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Long Paper

Naturalism in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*

In 1893, the French author and playwright, Émile Zola, published a collection of essays under the carefully chosen title of *The Experimental Novel.* Zola intended his title to be understood literally. Conceived against the backdrop of Darwinism, Zola sought a style that would marry the process of crafting literature with the scientific method. “We novelists are the examining magistrates of men and their passions,” Zola asserts in the opening of the collection, thereby drafting a new and more radical brand of realism that would later come to be known as naturalism. Beyond simply describing society as it appeared, Zola’s naturalist literary mode yearned to divulge the underlying motivating forces responsible for making society the way it was. Zola’s fresh approach to crafting literature inspired two formative American naturalist novels: Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Sinclair and Wright’s novels retained many of the same qualities of Zola’s fiction: the use of urban settings, a special focus on the poor, and, most important,and an overhanging mood of pessimistic determinism. But for some critics, simply sharing thisfundamental theme does not make a novel fully naturalistic. One of those critics is Pierce Butler Professor of English Emeritus at Tulane University, Donald Pizer, who further distills naturalism to narratives composed of “two tensions or contradictions that…in conjunction comprise both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience. In other words, the two constitute the theme and form of the naturalistic novel.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Given this framework, one can see how *The Jungle* and *Native Son* bothsatisfy the expectations regarding the themes of a naturalist novel: the air of determinism is palpable in the experiences of Jurgis and Bigger. But when it comes to Pizer’s notion that the naturalist text emerges by reflecting the novel’s naturalist themes in its narrative progression, only the machine-like narrative of *The Jungle* satisfies this expectation while the relatively unpredictable narrative of *Native Son* emerges as a style of novel all its own.

Sinclair and Wrightrevealthe shared theme of pessimistic determinism in two ways. The first is by paralleling the protagonists’ struggles with those of entrapped animals. The second is through the two-pronged relationship between the protagonists and their bosses, and between theirbosses and the underlying societal forces of capitalism and systemic racism.

Sinclair’s comparison between the workers and the pigs —slaughterers and slaughtered—underscores the air of determinism in *The Jungle*. Some time after being hired to work at Brown’s meatpacking plant, Jurgis oversees a tour of the factory. In many ways a microcosm of the tour Sinclair affords the reader, the tour of plant is in itself a harrowing depiction of the numb horror of capitalism at work:

Somehow the most matter-of-fact person could not help thinking of the hogs; they were so innocent, they came so very trustingly; and they were so very human in their protests and so perfectly within their rights. They had done nothing to deserve it; and it was adding insult to injury, as the thing was done here, swinging them up in this cold-blooded, impersonal way, without a pretense at apology, without the homage of a tear. Now and then a visitor wept, to be sure; but this slaughtering-machine ran on, visitors or no visitors. It was like some horrible crime committed in a dungeon, all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and of memory (41)

Sinclair personifies the pigs both overtly through his description of them as “so very human” and more subtly through his suggestion that the pigs were being unfairly robbed of “their rights.” Moreover, Sinclair’s personification of the pigs serves the larger purpose of paralleling the system of capitalism that, to Sinclair, treats people similarly to how Jurgis and his coworkers treat the pigs. This thread is woven throughout the novel as many characters live and die like the hogs— “all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and of memory.” And most poignant of all is the sentiment of inevitability in Sinclair’s narration—that the “slaughtering-machine” of society “ran on visitors or no visitors.” Sinclair’s concern for the fate of America’s capitalist society led to his disappointment over the collective response to his novel, which garnered widespread outcry only for its depiction of the meatpacking process itself and not Sinclair’s intended target. “I aimed at America’s heart and hit it in the stomach,” Sinclair famously griped, revealing, in the process, the extent to which the influence of capitalism is unavoidable. Nevertheless, Sinclair’s blurring of the line between human and animal characters supports the overarching naturalist theme of pessimistic determinism.

