

“WHERE EVERYTHING GOES TO HELL”: STEPHEN KING AS  
LITERARY NATURALIST

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**Title**

“Where Everything Goes to Hell”: Stephen King

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As Literary Naturalist

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota State University’s regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

In his bestselling nonfiction book about the horror genre, *Danse Macabre*, author Stephen King lists among his idols “the great naturalist writer Frank Norris” (336). While King primarily writes horror fiction, he has often noted his indebtedness to early American literary naturalists. As these naturalist writers have been such an influence in King’s life and writing, it seems logical to explore whether King himself, in addition to being a horror writer, can also be considered a literary naturalist. By looking at ideas of both early and contemporary American literary naturalism, I explore how a variety of King’s works utilize the most central tenets of naturalism, including realism, determinism (biological, environmental, and technological) and the seeming paradox of free will within determined environments. I also look at how King’s horror can be compatible with, and even expands on, the definition of traditional literary naturalism.

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## CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

In his bestselling nonfiction book about the horror genre, *Danse Macabre* (1981), author Stephen King lists among his idols “the great naturalist writer Frank Norris” (366). While King primarily writes horror fiction, he has often noted his indebtedness to early American literary naturalists such as Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London. As these naturalist writers have been such an influence in King’s life and writing, it seems logical to explore whether King himself, in addition to being a horror writer, can also be considered a literary naturalist.

American literary naturalism, a tradition that began in the late-nineteenth century, has a broad and varied definition. As naturalist critic Eric Carl Link says in his article “Defining American Literary Naturalism,” “there is no one set of conventions, styles, forms, or even philosophical positions that defines American literary naturalism” (72). Link goes on to say:

Just as naturalist theory itself is a scientific and philosophical sprawl radiating outward from a Darwinian core, so too American literary naturalism as an aesthetic movement is one with an identifiable core, in effect, but whose edges are not clearly defined and whose influence extends far and wide. (“Defining” 72)

The influence may be broad, but as Link says, there is still an “identifiable core” of literary naturalism, which includes an adherence to realism, an assumption of various types of determinism, certain restrictions on free will, and the presence of violence, with the purpose of social critique. Many critics, including Link, view American literary naturalism as a genre that grew out of literary realism, which was the dominant literary type in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Link says in another study of naturalism that when critics ponder what, exactly, literary naturalism is, the consensus is that it “is a branch of the realist movement...informed by a reasonably well-defined set of philosophical attitudes regarding the

relationship of humans to their environment” (*The Vast* ix). There are themes and characteristics that are common to many naturalist works, and it is important to establish these themes and characteristics in order to show Stephen King’s naturalistic qualities.

### **Early American Literary Naturalism**

The tradition of American literary naturalism began in the late-nineteenth century, at least partly in response to many scientific, economic, and social changes occurring in the country and partly as an extension of European naturalism, led by writer Emile Zola. Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and included his theory of evolution, which states that both humans and apes have evolved from the same ancestors, and their personalities and behaviors are determined by their heredity. By the 1870s, many scientists and the general public had accepted evolution as a scientific fact. The rapid urbanization caused by the Industrial Revolution also created major economic and social changes. This rise of capitalism contributed to an increased inequality in social and economic class between the “haves” and “have-nots,” and this could often be seen in the slum areas of the newly-formed, crowded cities. Early American naturalist authors such as Norris, Dreiser, and London were influenced by these new ideas and changing social situations.

Of the early American literary naturalists, Norris was one of the few to try to define American literary naturalism, and for this reason, his theories will be used to establish a baseline for how King’s works can be read as naturalistic. As Donald Pizer, one of the foremost naturalist critics, notes in “Introduction: The Problem of Definition”:

Naturalism, Norris declares, must abjure the “teacup tragedies” of Howellsian realism and explore instead the irrational and primitive in human nature – “the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems

of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man” – and it should do so within the large canvas and allegorical framework that permit the expression of abstract ideas about the human condition. (8)

The phrase “Howellsian realism” refers to one of the prominent literary movements of the time. William Dean Howells was one of the major realist writers and a respected critic, and he pushed for realism to replace romance as the main type of literature in America. As Howells says in “Criticism and Fiction”:

The talent that is robust enough to front the everyday world and catch the charm of its work-worn, care-worn, brave, kindly face, need not fear the encounter, though it seems terrible to the sort nurtured in the superstition of the romantic, the bizarre, the heroic, the distinguished, as the things alone worthy of painting or carving or writing. The arts must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art. (243)

Howells suggests in the above passage that most writers have been taught that everyday life is not worth writing about; instead, they should focus on the “romantic” and “bizarre.” However, Howells believes that the “everyday world” is what writers should focus on, even if it seems common. While Norris did believe that naturalist writers should be faithful to the truth and present their stories in a realistic way, he also thought they needed to go beyond just the surface truth, or the “teacup tragedies,” and instead search for a deeper truth. This was to be done by exploring some of the new, grittier ideas of the time. Pizer reinforces this idea when he says:

The common belief is that the naturalists were like the realists in their fidelity to the details of contemporary life, but that they depicted everyday life with a greater



sense of the role of such causal forces as heredity and environment in determining behavior and belief. (“Late” 306-07)

The “causal forces” Pizer refers to bring up another theme almost always present in a discussion of literary naturalism: determinism, the idea that people are determined by forces beyond their control, whether these forces are biological, environmental, social, or mechanistic. The idea of determinism raises the question of whether free will is possible. If people’s futures are already determined by one or many of the forces mentioned, how can there also be free will? The answer to this question varies from one author or critic to another. Some authors create very determined environments for their characters and give them very little free will, while others seem to show their characters as having at least some form of control over their circumstances. As this has been an issue in naturalism, it will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, in reference to Joyce Carol Oates’s short story “Me & Wolfie, 1979,” and several King works, including “The Body,” *The Shining*, and *Carrie*.

In his study “The European Background,” critic Richard Lehan offers a definition of naturalism as a narrative mode that includes the ideas of evolution and determinism and can be specifically applied to the early literary naturalists. He says:

It depends upon a biological model, relying heavily on theories of evolution and devolution, seeing man as a product of his immediate environment. It is essentially mechanistic in its view of matter and deterministic in its attitude toward human will, moving toward theories of degeneration when viewing the individual, the family, the crowd, and finally the community itself, whether it be the city or the nation-state. (65)

This definition does not mention realism but is a more complete definition regarding the various types of determinism (biological, environmental, social, and technological) that will be discussed in this paper in relation to King's own works.

### **Contemporary Literary Naturalism**

There are some critics who view American literary naturalism as a movement with a definite beginning and end; the beginning was the late-nineteenth century, and the end was the early-twentieth century. However, there are other critics who view literary naturalism as a tradition that, like one of its basic tenets, has evolved over the years but still exists in contemporary literature. In recent years, critics such as Pizer, James Giles, and Link have studied how the early tradition of American literary naturalism can be seen in contemporary literature. They have studied how literary naturalism has expanded and changed from its early forms. Naturalist critic Christophe Den Tandt acknowledges this expansion when he says, "advances in literary historical research have brought into the circle of critical discussion ever more texts deserving inclusion into the naturalist corpus" (406). Den Tandt does not mention specific authors or works that deserve "inclusion into the naturalist corpus"; instead, he talks about how postmodernism has affected the way critics view texts and cites this as the reason more texts can be included. Contemporary naturalism still includes the idea of determinism, but it has expanded from biological, environmental, social, and mechanistic determinism to include technological determinism, which could be considered an extension of mechanistic determinism, and psychological determinism, which focuses more on the characters' inner lives as they are affected by arguably deterministic forces.

