

Honors American Lit - Realism and Naturalism Paper Assignment

One way in which the subject matters and themes of the realism and naturalism movements in American literature can be understood is as reactions to the romantic ideals that preceded them.

For example, the symbolic realism of Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* depicts the bloody and horrific psychological landscape of the Civil War. The realism of the novel was a revelation to readers because it so strongly opposed the romantic ideal of war – war as glorious and honorable. Popular culture and classical literature (Greeks and Romans), and even contemporary poems like Tennyson's 1854 "Charge of the Light Brigade" portrayed war as a glorious endeavor, an opportunity for valor, bravery and fame. War was (and still is) romanticized. Young men (and now women), moved by the idea of *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (Horace -it is sweet and honorable to die for one's country) enlisted for the opportunity to become heroes in a "noble cause." Crane's symbolic and realistic depictions of battles and the mindset of a real soldier (governed by instinct and environment) are in stark juxtaposition to the romantic ideal. Even Civil War vets claimed that Crane, who was born after the Civil War, got it right – that the war was NOT glorious or romantic, but chaotic, mindless and terrifying, it was NOT about individual will and choices, but about forces outside the control of the individual. Crane's style, densely layered with graphic similes and metaphors appealing to all five senses, and structure, deliberately unconnected and unfocused and describing only "small" anonymous battles, add up to a terrifying verisimilitude.

Now to the paper: using one of the five short stories read in class ("The Open Boat," "The Yellow Wallpaper," "Desiree's Baby," "The Reckoning" or "To Build a Fire") or another realist/naturalist text by the same authors, explain what romantic ideal is being countered by the reality described by the writer, and demonstrate HOW the realist stylistically and thematically creates the "real." You'll need to do some research to prove the existence of a 19th century romantic ideal (find primary sources) that is being debunked by the realist's point of view. You'll also need to get your hands deep into the text of your choice of short story in order to demonstrate HOW the writer is using the technique of realism to depict their subject – that means you will need to quote the story copiously to demonstrate how the writers "accumulate details." Which details (diction)? How arranged (syntax)? Why arrange the details the way they are? What effect is created by doing so? How does that effect match up with what we believe the realists/naturalists were trying to do?

This paper is a **3 page maximum** – no fluff! Rough draft is due **11/7 or 8**, final draft due **11/12**.

Realism: Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality" or "verisimilitude," realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing. Although strictly speaking, realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life. A reaction against romanticism, an interest in scientific method, the systematizing of the study of documentary history, and the influence of rational philosophy all affected the rise of realism. According to William Harmon and Hugh Holman, "Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence" (*A Handbook to Literature* 428).

Naturalism: Through [an] objective study of human beings, naturalistic writers believed that the laws behind the forces that govern human lives might be studied and understood. Naturalistic writers thus used a version of the scientific method to write their novels; they studied human beings governed by their instincts and passions as well as the ways in which the characters' lives were governed by forces of heredity and environment. Although they used the techniques of accumulating detail pioneered by the realists, the naturalists thus had a specific object in mind when they chose the segment of reality that they wished to convey.

{Definitions above from Prof. Donna Campbell's American Lit pages, Washington State University, visited 11/13/2014}