Though he replaces the hog with the rat, Wright’s depiction of Bigger’s relationship with vermin in *Native Son* is both a microcosm for and a foreshadowing of the unavoidable constraint institutionalized racism places on Bigger’s freedom. In the opening pages of the novel, Bigger and his family are confronted with the presence of “a huge black rat” (4). The rat is introduced when Bigger’s mother screams, “there he is again,” (4) suggesting that the presence of such vermin in the Thomas household is commonplace. Moreover, Bigger’s mother’s scream “galvanized” (4) the “one-room apartment” (4) into “violent action” (4). This description both shows the squalor in which Bigger and his family live, and collapses the identity of the five people living in the apartment into the entity of the filthy apartment, itself. The rest of the scene depicts Bigger brutally killing the rat:

Bigger caught the skillet and lifted it high in the air. The rat scuttled across the floor and stopped again at the box and searched quickly for the hole; then it reared once more and bared long yellow fangs, popping shrilly, belly quivering. Bigger aimed and let the skillet fly with a heavy grunt. There was a shattering of wood as the box caved in. The woman screamed and hid her face in her hands. Bigger tiptoed forward and peered. ‘I got ‘im’ he muttered, his clenched teeth bared in a smile. (6)

These brutal details foreshadow Bigger’s decapitating Mary Dalton’s corpse. And so on a superficial level, this scene establishes Bigger’s capacity for killing. But more important in this scene than the actual act is the context for Bigger’s killing of the rat. Chicago’s system of racial segregation confines Bigger to such a foul existence. Thus, although it was Bigger who did the killing, Chicago’s inherently racist housing system made Bigger’s deed unavoidable. Wright implies a similar logic to Bigger’s killing of Mary; that while Bigger did, of course, kill Mary Dalton, his extreme fear of being seen as a black man who raped a white woman guided his hand. While Sinclair compares the predestined plight of the hogs in the slaughterhouse to immigrant workers in a capitalist society, Wright shows the inexorable influence of institutionalized racism by intertwining the fates of Bigger and the rat.

An examination of the bosses’ influence on the protagonists andthe societal principles of capitalism and systemic racism that, in turn, shape the bosses, further substantiates the naturalist trope of pessimistic determinism in both texts. Though some scholars have criticized the portrayal of the bossesas one-dimensional, this simplicityrenders them the perfect meansofgauging the extent to which the future is fixed for characters like Jurgis and Bigger by their environment.Because the two naturalist novels aimto explore whether humanity is simply a product of its environment, the one-dimensional quality of these bosses is a calculated choice to present a constant variable—a barometer, if you will—of Jurgis and Bigger’s relationship with their respective surroundings.

In *The Jungle,* Mike Scully’s corruption constrains Jurgis’ ability to act freely. Introduced with the deeply ironic title, “democratic boss,” (110) Mike Scully is described as “[holding] an important party office in the state, and bossed even the mayor of the city, it was said; it was his boast that he carried the stockyards in his pocket” (110). Scully’s absolute control of Packingtown exerts an invisible force on Jurgis, limiting his ability to provide for his family. In fact, the consequences of Scully’s corruption can be tracked through every trouble that befalls Jurgis and his family:

It was Scully who was to blame for the unpaved street in which Jurgis' child had been drowned; it was Scully who had put into office the magistrate who had first sent Jurgis to jail; it was Scully who was principal stockholder in the company which had sold him the ramshackle tenement, and then robbed him of it. (313)

On one level, this description reveals the extent to which Scully is able to directly control Jurgis’ life. But on another, deeper level, this quote suggests that it is not, finally, only Scully who is to blame for Jurgis’ struggles. Of course, he is not innocent, but the repetitive quality of Scully’s slights of Jurgis and his family suggests that a more foundational guiding force may be enabling Scully’s corruption. Sinclair alludes to this notion when he writes, “Scully was but a tool and puppet of the packers” (311). Thus, Scully’s corruption is not a drawn-out act of willful negligence, but an unconscious adherence to the even more tectonic current of capitalism. And if the packers are the agents of capitalism, then how does their influence affect Jurgis? “To Jurgis the packers had been equivalent to fate” (376). The naturalist theme of determinism, therefore, lies at the heart of *The Jungle*, manifesting itself first in capitalism’s invisible manipulation of Mike Scully and thereby extending to Scully’s quite obvious manipulation of Jurgis and his family.