Giles has also argued that violence plays a larger role in contemporary naturalism. For example, contemporary writer Joyce Carol Oates is often considered a contemporary naturalist,

and Giles says that, for Oates, “Violence...assumes the function of scientific determinism in traditional naturalism. Through its very irrationality and unpredictability it controls the lives of the characters in her work” (174). Violence can be a determining force in itself, as Giles suggests, or it can be the result of other determining forces in characters’ lives. Giles also refers to critic Steven Barza’s view of Oates as a naturalist as “perceptive. None of her characters would ever discover in themselves an inherited tendency toward alcoholism and immediately turn into sadistic drunks, but most of them are driven and molded by vague external forces that the reader must attempt to identify” (170). Oates seems to be less concerned with strict external realism than the early naturalist writers, as she often focuses more on the inner thoughts of her characters than on what is happening around them. As will be shown, however, there are instances where she utilizes more Darwinian ideas in her work as well.

In addition to Oates, critics often also consider contemporary writers Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy to be naturalists; the lives of the characters in their novels are often determined by external forces, and violence often pervades their novels. McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, published in 1985, provides many examples of deterministic violence and is a very pessimistic book. One gruesome depiction of violence occurs early in the novel, after a firefight between the riders and the Indians. The narrator says the men were

stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it

like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. (56)

This extremely descriptive passage illustrates McCarthy's use of violence throughout the novel, and is also naturalistic in its use of description and portrayal of violence. McCarthy portrays the characters as deprived of humanity and, exhibiting animalistic qualities, use violence to stay alive. As Pizer says about contemporary naturalism in his book *The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism*:

The traditional matter, themes, and forms of earlier American naturalistic fiction are still with us. Limited and deprived characters still struggle to stay afloat in a world of violent destructiveness, and the novels in which they appear still shape themselves into symbolic expressions of major flaws in the human experience. (185)

Using the ideas stated above, then, the purpose of this paper is to show Stephen King as a literary naturalist. Giles, in a study, created a list of authors he considers contemporary naturalists, but King was not included on his list. He then challenged scholars to add to that list; that is what this paper will do. Beyond simply listing early naturalists as a strong influence, King directly uses many of the themes noted by critics to be qualities of literary naturalism. King's naturalism has been mentioned previously by only one critic, Heidi Strengell, but the matter is insufficiently discussed by her. Strengell has shown elements of literary naturalism in his works but has stopped short of calling him a literary naturalist. In addition, Edwin Casebeer says in his study of King's canon (referring to works by King critics Tony Magistrale and Douglas Winter):

King has created many novels which allegorically address current social dilemmas: the corruption of school and church...the government...the small

town...the family...and heterosexual relationships. Thus, King's work offers more than mere escape fiction or "adrenaline" fiction; it urges readers to confront squarely and disturbingly the horror in their own lives. (212)

Critiquing social institutions and their corrupting influence on people's lives is one of the themes of literary naturalism, and the ways King does this will be explored throughout this paper to show that he is, indeed, a literary naturalist in addition to being a horror writer.

One of the moments when King admits his indebtedness to the early naturalists occurs in an interview with Paul Janeczko:

I'm not very optimistic about the world....The books that influenced me the most when I was growing up were by people like Thomas Hardy, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser. All those people of the naturalistic school believed once you pull out one rock, it's sort of a relentless slide into the pit. I don't think that any thinking person can look at the world in our society and see anything very secure. The whole situation is bad. (10)

King's acknowledgment of debt to these authors sometimes also occurs in his own fiction; he directly references Norris's novel *McTeague* in his own popular novel, *The Shining*. When main character Jack Torrance is losing his mind, he thinks of his parents' relationship and compares it to the fate of the main character in *McTeague*. The third-person narrator, from Jack's perspective, says, "For Jack's father it must have been more like the fate of McTeague the dentist at the end of Frank Norris's great novel: handcuffed to a dead man in the wasteland" (379).

However, in order to show that King is a naturalist, more is needed than strong quotations; it is important to elaborate on how the various aspects of naturalism appear in a number of his works. Using the most commonly agreed upon themes and definitions of

naturalism and considering the role of realism in his writing, I will look at a range of King's works, from his earlier novels and novellas, to his more recent works, to show a pattern of literary naturalism that spans his career and, in effect, makes him a literary naturalist. In addition, I will discuss how the supernatural and horror elements in King's works can be reconciled with, and even be seen to be extensions of, American literary naturalism.

Chapter Two will discuss the role of realism in literary naturalism and will show how King uses many of the realist strategies of early naturalists in his own works. Chapter Three will discuss the paradox of free will being compatible with determinism, as well as demonstrate different types of determinisms found in early and contemporary naturalists' works and how King utilizes them in his own work. Finally, as King is mostly known as a horror writer, a fact that cannot be ignored, Chapter Four will discuss horror and the supernatural in King's work and how these ideas can be compatible with literary naturalism. Chapter Five will conclude the paper with a brief discussion of potential future research directions relating to the relationship of literary naturalism to horror, both in general and specifically in King.

## CHAPTER TWO. REALISM, LITERARY NATURALISM, AND KING

Most critics – and naturalist writers – agree that realism is an important aspect of naturalism. Realism as a literary movement developed in America before naturalism, and writer and critic William Dean Howells was a proponent for realism being the most important type of literature of the time. Paul Lauter, editor of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, states, “realists like Howells emphasized situations and characters created from ordinary, everyday life, and the use of authentic American speech and dialogue rather than authorial comment as primary narrative mode” (10). Howells and other realists viewed realism as “a matter of faithfulness to the surfaces of American life” (*The Heath* 10). One of the differences between realism and naturalism is that while naturalism also shows “the surfaces of American life,” it does so in order to then show the “unplumbed depths of the human heart,” as Frank Norris says in “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” (280).

Norris in some ways mocked realism as a movement in itself but, as noted by Eric Carl Link in *The Vast and Terrible Drama*, he also described literary naturalism as “the perfect union of realism and romanticism. It takes the best techniques from literary realism – its fidelity to detail, its accuracy in description – and uses these techniques to do what the romance does...search for deep and hidden truths” (47-8). Although there has been a debate between scholars about the precise place of realism in the tradition of naturalism, there seems to be general agreement that realism is a part of literary naturalism. In other words, naturalist writers try to depict their material in the most realistic way possible, so that readers believe their stories. This is done in different ways. First, characters must be portrayed as realistic, so that the reader believes that they could be real people. One way this is done is to create characters who best represent the overall population, and this is often why ordinary middle- or lower-class people are

the main characters in realistic and naturalistic novels. Another way naturalist writers utilize aspects of realism is by using documentary strategies, such as detailed description, verifiable facts, and real-life events. This chapter will show that King does exactly these things in his works.

### **Realistic Characters and Events**

One of the comments often made – generally in praise – of King’s works is that he makes his characters seem so real that readers feel connected to them. King critic Rocky Wood says, “King’s characters are as multi-dimensional as any in modern fiction. It is this life-like quality that most endears [them to] his readers and builds empathy so strong that it is not unusual to hear that a reader cried over the death of a character, or for their circumstances” (7). One of King’s well-known and most realistic characters is Dolores Claiborne from King’s 1992 novel of the same name. The novel’s plot is that Dolores, a woman in her sixties from Little Tall Island, Maine, is arrested for the murder of her boss, Vera Donovan. Dolores was her housekeeper and caretaker. She denies killing Vera, but she does admit to killing her own husband Joe St. George thirty years earlier. The novel – through Dolores’s point-of-view – recounts that event as well as Vera’s death. The reader learns that Joe, who was an alcoholic, was sexually abusing their adolescent daughter, Selena. After exhausting all her other options, Dolores decides the only way to stop the abuse is to get rid of Joe permanently, and during a solar eclipse she leads him to a deep well, which he falls down and in which he eventually dies. Even though she murders her husband, the reader feels sympathy for Dolores because she is such a realistic character in such a believably traumatic situation. One reason she is so believable is that the story is told from her perspective, in her own words.



