and paranoiac who feels being betrayed. Mythically Jimmy is exemplary modern Sisyphus who struggles relentlessly with existence and is doomed to fail. His tirades are the reactions of a rancorous 'declassé'⁽¹¹⁾ against a society that has ruined his aspirations. Much of the appeal made by the play comes from

its driving, remorseless energy. However, this energy is associated with a sense of futility. He feels that the world is an utterly putrid place for the youth of today. He can do nothing with his brains and education except rail against what present-day life offers him. He is racked with uncertainty and his every action and impulse stems from a personality that is too disturbed. He thinks himself "a lost cause," (Osborne, 2004). Jimmy is the product of a national malaise. However, his emotional involvement, depths of feeling, integrity remain intact throughout the course of the play. Both Jimmy and Clyde epitomize what Schopenhauer had stated in his studies in pessimism that the longer a person lives, s/he clearly realizes that life is a series of failures and disappointments that are to be accepted with no alternatives. To Schopenhauer, "Life is a task to be done. It is a fine thing to say *defunctus est*; it means that the man has done his task."(12) It is nothing more than a performance filled with angst when we try to achieve our goals. Naturalism ensures that resilience and tolerance are the only means to survive in a world that is fallen, heinous, and unsympathetic to the miseries of mankind. It is perhaps the most concrete document of socially

conditioned existence which the human beings continue, reluctantly. Naturalism can be related to the main ideas of Existentialism. In both these philosophies human life is seen as a continuous flow of consciousness, struggle, suffering and despair. For Kierkegaard man has always struggled to grapple with chaos, his destiny and has made continuous efforts to rise above the indignity of death. Sartre thinks that 'nothingness' forms an inseparable part of our existence and is the source of man's despair and isolation. If he cannot, by chance or choice, assert his identity, he is likely to experience the meaninglessness of life and existential nausea. It is only his freedom of choice and discretion that makes his meaningful affirmation towards life. In a world without sense, all choices are possible, as observed by Sartre. Here the central dilemma is that an individual is "condemned to be free." In the much discussed myth of Sisyphus (1942), Albert Camus compares the absurdity of the existence of humanity to the futile labours of the mythical character, Sisyphus. He was eternally condemned to push a boulder to the top of a hill and watched helplessly as it rolled down again. In the novel, *The Plague* (1947), Camus tries to emphasize on the demands made through rebellion.

He expounded in details a vision of life without an apparent purpose, out of harmony with its surroundings, sad to the point of anguish but at the same time funny.

Conclusion

Meursault, the protagonist in Camus' *The Stranger*, cannot conform to the norms of society just as Osborne's Jimmy Porter. Paradoxically, when Meursault is about to die he states that he is ready to live. He chooses death as a freedom from condemnation by society. Anna Wulf, the protagonist of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), like Sisyphus, engages in an unceasing struggle to confront the absurd where this mind and this world are juxtaposed together without being able to embrace each other. The novel exemplifies the fragmentation of Anna's mind and personality. The four notebooks symbolize the four aspects of Anna Wulf, a writer who lives with her young daughter in a flat. Her black notebook represents her experiences in colonial Africa as a novelist. Similarly the red notebook represents political activism, yellow manifests her imaginative self, the quest for identity as a writer is presented in the blue diary. She views her experiences from different angles- professional, political,

the lack of coherence and order in our fragmented, materialistic century where relationships turn meaningless. Alienation and fragmentation of her consciousness in a disintegrated world are symbolized in this novel. She broods over her responses and probes the intertwined layers of consciousness. Eventually Anna manages to unify her identity in one notebook- the "Golden notebook" which records the successful self-healing from fragmentation and blocked creativity. She comes to terms with her growing disillusionment with Communism, the trauma of emotional rejection and sexual betrayal, professional anxieties and the tensions of friendship and family. The novel is an attempt to break certain forms of consciousness and transcend them. It is a critique of life in the middle of a whirlwind that moves with the beat of our time. In both the philosophies of 'Existentialism' and 'Naturalism,' suffering remains as the central focus. The individuals are rather trapped in a world which s/he does not understand, nor does the world understand him or her. We live in a world where good intentions fatally miscarry and purblind men enact hell. To attempt to know one's self is not egoism but the gateway to all virtue. The consequence is some heroic dislocation from the

pulse of mundane, drab and continuous life. It is a world as put by Iris Murdoch, we must learn to be “good for nothing.”

End Notes

(1). In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, “life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream

(2). Stephen Greenblatt propounds the theory of “invisible bullets” to elaborate his views on social energy. Retrieved from <http://www.connotations.de/pdf/articles/derdzinski01123.pdf>

(3). Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, Chapter 3. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/feb/09/darwin.struggle>

(4). William Wordsworth’s Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800). Retrieved from <http://www.bartleby.com/39/36.html>

(5). Arthur Schopenhauer’s “On the Sufferings of the World.” Retrieved from <http://ebooks.aделаide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer>

[/arthur/pessimism/chapter1.html](#)

(6). The disgruntled group that not only expressed discontent with the staid, hypocritical institutions of English society—the so-called Establishment—but betrayed disillusionment with itself and with its own achievements. Retrieved from http://web.usal.es/~anlosan/Angry_Young_Men.html

(7). Read the section “Choice and Moral Dilemmas.” Retrieved from http://www.class.uidaho.edu/engl_258/Lecture%20Notes/existentialism.html

(8). Psychologists have given various identity development theories. Retrieved from <http://www.education.com/reference/article/identity-development/>

(9). In Greek tragedy “hubris” refers to excessive pride that precedes the downfall of the protagonist. Retrieved from <http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/heroicbehavior/g/Hubris.html>

(10). In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, “life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream

wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream

(11). "Declasse" is a French word for a person with inferior social status.

(12). Arthur Schopenhauer's "On the Sufferings of the World," gives a pessimistic view of the world. Retrieved from <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter1.html>

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