In the same way that in *The Jungle* the societal characteristic of capitalism influences Scully’s corruption, the societal characteristic of systemic racism in *Native Son* enables Mr. Dalton’s complicity in steering Bigger toward an inescapable path to crime. After killing Mary, Bigger decides to go to his girlfriend, Bessie’s house. While on his way, Bigger sees “a sign on a building: THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY…He had never seen Mr. Dalton until he had come to work for him; his mother always took the rent to the real estate office. Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god” (218). Wright’s characterization of Mr. Dalton existing “distant, like a god” highlights at once how all-powerful Mr. Dalton is and how equally removed he is from the intense strife caused by his exploitation of black Chicagoans. The indentured system of systemic racism fuels this combination of authority and aloofness, which is described later in the novel by the Jewish lawyer, Boris Max, in his defense of Bigger, “in some of us, as in Mr. Dalton, the feeling of guilt, stemming from our moral past, is so strong that we try to undo this thing in a manner as naïve as dropping a penny in a blind man’s cup! But, Your Honor, life will not be dealt with in such a fashion” (496). And so according to Mr. Max, how should we view Bigger’s role in Mary’s death if not as the result of one man’s aggression? Max answers:

We planned the murder of Mary Dalton, and today we come to court and say: ‘We had nothing to do with it!’ But every schoolteacher knows that this is not so, for every schoolteacher knows the restrictions which have been placed upon Negro education…Your Honor, we who sit here today in this courtroom are witnesses. We know this evidence, for we helped to create it. (498)

While it is Mr. Dalton’s exploitation of the black community through his racist real estate management that catalyzes Bigger’s crime, Mr. Max proclaims in his speech that Mr. Dalton is but a pawn in the larger system of institutionalized oppression. These bosses—represented in *The Jungle* by the character of Mike Scully and in *Native Son* by the character of Mr. Dalton—are essential in substantiating the themes of rampant corruption and racism that lay the foundation in both novels for the naturalist notion of pessimistic determinism.

The two novels differ in their ability to satisfy Pizer’s second criteria for the naturalist novel, which is that the form of the text parallels the thematic content. This notion is exemplified through the difference between the monotone, purposefully predictable plot of *The Jungle*, and the unexpected transformation of Jan’s character in *Native Son*—a surprising narrative development that ultimately distances Wright’s novel from being a fully naturalist one.

Once winter arrives in Packingtown, Sinclair’s narrative devolves into a series of disastrous, yet unsurprising calamities. Moreover, the tone with which Sinclair describes these tragedies characterizes their inexorable nature. After Teta Elzbieta’s son, Kristoforas dies and Jurgis begins his work at the fertilizer plant that ultimately leaves him so sick he can only drink all day, the narrator describes the family as having

Lost the game... It was not less tragic because it was so sordid, because that it had to do with wages and grocery bills and rents. They were lost, they were going down and there was no deliverance for them, no hope; for all the help it gave them the vast city in which they lived might have been an ocean waste, a wilderness, a desert, a tomb (163).

This wakeful march towards death is the story of *The Jungle* at its most elemental level. Unlike traditional depictions of tragedy—stories in which the shortcoming or oversight of a character leads to their demise—Jurgis’ family’s decline results from the deeply flawed system of capitalism. Therefore, their deterioration is and never was something that they could control. Their fate was fixed from the second they got off the boat. Form, in *The Jungle*, therefore mirrors theme.

In *Native Son*, on the other hand, the theme of pessimistic determinism does not totally govern the unfolding of the plot. This notion is exemplified through Jan’s transformation. Early in the text, Jan’s cavalier misguidedness is demonstrated through his inability to recognize Bigger’s intense discomfort at being treated as anything but a black male. Upon meeting Bigger, Jan immediately breaks social convention by instructing, “‘First of all…don’t say *sir* to me. I’ll call you Bigger and you’ll call me Jan. That’s the way it’ll be between us” (83). The result of Jan’s demand?