King also uses everyday Maine dialect and everyday language to make Dolores seem more real as a character. When she explains why she stayed in the abusive relationship with her husband, King uses dialect especially effectively:

I grew up with the idear that when women and children step off the straight n narrow, it's a man's job to herd them back onto it. I ain't tryin to tell you that just because I grew up with the idear, I thought it was right, though – I won't let myself slip off that easy. I knew that a man usin his hands on a woman didn't have much to do with correction...but I let Joe go on doin it to me for a long time, just the same. I guess I was just too tired from keeping house, cleanin for the summer people, raisin m'family, and tryin to clean up Joe's messes with the neighbors to think much about it. (90)

The dialect makes the reader feel as though Dolores is a real person. As King critic Douglas Winter says, “King’s genius as a prose stylist is his portrayal of these characters in strikingly real, *human* terms” (210). The story she tells in the above passage is also a very real scenario, unfortunately fairly common in America, and it helps the reader understand why Dolores kills her husband. While her action may not be legal, it is still possible to see it as justified and to have sympathy for Dolores because of the harsh situation King places her in and the realistic language she uses.

In addition to making Dolores Claiborne and many others of his characters realistic, King also uses scenes from everyday life that readers can relate to. One of King’s numerous short stories, “The Woman in the Room,” in the *Night Shift* collection published in 1978, is an example of a realistic situation that many people have to face. The story is about a son and his terminally ill mother. The setting is the “Central Maine Hospital, in Lewiston. Room 312. She

went when the pain got so bad she could no longer go out to the kitchen and make her own coffee. At times, when he visited, she cried without knowing it” (313). King’s attention to factual detail in this brief passage creates a feeling of reality, and the situation itself – watching a parent die in a hospital – is something that many people have to experience. King describes additional elements of the hospital scene in a way that many readers will find convincing and familiar:

Above the door of every room there is a small square light. When a patient pushes his call button his light goes on, glowing red. Up and down the hall patients are walking slowly, wearing cheap hospital robes over their hospital underwear. The robes have blue and white pinstripes and round collars....The men always seem to wear brown imitation-leather slippers on their feet. The women favor knitted slippers with balls of yarn on them. (315)

By describing mundane details of the hospital, he is showing realistic hospital life. Most of King’s works have realistic situations in them, which is an element that supports defining him as a naturalistic writer.

In creating realistic characters and settings, King uses extensive detail, as in the example above. In fact, he has sometimes been criticized for being too detailed. For example, King critic Heidi Strengell says of King’s writing style, “King’s stories more often are marred by his obsessions with giving an explanation of every possible detail” (26). Whatever this criticism may say of the quality of King’s work, it supports describing King as a naturalist writer. As naturalist critic Keith Newlin says about documentary strategies in naturalism, “A principal function of documentary description...is to pile up detail to prove the existence, as well as the accuracy, of the subject being depicted” (106). In effect, King’s use of “too much” detail is actually a strategy that has been used by many naturalist writers to create verisimilitude. Next, I will discuss the use

of other documentary strategies that occur in works by naturalists and in works by King to show another connection between him and the literary naturalists.

### **Documentary Strategies**

Newlin discusses the way literary naturalists use documentary description in their writing and, in fact, calls it “probably the hallmark of naturalistic writing” (105). He claims that, “Detailed description is common to both realism and naturalism, and for both genres, description functions as an effort to depict the truth of a scene, to show readers how it was” (105). King uses documentary strategies in several ways.

Literary naturalists such as Dreiser, Norris, and Crane, often use newspapers and their own reporting skills to objectively document the events in their novels, in order to make them more believable and realistic. King does the same. Critic Chris Beyers says,

When naturalist writers seek to document the world “scientifically,” they typically take for granted a notion that the conditions and events they describe can be verified objectively and, for that reason, peruse newspapers and other documents in order to report, truly, things that happened in the world. Their facts can be easily verified. (446)

Literary naturalists would often use newspapers directly to get ideas for their stories. In fact, as many of them were journalists themselves, they would use some of their own journalism as the basis for their short stories and novels. While King’s stories are almost always entirely fictional, he still makes use of newspapers and other objective documents to give the reader another perspective from which to view the action and to provide a greater sense of reality. He does this in quite a few of his works, but I will focus on his novel *Carrie* to illustrate how he uses objective, including reportorial, strategies to make his fiction more realistic.

*Carrie*, published in 1974, is about Carrie White, an adolescent female who has been raised by an ultra-religious mother, Margaret. From a young age, Carrie has had the power to move things with her mind, an ability known as telekinesis. However, she is an outcast in her school and is considered ugly by most of her classmates. She doesn't have any friends, and she is often picked on by her peers. The opening scenes of the novel show this. Carrie and her classmates are in the locker room showering after gym class when Carrie gets her first period, which is clearly a naturalistic biological detail. Having been raised by her extremely religious mother, she has no idea what is happening and thinks she is bleeding to death. However, rather than help her, the girls begin pelting her with tampons and chanting at her to "Plug it up" (6). Understandably, Carrie becomes very upset by this, and one of her classmates, Susan Snell, feels guilty about it afterward. To make up for it, she asks her popular boyfriend, Tommy, to invite Carrie to the prom, and she hesitantly accepts.

At the prom Carrie looks beautiful, and she and Tommy are actually crowned prom queen and king. However, another classmate, Chris Hargensen, blames Carrie for not being able to go to the prom herself (the punishment for the locker room incident was that the girls who participated were prohibited from attending prom), and so she and her boyfriend Billy, exhibiting an extreme version of adolescent rage and vengeance, collect two pails of pigs' blood, which they dump on Carrie and Tommy as they are announced king and queen. Standing on the stage covered in blood, Carrie loses all control over her telekinetic ability and ends up destroying the school and half the town of Chamberlain, Maine, killing many people. This is her version of adolescent rage and vengeance, magnified tenfold because of her ability. Carrie also dies at the end of the novel. While most of the novel is told from a third-person narrative perspective, King

uses some of the naturalists' documentary strategies as well, to ground the story in a more realistic narrative mode and to provide more objectivity related to the events that unfold.

King intersperses fictionalized newspaper accounts, as well as excerpts from scientific studies and government reports throughout the narration, to help tell the story as well as to make it more like an everyday event. He actually opens the novel with such an account to set up the plot. The book begins, "News item from the Westover (Me.) weekly Enterprise, August 19, 1966: Rain of Stones Reported" (3). This headline is followed by a brief article that explains that stones fell from the sky and damaged the home three-year-old Carrie and her mother shared. Using this article to begin the novel serves two purposes: first, it implies to the reader that this story is true, since it is in a newspaper, the place where people get objective facts. Second, it very quickly establishes that something is not quite right in the White household and that it is something that has been going on since Carrie was at least three-years-old. It is something in her genetic heritage and is part of her evolutionary destiny – both naturalistic themes. It also foreshadows the deadly events that happen at the end of the novel. In this particular novel, newspaper accounts are also a way to conclude the story and explain to readers exactly what happened, since many of the main characters are dead at the end of the novel. The final excerpt from the "AP ticker," dated Friday, June 5, 1979, is:

State officials say that the death toll in Chamberlain stands at 409, with 49 still listed as missing. Investigation concerning Carietta White and the so-called 'TK' phenomena continues amid persistent rumors that an autopsy on the girl has uncovered certain unusual formations in the cerebrum and cerebellum of the brain. This state's governor has appointed a blue-ribbon committee to study the entire tragedy. (238)

The above example tells the reader, objectively, what the ultimate loss of life was after Carrie's meltdown and also tells the reader that Carrie's brain has been examined and the "telekinesis phenomena" will be investigated. Using biology to explain human behavior, including tragic entrapment in misery, adds a naturalistic touch to this investigation. This grounds the readers in a sense of reality from which, following Carrie's destructive rampage, they may have felt disconnected.

