

Realism and Naturalism

The Novel in an Age of Transition

Richard Lehan (Jun 30, 2005)

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It is difficult to imagine the activity of reading in the post-industrial age without the presence of the novel. The novel as modern readers know it, despite its many forms and distinctive subgenres, remains a direct descendant of the realistic narratives that emerged in the eighteenth century. In this volume, the author undertakes a history of the novel using a wealth of primary texts that illuminate naturalism's debt to realism and the novel's deep roots in naturalism.

Lehan is professor emeritus of English at UCLA and author of a number of book-length works of literary history and criticism. He employs the traditional approach to literary studies that once ruled the academy, but has today experienced serious challenges from new perspectives on cultural studies. This book analyzes many canonical works, i.e., "classics," culled from more than three centuries of European and American literature.

For literary historians like Lehan, works of the mind in the Western tradition—be they historical, scientific, philosophical, or literary—exist in a great conversation with each other as well as with their audiences. Lehan charts this web of relations while laying out his thesis that the tandem developments of realism and naturalism were a product of the series of massive changes that transformed the western world beginning with the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.

The chapters here are centripetal in that Lehan returns repeatedly to his main themes, and even to many of the same texts, to stress his arguments. The range of Lehan's observations and close reading is impressive. Cervantes, Fielding, and Balzac give way to Marx, Nietzsche, and Herbert Spencer. Dickens, Dostoyevsky, and Zola are compounded with Twain, James, and Dreiser. The middle chapters of the book utilize an interesting concept derived from Spencer—"fields of force"—to assess a great variety of novels and works.

A critic of the old school, Lehan nevertheless engages some of the critical paradigms of contemporary literary studies, including post-structuralism and New Historicism. Readers will note that Lehan's definition of both realism and naturalism is more expansive than one finds in the customary timelines, and his literary assessments encroach on the present with discussions of William Kennedy, Joyce Carol Oates, and Don DeLillo.

For the non-specialist, this comprehensive overview of developments in the novel will help make sense of some of the periods and categories that constitute the Western canon. College curricula often present a baffling smorgasbord of self-contained literary moments without clear connections between them. Lehan's study provides a model for understanding these significant works as a single course of development.

JOHN ARENS (January / February 1999)

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