[Bigger] flushed with anger…He felt foolish sitting behind the steering wheel like this and letting a white man hold his hand…He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin (83).

Though his attempts to reach out to Bigger ostensibly come from a genuine concern, Jan’s flippant disregard for how his breaching of social conventions might make Bigger feel suggests otherwise. Nevertheless, the Jan that Wright presents later in the novel reveals a subtle sense of optimism, suggesting that change in *Native Son* may not be the stuff of fantasy as it is in *The Jungle*. When he visits Bigger in jail, Jan’s mode of interaction has changed drastically, his impudence replaced with sincerity: “Let me be on your side, Bigger…I can fight this thing with you, just like you’ve started it. I can come from all of those white people and stand here with you” (365). Jan’s evolution is most obviously demonstrated through Bigger’s reaction to this appeal: “He looked at Jan and saw a white face, but an honest face. This white man believed in him, and the moment he felt that belief he felt guilty again” (365). Consider this sentiment is coming from the same Bigger Thomas who not long ago felt for “Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate,” (85) and the gravity of both Jan’s and Bigger’s evolution is apparent. In this scene, Wright shows that the societal norms of racism are not, finally, impossible to overcome. In so doing, Wright offers an optimistic portrait of humanity that runs against the pessimistic themes of the novel as a whole. Jan’s evolution from the utterly tone-deaf “sympathizer of black America” to the character capable of forgiving Bigger after he framed him for Mary’s murder distances *Native Son* from being a purely naturalist novel.

Ultimately, if we are to read *The Jungle* and *Native Son* as essentially literary sociological experiments (as a naturalist reading would suggest we should), then the hypotheses of either novel is clear. For Sinclair, the purpose of *The Jungle* is to show, step-by-tragic-step, the pitfalls of American Capitalism. For Wright, the purpose of *Native Son* is to show how the systemic racism of mid-20th Century Chicago made Bigger’s criminal actions all but inevitable. Yet whereas the plot of Sinclair’s novel parallels this model, progressing mechanically from one Capitalism-caused tragedy to the next, Jan’s transformation complicates the narrative of *Native Son.* A character whose original purpose was to represent the misguidedness of even the most earnest attempts by whites to understand blacks, Jan’s transformation into the character capable of visiting Bigger in jail—to preach forgiveness, no less—underscores a sense of optimism in Wright’s vision that distances the text from the typical, monotonously grim naturalist novel.

The Chicago poet Carl Sandburg once wrote, “Passing through the bars and over the steel points will go // nothing except Death and the Rain and To-morrow.” Though Sandburg was describing a fence, he may well have been sketching the ever-predictable lives of Jurgis Rudkis and Bigger Thomas. Ironically, Sandburg’s lines capture with their imagery of renewal the inescapable nature of struggle for Chicagoans like Jurgis and Bigger. And so beyond the obviously shared naturalistic tropes of an urban setting and a focus on lower-class members of society, *The Jungle* and *Native Son* have been described as examples of American literary naturalism because of their shared theme of pessimistic determinism. But it is *The Jungle* and not *Native Son* that represents the archetypal naturalist novel in that its theme of determinism resembles the mechanical quality of its plot. *Native Son*, which was written some thirty years after *The Jungle*, moves away from Pizer’s strict notion of naturalism. While *Native Son* retains the theme of pessimistic determinism, its plot is not characterized by the same kind of predictability as *The Jungle’s*—as exemplified by the unforeseen turn of Jan’s character.

*Quotes from both novels come from the free Kindle eBook edition available on Amazon.com*

*(I copy edited a draft of this essay with Jan Hortas, Calhoun’s incomparable writing tutor.)*

1. Pizer, Donald. *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-century American Literature*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1966. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)