In this novel King also uses transcripts from government interviews to add to the realism of the novel. The state committee is set up to investigate the events in Chamberlain and Carrie's telekinesis, and King uses fictional transcripts from interviews rather than just summarizing them, which makes it seem more objective and thus, more based in reality. King even creates a book called *Black Prom: The White Commission Report* that includes the testimonies from all who were interviewed during the investigation (177). By creating this imaginary book (which includes a publisher and publication year), King adds a sense of objectivity, a sense that the facts in the novel can be verified. This is an interesting use of naturalist documentary strategy and works quite well to keep his readers grounded in the reality of the story.

*Carrie* is not the only work of King's that utilizes this type of narrative, documentary strategy. It is also used in his novella, "Rage," and his novel *Cujo*, among others. Using this strategy allows King to provide the illusion of a more objective view of the events of the fiction, and since newspapers are generally believed to present facts, it makes the stories appear more realistic.

Another common strategy among naturalists is to use real-life events and fictionalize them into novel form. Newlin says:

Writers are often inspired by real events; naturalists are particularly drawn to headlines and sensational news stories and illustrations for the plots and themes of their fictions, which brings us to a third type of documentation: the naturalists' tendency to base their fiction on actual events. (109)

This can be seen in Norris's *McTeague*, published in 1899, which was based on an actual murder in the San Francisco area. The headlines about the murder in the *San Francisco Examiner* read, "Twenty-nine Fatal Wounds"; "Sarah Collins Slaughtered by Her Husband Because She Would Not Give Him Money"; "He Followed Her to Work at a Kindergarten and Fulfilled his Oft-Made Threat"; "Arrested While at Prayer" (Norris, "An Opening" 249). This is almost identical to how and why McTeague kills his wife Trina in the novel, although the fictional character was not arrested; rather, his fate was to be handcuffed to the dead Marcus Schouler, who also wanted a share of the lottery winnings McTeague took after he killed Trina. This is an example of an early literary naturalist using real stories with sensational headlines and turning them into fictional works.

As a later writer in the naturalist tradition, King utilizes this type of documentation from the headlines in his novella "A Good Marriage," a method which he discusses in the "Afterword" in *Full Dark, No Stars*, the anthology in which the novella is published. King uses free indirect speech, which is a type of narrative strategy that he uses often in his work. The point-of-view is the third person, but through free indirect speech, the third-person narrator provides the reader with the thoughts and feelings of one of the characters; in this case, it is Darcy, who has been married to her husband Bob for twenty-seven years before she accidentally discovers a box in the garage that contains a horrendous secret. Completely without her knowledge, Bob has killed a total of 11 people over two decades, some before and some after they were married. King wrote

“A Good Marriage” loosely based on real-life serial killer Dennis Rader (also known as BTK for Bind-Torture-Kill), whose wife of thirty-plus years claimed to have no knowledge of his crimes.

In the “Afterword,” King says,

Paula Rader was married to this monster for thirty-four years, and many in the Wichita area, where Rader claimed his victims, refuse to believe that she could live with him and not know what he was doing. I did believe – I *do* believe – and I wrote this story to explore what might happen in such a case if the wife suddenly found out about her husband’s awful hobby. (368)

This is similar to the technique of contemporary author Joyce Carol Oates, who, in her story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” “drew upon many of the particulars in a *Life* magazine article about an Arizona serial killer...including some of the most memorable details of her story – the cowboy boots stuffed with cans and rags, the killer who used makeup to appear younger” (Newlin, “The Documentary” 113). While King’s story is clearly fictional, there are some intentional similarities between “A Good Marriage” and the BTK real-life story, and this is another example of King using naturalistic documentary strategies in his work.



### CHAPTER THREE. DETERMINISM, FREE WILL, AND KING

One of the most prevalent theories associated with literary naturalism is determinism, or the idea that humans are directed by forces over which they have no control. As defined in *A Handbook to Literature*, the types of determinism found in naturalism are

a response to the revolution in thought that science has produced. From Newton it gains a sense of mechanistic determinism; from Darwin (the greatest single force operative on it) it gains a sense of biological determinism and the inclusive metaphor of competitive jungle that it has used perhaps more often than any other; from Marx it gains a view of history as a battleground of economic and social forces; from Freud it gains a view of the determinism of the inner and subconscious self. (“Naturalism” 338)

Certainly the early naturalists focused mostly on biological determinism, and Darwin’s ideas are still used by contemporary naturalists such as Joyce Carol Oates. Stephen King also relies heavily on biological determinism and Darwin’s ideas, especially in the novella “The Body” and the novels *Firestarter* and *The Shining*. Closely related to biological determinism is environmental determinism. To early literary naturalists, heredity and environment were the two main factors that determined human behavior. The boom in capitalism, the Industrial Revolution, and the influence of Marx’s economic theories were also occurring at the same time the early American literary naturalists were writing. Cities grew rapidly because immigration increased rapidly, and people began moving from the country into the city because that’s where most of the jobs were. This population boom created many slum areas in cities, and many of the early naturalists, especially Jack London and Frank Norris, documented these living conditions in their writing. Various institutions became more influential and powerful as well, and these institutions and

economic factors created social determinism. Another type of determinism is mechanistic determinism, or the idea that machines are determining forces in people's lives. In more contemporary terms, this could be referred to as technological determinism, which King utilizes in many of his works, including his novel *Cell* and his short story "Trucks." All of these types of determinism can be found in early American literary naturalism, and they can also be found in many of King's works. This chapter will discuss these types of determinism, how they have been used in American literary naturalism, and how King uses them in his horror fiction. But first, it is important to address a seeming paradox that has in some cases plagued literary naturalism, which is the simultaneous acceptance of the opposing ideas of determinism and free will.

### **Determinism and Free Will**

A question that often arises in discussions about literary naturalism is the role of free will in very determined environments. For example, if humans are determined by biology, environment, social forces, and technological forces, how can they possibly be assumed to have any type of free will to make their own choices? This question has been debated by naturalist critics since the beginning of the naturalist movement, and in general the consensus seems to be that while humans are determined to a large extent by their environment, within that environment they still have choices, although the choices may be very limited. Critic James Giles uses early naturalist Stephen Crane's novel *Maggie* as an example of free choice existing within the determined. The title character, Maggie, who is a lower class girl, becomes a prostitute, and she is portrayed as having very little choice because of the outside forces exerting control on her life. Giles explains:

Maggie's decision to become a prostitute and indeed her entire characterization are classic examples of what John J. Conder has described as the Hobbesian

paradox faced by most characters in naturalistic fiction. Conder reconciles the dual existence of determinism and free will in naturalism in the context of Thomas Hobbes's argument that man is free in only those ways in which his actions are not naturally proscribed. (26)

Although Maggie is determined to a great degree by outside forces, within her determined environment she still has a choice; she does not have to become a prostitute. She worked in a shirt factory earlier in her life; perhaps she could find factory work again. A similar idea is described by Eric Carl Link, who defines any writer who embraces the idea of limited choice within a determined environment as a soft determinist. Link says, "Humans are still seen as confined to a universe governed by causal relationships, but the soft determinist allows for moral responsibility and, potentially, degrees of free will within this deterministic framework" (*The Vast* 111). This tension between determinism and free will can be seen in writers who are considered contemporary naturalists as well. Joyce Carol Oates, for example, shows this tension in one of her short stories, "Me & Wolfie, 1979," which is about a mother (referred to as Me) and child. The mother has mental problems, and Wolfie, as the narrator, refers to the idea of genetic determinism and free will when describing Me's moods. He says,

Me was susceptible to *bruise-moods* when pondering how we're essentially determined by our genes, locked into patterns of behavior as rigid as ants, if you had the perspective to judge, yet Me could be lifted suddenly into *100-watt-moods* by a vista of beautiful mountains, cloud-formations, rolling hills, farmland & dairy cows & horses grazing in fields, & the realization that mankind is essentially free, there's free will for all, since we can't foresee the future & strictly speaking there is no future until we make it. (57)

The character Me at times seems to feel that she has no control over her future because it has already been determined by her genes. However, at other times she feels she does have the freedom to make her own decisions. This is a good example of a contemporary naturalist utilizing Link's concept of soft determinism in a naturalistic work. Me could be viewed as a reflection of how Oates views the paradox between free will and determinism. King also shows this tension in his works. Indeed, relating specifically to King, critic Tony Magistrale echoes Link's idea, saying:

Individuals in his fiction who succumb to the temptations of evil usually do so of their own volition. But King also acknowledges the existence of outside forces – particularly a malefic fate – that often bears some responsibility for the victimization of an individual. (*The Moral* 14)

This chapter will show not only how King's characters are determined in various ways, thus showing King's tendency as a naturalist writer, but also how they have at least a degree of free will to ultimately make their own decisions.

### **Darwin, Biological and Environmental Determinism, and King**

As stated previously, Darwin's theory of evolution was a major influence on early American literary naturalists, and it led to the idea of biological determinism. Louis Budd, tracing the origins of literary naturalism, says the early literary naturalists "recognized that science had cornered Homo sapiens by tracing his animal heritage and chemical mechanisms" (42). In other words, humans were perhaps not special, but were, in fact, genetically and biologically determined by not only their parents and their genes but by the animals from whom their ancestors had evolved. In early American literary naturalism, this can be seen in distinct ways. First, literary naturalists often compared humans to brutes, animals, insects, or rodents.

Literary naturalist Theodore Dreiser was one early writer who did this, as critic Blanche Gelfant points out in her article about his 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*: “Determinism evoked Dreiser’s famous comparison of human beings to insects and animals, all subject to ineluctable drives that characters experience as desire” (179). This is also a common theme found throughout Norris’s novel *McTeague*, especially as McTeague seems to devolve. He is often referred to as a brute, and toward the end of the novel, when he is fleeing his crime of murdering his wife, he seems to revert to animal instinct for survival. His higher state of consciousness disappears. Norris writes, “What! It was warning him again, that strange sixth sense, that obscure brute instinct. It was aroused again and clamoring to be obeyed” (226). The reference to the “brute instinct” is just one of many examples of McTeague’s devolution to an animal or brutish state.

King uses this comparison of humans to animals in one of his most deterministic novels, *The Shining*. Published in 1977, *The Shining* is the story of the Torrance family – father Jack, mother Wendy, and five-year-old son Danny – who move into The Overlook Hotel in Colorado so that Jack can be the caretaker through the winter, when the hotel is closed. The hotel becomes the symbolic universe within which the controlled humans are contained. The Overlook, as the hotel is known, begins to exert a control over Jack specifically but tries to control the entire family. As the novel progresses, the hotel seems to take on more conscious characteristics and becomes overtly hostile to the Torrance family, specifically Wendy and Danny. King depicts this idea by comparing the family to insects and animals. King diminishes the power of the family when the narrator says, “Inside its shell the three of them went about their early evening routine, like microbes trapped in the intestine of a monster” (211). The Torrance family is not just reduced to insects, but bacteria – in King’s view, even lower on the evolutionary ladder than insects. King also illustrates the idea of devolution in terms of the animal when he refers to

Jack's decline. In some ways it can be paralleled to McTeague's descent from human to brute. King's narrator describes Jack's devolution when he says he goes "from college educated man to wailing ape in five seconds" (110). He also refers to Jack's temper as "a vicious animal on a frayed leash" (37). These are references to Darwin, whose theory posits that humans and apes – which have many similar characteristics – evolved from the same ancestors. It foreshadows Jack's decline, and shows a commonality between King and literary naturalism, specifically its Darwinism.

Another aspect of literary naturalism closely related to science and Darwin is biological or genetic determinism. This means that humans are determined by their heredity; parents pass on their genes to their children, and children display specific characteristics based on their genes. This can be seen in a variety of characters in King's works, but perhaps one of the most genetically determined characters is Charlie McGee in the novel *Firestarter*. This novel, published in 1980, is about a father and daughter who both have supernatural abilities. Andy McGee, the father, participates in a psychological experiment in college that requires him to take a hallucinogenic drug known as Lot Six. The participants are never informed about the purpose or possible future effects of the experiment; in fact, they are given very little information about anything relating to the experiment. In general, the drug produces a variety of abilities in the participants of the experiment, including "telekinesis, thought transference, and maybe the most interesting manifestation of all...mental domination" (86-7). Andy's future wife, Vicky, also participates in the study, and it is how they meet. The drug does cause long-lasting effects on both Andy and Vicky, who develop unusual abilities. Vicky has the power to move things with her mind, and Andy has the power to "push" people, which he refers to as "autohypnosis" (79). Basically, if he concentrates, he can get people to do what he wants. However, neither of them

has unlimited power; when Andy “pushes” people, he feels physically ill, sometimes for days after.

Most of the episodes that explain the background of the story are given in flashbacks; by the time the novel actually starts, Vicky has been killed by a secret government agency known as The Shop, from which Andy and their seven-year-old daughter Charlie are on the run. The government agents have discovered that Andy and Charlie have special abilities and want them in their control. Charlie’s ability is that she can start fires with her mind. This also seems to be an effect of the Lot Six drug. Andy’s friend Quincey explains, hypothetically, what could have caused Charlie’s unusual ability, and the source is Andy and Vicky:

“So this drug was given to them and maybe it changed their chromosomes a little bit. Or a lot. Or who knows. And maybe two of them got married and decided to have a baby and maybe the baby got something more than her eyes and his mouth.” (79)

Quincey explains it as a hypothetical scenario, but it is the most plausible explanation, and no other explanation is given. While Charlie’s ability to start fires is considered supernatural, it is directly linked to her heredity so that in a sense the story’s supernaturalism is simply an extension of naturalism. If the Lot Six drug hadn’t altered Vicky and Andy’s chromosomes, then the genes that would have been passed to Charlie would have been normal, and she would not have the supernatural ability that she has. The novel relies on the idea of biological determinism for its basic plotline. As King critic Heidi Strengell says, “inherited supernatural abilities and defects determine an individual character’s life to a considerably greater degree than normal genes and normal childhood” (208). This is certainly true in Charlie’s situation; her inherited supernatural abilities impact and determine every aspect of her life and make her, even as a child,

a target of the government. This futuristic and somewhat paranoid use of biological determinism expands on naturalism and is another way King can be seen as a literary naturalist.

As mentioned previously, biological determinism is often paired with environmental determinism as the two forces that strongly influence characters' lives, especially in early literary naturalism. While biological determinism focuses on genes and inherited traits, environmental determinism is the impact that the type of environment in which one lives has on one's life. As far as children go, it is the "nurture" aspect of the nature versus nurture conversation. Both genetic and environmental determinism can be seen in King's early novella "The Body," published in 1982 in *Different Seasons*. The novella is a coming-of-age story about four twelve-year-old boys: Gordie Lachance, Chris Chambers, Vern Tessio, and Teddy Duchamp. Vern overhears his older brother talking about a dead body in the woods in Chamberlain, Maine, a few hours away from their hometown of Castle Rock. The boys decide to try and find the body themselves, and the story recounts their journey through the woods and how, through this journey, they essentially grow up. The novella is written in first-person point-of-view, and the narrator is the main character, Gordie, although he is looking back at the experience as an adult. By employing this narrative strategy, King can explore the idea of biological and environmental determinism, and while all the characters are influenced to some extent by these forces, the character of Chris Chambers, who is Gordie's best friend, is the best example of both types of determinism in the story.

The males in Chris's family, including his father and older brothers, are serious alcoholics, and Chris admits to Gordie once that he is afraid to drink. As Gordie says, Chris thinks about his own future and relationship with alcohol often:



What, he asked me, did I think his chances of letting go of the bottle would be once he picked it up? May be you think that's funny, a twelve-year-old worrying that he might be an incipient alcoholic, but it wasn't funny to Chris. Not at all.

He'd thought about the possibility a lot. (325)

In this passage, King implies that if Chris does take a drink, his subsequent future will be determined based on his family history – in other words, by heredity – and he too will become an alcoholic. However, Chris does have the choice not to take a drink and avoid the same future as his father, so he is not completely determined by his biology. This passage illustrates one of the tensions in literary naturalism between determinism and free will. It is an example of Giles's "Hobbesian paradox." Chris has a degree of free will; he can choose whether or not to start drinking alcohol. However, if he does choose to take a drink, King implies that his future will be the same as his father's and brothers'.

Another type of determinism King uses in this novella is environmental. This type of determinism is often present in the lives of his child characters, as they are the characters with the least amount of freedom; they are generally dependent on their families for survival. In "The Body," Chris's father abuses him regularly, hurting him badly enough to send him to the hospital on several occasions. His older brothers are also often in trouble with the law, and Chris's family's reputation reflects directly on Chris. Gordie tells the story about Chris getting suspended from school for stealing the class milk money, simply "because he was a Chambers from those no-account Chamberses...even though he always swore he never hawked that money" (303). Following that incident his father beat him so badly he wound up in the hospital: "he broke Chris's nose and his right wrist" (303). Gordie says, "Chris came from a bad family, all right, and everybody thought he would turn out bad...including Chris. His brothers had lived up to the

town's expectations admirably" (303). Because of Chris's home environment and the violence in his family, it seems as though his options are limited. Everyone, including him, expects him to turn out like his father and brothers. Coupled with his genetic proclivity to alcoholism, his future seems quite bleak.

Chris, however, makes a serious effort to escape his genetically and environmentally determined future. In high school, he and Gordie enroll in college courses, which is not odd for Gordie, who is from a more middle-class family, but Chris's reputation and economic status has already been well-established as unlikely to include academic success. His environment continues to try to determine his future. Gordie says about Chris in high school, "He almost quit a dozen times that year. His father in particular hounded him, accusing Chris of thinking he was better than his old man, accusing Chris of wanting 'to go up there to the college so you can turn me into a bankrupt'" (430). Chris graduates from high school, goes to college, and seems to be one of the few characters who is able to choose his future and not be determined by biological and environmental forces. However, in his early 20s, all this becomes moot when Chris is stabbed by a complete stranger in a Chicken Delight restaurant and dies. As Gordie describes it:

Just ahead of him, two men started arguing about which one had been first in line. One of them pulled a knife. Chris, who had always been the best of us at making peace, stepped between them and was stabbed in the throat. The man with the knife had spent time in four different institutions; he had been released from Shawshank State Prison only the week before. (431-32)

This event suggests that even though Chris seems to escape being determined by biological and environmental forces, there are other forces, including random chance, that also determine characters' lives, which is a central tenet of literary naturalism.

In certain respects, *The Shining* and “The Body” are alike. *The Shining* uses biological and environmental determinism to establish some of the reasons for Jack’s increasingly violent and aggressive behavior. As King critic Magistrale says, “Throughout the novel King carefully establishes parallels between Jack and his father: their common problem with alcohol, their tendencies toward violence, their abrupt tempers, and their shared love/hate relationships with their respective families” (*The Moral* 15). Both Jack and his father are alcoholics, and alcoholism is a genetic disease, passed from generation to generation. The narrator, from Jack’s point of view, says, “He was *still* an alcoholic, always would be, perhaps had been since Sophomore Class Night in high school when he had taken his first drink” (109). This is similar to the situation in “The Body,” when Chris is scared to take one drink because he doesn’t want to become an alcoholic. The difference is that in *The Shining*, Jack does take that first drink, and from then on, he is an alcoholic. The narrator continues, saying “It had nothing to do with willpower, or the morality of drinking, or the weakness or strength of his own character. There was a broken switch somewhere inside, or a circuit breaker that didn’t work” (109). In other words, the narrator of *The Shining* makes the reader believe that Jack didn’t have any choice in being an alcoholic; it was determined for him by biology. Here again is the Hobbesian paradox: Jack has the choice to take or not to take his first drink, but unlike Chris Chambers, Jack chooses to drink and from then on his future as an alcoholic is determined.

Jack is also determined by his environment, and like Chris Chambers, he experiences the environmental influence in the form of violence. Jack was abused by his father as a child, and when he thinks about his childhood, he illustrates how, in his life, violence begets more violence. The narrator says about Jack’s temper:

All his life he had been trying unsuccessfully to control it [his temper]. He could remember himself at seven, spanked by a neighbor lady for playing with matches. He had gone out and hurled a rock at a passing car. His father had seen that, and he had descended on little Jacky, roaring. He had reddened Jack's behind... and then blacked his eye. And when his father had gone into the house... Jack had come upon a stray dog and had kicked it into the gutter. (109)

Jack has been trying "all his life" to control his temper, which suggests that his tendency toward violence is something that is at least partly determined by his environment and partly determined by heredity, as his father was also violent. In other words, the likelihood of his future as a violent person has already been determined, and he has very limited control over it. Ironically, violence is one of the ways that Jack expresses his frustration with other aspects of his life that he feels he cannot control. Jack, in essence, becomes his father as an adult, and violence determines his environment as well. In a drunken rage, Jack breaks his young son Danny's arm, which is one of the reasons the Torrances decide to move to Colorado in the first place, to start over. The way the narrator describes the incident, again through Jack's point of view, makes it seem as though he had no control over his actions. As Wendy cares for Danny and his broken arm immediately after the incident, "Jack was standing there, stunned and stupid, trying to understand how a thing like this could have happened" (18). The way King phrases this description of Jack's thoughts shows his use of determinism. Jack's bewilderment suggests that Jack, from his own point of view, had no control but instead that the forces of heredity and environment, specifically the family history of violence, determined his behavior.

These are just a few examples of King's use of Darwinian ideas, biological and environmental determinism, and the psychology of violence in his works that connect him

directly to the tradition of literary naturalism. In the next section I will discuss social determinism in King's works and how institutions ranging from the family, to schools and government determine the lives of his characters and how this relates to the early ideas of literary naturalism.

### **Social Determinism**

According to naturalist critic June Howard, one of the purposes of literary naturalism is critiquing and trying to reshape society. She says, "the fact that a novel confronts social problems is one of the most important markers readers react to when they identify it as naturalist.

Exercising will means not simply acting for oneself but shaping society to considered ends"

(116). "Society" in this case often means various institutions: the family, school, church, and

culture itself. One of the ways King critiques society in his novels is through horror as allegory,

but he also uses ideas of social determinism to explain characters' actions and suggest the need

for social change. As Magistrale says:

Nearly every institution that appears in his canon – high school, organized religion, corporations, the government (on all levels of operation), the small-town community, the workplace, and even many marriages and the nuclear family itself – typically operates as a prison without walls. There are precious few instances where King treats any of these cultural and societal institutions favorably.

*(Stephen 53-4)*

These "prisons" trap King's characters, who are determined by social forces. One example of this implied social critique is the novel *Carrie*, in which King criticizes high school, organized religion, and the nuclear family as negative determining forces in Carrie White's young life.

Carrie is victimized by both her mother and her classmates at school, and it is the torture by her classmates that finally leads to Carrie's unleashing of destruction on the town of Chamberlain,

Maine. However, according to Jonathan P. Davis, the destruction is not entirely Carrie's fault. He says:

Carrie is metamorphasized into a monster by the society that tried to repress her. But all the while, the reader never truly views Carrie as an atrocity; on the contrary, she demands the reader's sympathy. She does not willfully conduct evil against others but rather is forced to lash back at those who try consistently to eradicate the one thing that has any significant meaning in Carrie's adolescence: her self-worth. (145)

Some examples of the torture her classmates put on her include taunting her and throwing tampons in the girls' locker room when she gets her first period and doesn't understand what's happening to her; being made fun of since she was a young child because of her uber-religious upbringing; and, the final insult: being doused with pigs' blood after she is crowned queen at the prom. When the majority of her classmates begin to laugh at her at the prom, she finally snaps, but the reader can see the justification in her actions. King's narrator documents the taunts and torture she has endured throughout the years early in the novel, when Carrie gets her first period and starts "to howl and back away, flailing her arms and grunting and gobbling" (8). The narrator says:

The girls stopped, realizing that fission explosion had finally been reached....Yet there had been all these years, all these years of let's short-sheet Carrie's bed at Christian Youth Camp and I found this love letter from Carrie to Flash Bobby Pickett let's copy it and pass it around and hide her underpants somewhere and put this snake in her shoe and duck her *again*, duck her *again*; Carrie tagging

along stubbornly on biking trips, known one year as pudd'n and the next year as truck-face, always smelling sweaty, not able to catch up...(8)

She is “forced to lash back,” as if she has no free will. She is also subjected to determining forces by two other powerful social institutions: the family and religion. It is the combination of all of these forces that determines Carrie’s actions and ends in the tragedy of the novel. Howard’s description of the social institution of the family in the early naturalist works *McTeague* and *Maggie* could also be applied to Carrie’s mother, Margaret. Howard says, “In the degraded world of *McTeague* and *Maggie* the family is no safe enclave in which humanity, affection, and virtue can assert themselves; instead, brutality, passion, and indifferent causality predominate” (180). As in the worlds of the early naturalists, Carrie’s mother abuses her, mostly through religion. She locks Carrie in the closet to discipline her and ends up stabbing her daughter at the end of the novel. Margaret White believes in a vengeful god, not a loving god, and this view of religion influences how she treats Carrie. Margaret has no love or compassion for her daughter. As Lois Gresh and Robert Weinberg explain:

Rather than listening to rock-and-roll music, Carrie hears her mother wailing and shrieking about religion and sin and how horrible it is to be inherently, innately female. To be born female is an unforgivable sin. Any form of sexual expression, even simply having the body parts, is enough to condemn a young girl to hell forever. (8)

These examples show King’s use of social determinism as well as his critiquing of the institutions of determinism. The combination of deterministic forces ultimately leads to Carrie’s destruction, as well as the destruction of most of Chamberlain, and the coming of the tragedy is

portrayed as out of Carrie's control; she has been determined by social forces for so long that she has no choice but to yield to the violence they inspire.

Another of King's works that critiques a social institution, the government, is the novel *The Long Walk*, written under King's pseudonym Richard Bachman and published in 1979. The basic premise of the novel is that each year the government hosts an event called the Long Walk, a competition that boys across the country apply to participate in and for which 100 are chosen. The competition starts at the northern east coast, in Maine, and doesn't end until there is only one walker left. The Walk, run by the Major, a powerful government figure, has many rules. There is no rest, and the boys cannot walk slower than four mile per hour. If they do, they are given a warning. Once they have three warnings, they are shot by the military that follows and closely monitors the boys. The Long Walk is a type of evolutionary competition: a Darwinian survival of the fittest. The protagonist of the novel is Ray Garraty, who ends up winning the Walk. His mother recognizes the governmentally-concealed reality of the Walk and does not want him to participate but realizes she is too late to stop her son, "to halt her son's madness in its seedling stage – to halt it before the cumbersome machinery of the State with its guards in khaki and its computer terminals had taken over, binding himself more tightly to its insensate self with each passing day" (180-81). By being selected for the Walk, Ray is one of the 100 boys who give up their free will to the state. They must follow the government's rules of the Walk, or they will die. The realization doesn't come to the boys until the first boy is shot because he is walking too slowly and has already received his warnings:

The soldiers on the back of the slow-moving halftrack raised their guns. The crowd gasped, as if they hadn't known this was the way it was, and the Walkers gasped, as if they hadn't known, and Garraty gasped with them, but of course he



had known, of course they had all known, it was very simple, Curley was going to get his ticket. (199)

The fact that “his ticket” means being shot to death shows the government’s power at its most extreme. This form of social determinism is also prevalent in other King novels; *The Running Man* and *Firestarter* are two examples. To King, the government is another type of institution that socially determines people’s futures and takes away their free will. Government also plays a role in some aspects of the final type of determinism I will discuss, which is technological determinism.

### **Technological Determinism**

The final type of determining force that King utilizes often is technological determinism, which is when technological advances become forces that determine people’s lives. This can be seen in King’s novel *Cell*, which was published in 2006. The basic premise of the novel is that at 3:03 p.m. on October 1, anyone who answered a cell phone was immediately reduced to the primitive state. People began to act like animals, killing anyone who was in their way and becoming, in effect, living zombies. The characters who did not have cell phones at the time of what became known as “the Pulse” (3) stayed sane, while those who answered their cell phones at the time of the Pulse instantly went crazy. One of the characters in the novel who did not have a cell phone and so was unaffected by the Pulse speculated on what caused it: “At about three o’clock this afternoon, a terrorist organization, maybe even a tinpot government, generated some sort of signal or pulse” (109). The people who answered their cell phones had no choice once that happened; they were automatically turned into animals. Essentially, the Pulse was explained as having erased the higher functioning brain cells of the humans who were affected by it. While they had free will to the extent of not answering or not having a cell phone, once they chose to

answer their cell phone, their free will was eliminated. It is a kind of technological determinism that shows how naturalism in its contemporary form has themes similar, but not always identical, to those of traditional naturalism. King uses the developments of the moment to exercise his naturalism, particularly naturalism's power to critique existing problems. In this specific case, the naturalist tradition has evolved beyond genetic determinism to technological determinism. Both deterministic forces are grounded in science, but different kinds of science. As Magistrale says about King's view of technology:

Man is viewed as having created a technology that has gone beyond the realm of his control, and King addresses what happens when that technology betrays its creator. He suggests...that technology will eventually turn on the human world, enslaving it and reducing society to a primitive, dark age. (*The Moral* 33)

In traditional naturalistic terms, humans clearly have the ability to choose whether or not to create the technologies that are potentially destructive but once they have been created, King suggests that humans have very little, if any, control over the results.

This idea of technologically "enslaving" society can be seen in King's short story, "Trucks," which was originally published in 1973. The story is narrated in the first person, but the reader never learns the identity of the narrator. The story is set in a truck stop, and several people are inside the diner. The narrator recounts several stories about car and truck accidents that have occurred since he's been in the diner before letting the reader know why the accidents that were occurring were unusual: "There was no one in the trucks" (129). How the trucks come to life and are able to control themselves is not made clear; the narrator doesn't know, so the reader doesn't know either. The general consensus among the people in the truck stop is some sort of technology-gone-bad. One of the truckers says, "What would do it? Electrical storms in

the atmosphere? Nuclear testing? What?” (130). The narrator responds by saying, “Maybe they’re mad” (130). While the reason isn’t clearly stated, the result is that the trucks start communicating through Morse code with the people in the truck stop. Trucks begin to line up at the gas pumps so that they can be filled with gas, and the humans have to do it. A bulldozer is ready to raze the diner and kill all the people inside if they don’t obey the trucks’ orders. The narrator goes out to pump gas and describes the experience:

Trucks marched by endlessly. I was beginning to understand now. I was beginning to see. People were doing this all over the country or they were lying dead like the trucker, knocked out of their boots with heavy treadmarks mashed across their guts. (140)

In other words, the trucks, products of human technology, now determine the humans’ future. They either obey the trucks or die. This is a very deterministic story, with little free will offered to the characters. It is a pessimistic story as well, which shows King’s distrust of technology and fear that technology can become more powerful than humankind. This technological determinism is the most contemporary found in King and expands the tradition of literary naturalism. Showing King’s use of genetic, environmental, social, and technological determinisms demonstrates King as a literary naturalist. The next chapter will discuss King’s use of horror and the supernatural and how that can be reconciled with literary naturalism and one of its basic tenets, realism.

## CHAPTER FOUR. KING'S HORROR AND LITERARY NATURALISM

One important idea not yet discussed is how King's horror – what he is best known for – can be compatible with the tradition of literary naturalism. On first glance, especially with the emphasis on realism in naturalism, it seems that King's horror would be incompatible with naturalism. However, there are some early naturalists, such as Frank Norris and Jack London, as well as many critics, who describe aspects of literary naturalism in a way that suggests horror could be compatible with the tradition. For example, in the essay "Zola as a Romantic Writer," Norris describes characteristics of naturalism that might be ascribed just as easily to horror fiction, which illustrates this potential connection. He says, "Everything is extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even, with a vague note of terror quivering throughout like the vibration of an ominous and low-pitched diapason" (274). These words "extraordinary," "grotesque," and "terror," could be applied to many of King's stories and suggest that King's version of horror literature may be seen as a logical modern extrapolation of traditional naturalism. While some naturalist writers and critics view the forces of determinism as originating from scientific and social factors, there is another type of determinism that is often associated with the writer Thomas Hardy. Hardy, at times, viewed the forces of the world as not merely indifferent, but often hostile to human life. In fact, naturalist critic Richard Lehan "observes a 'cosmic' force at work against Hardy's characters – a force in excess of more plausible (environmental or hereditary) forms of naturalist determinism....However, Hardy not only fits the naturalist mold but illuminates the critical features of the genre" (Meadowsong 29). Hardy's type of vaguely personified cosmic determinism is something that horror writers such as H.P Lovecraft have utilized to terrify their readers, and it seems to be a barely liminal or more often subliminal aspect

of literary naturalism in its traditional form as well. Lehan uses Stephen Crane's story "The Open Boat" as an example of an actively hostile, rather than indifferent, universe:

Crane depicts men in confrontation with the forces of nature. These forces are indifferent to the suffering of the men who humanize the force, seeing it first as indifferent and later as hostile. On final analysis there are two forces at work – human and nature, agent and state of mind, with man's state of mind intensifying the workings of nature as well as the vulnerability of the human condition. ("The Response" 47)

The men in Crane's story begin to view nature as personally out to get them, and King does this as well. Through King's novels *Cujo* and *The Shining*, I will show how horror can be compatible with naturalism, considering Hardy's view of the hostile forces of nature and how they present themselves in King's works.

Norris writes, "Terrible things must happen to the characters of a naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death" ("Zola" 274). The circumstances of characters being "twisted from the ordinary" is found often in King's work, and the novel *Cujo*, published in 1981, is an example of ordinary people being confronted with extraordinary circumstances that manifest themselves finally as the people being subjected to hostile forces.

The novel is about the title character, Cujo, a St. Bernard, who is bitten by a bat and becomes infected with rabies. Cujo belongs to the Cambers family, a lower-class family consisting of father Joe, mother Charity, and ten-year-old son Brett. The father is a mechanic who doesn't have a steady job, but will fix people's cars or other machines if they need it. The

other family featured in the novel is the Trentons, a middle-class family consisting of father Vic, mother Donna, and four-year-old son Tad. Vic runs an advertising agency, and to try and save a major campaign, he must leave the town of Castle Rock. Before he leaves, however, he finds out that his wife, Donna, has been having an affair, which puts a huge strain on their marriage. At the same time Vic is out of town, Charity and Brett Camber decide to go visit Charity's sister in another city, and Joe, who is an alcoholic, goes to drink at a buddy's house while they are gone. The Cambers don't know that their family pet is now rabid, and Cujo is left alone at the house. While Vic is gone, Donna's car starts breaking down, and on recommendation from some locals (the Trentons are fairly new arrivals in town), she drives Tad and herself out to see Joe Camber, not knowing that the entire family is away. She and Tad are welcomed instead by Cujo, the rabid St. Bernard, and they end up trapped in their car, held hostage by Cujo. Through a variety of unfortunate circumstances and coincidences, Donna is unable to start her car so she can leave the Cambers' house. Running out of food and water, Donna considers her situation. King portrays her thoughts through free indirect speech, a form of narrative often used by naturalists, in which the author uses third person narrative but still provides the thoughts of the characters. King writes about Donna,

Munching the last two or three cucumber slices, she realized it was the coincidences that scared her the most. That series of coincidences, utterly random but mimicking a kind of sentient fate, had been what seemed to make the dog so horribly purposeful, so...so out to get her personally. (172)

These coincidences include both her husband and the entire Cambers' family being out of town, the car not starting, and the postal worker not delivering mail to the Cambers' house that day.

These are the coincidences that put Donna and her son, arguably "ordinary people," in such an

extraordinary situation, and this passage also emphasizes the idea of cosmic determinism; that humans do not have control over situations in which they are placed, and that forces even outside those of science can determine their lives. When the deterministic pattern takes on the complexity Donna contemplates, whether the hostility of the cosmos is a projection of our mind or a characteristic of the cosmos itself becomes difficult to decide. This is similar to Thomas Hardy's view of a hostile, rather than indifferent, world. Donna feels personally attacked by random forces, which is compatible with many of the naturalists' ideas about determinism. In the end, Donna's son Tad dies of dehydration, but she manages to kill Cujo and escape, although she suffers severe injuries and requires a long hospitalization. This novel is one example of King placing ordinary people in extraordinary situations that evoke horror and tempt them to believe that the world itself is against them, but even though there is horror in the novel, it seems to be perfectly compatible with literary naturalism and with the realism that naturalism contains.

Another example of outside forces working on the characters in King's novels is in *The Shining*. In this case, the Overlook Hotel is the outside force that works on all three members of the Torrance family, but succeeds only with Jack. The Overlook has been referred to in criticism as a contemporary example of the "gothic castle," and Eric Carl Link is one critic who has made connections between literary naturalism and the gothic. He says that although many naturalist works do use "a realist aesthetic....they just as often veered from that aesthetic. They make use of the gothic, the grotesque, the symbolic, the improbable, the melodramatic, and the sensationalistic" ("Defining" 86). In this case, according to Link, naturalist works can have elements of what could be considered horror in them. As seen in *The Shining*, the forces that control the Overlook Hotel are outside, perhaps even cosmic, forces, and they end up determining the fates of the Torrance family, particularly Jack. The power and hostility of the

hotel takes away the free will of the characters, and King personifies it as if it has its own will: “The Overlook was having one hell of a good time. There was a little boy to terrorize, [and] a man and his woman to set one against the other” (281). By imbuing the Overlook with a life of its own, King in turn gives it power, as the narrator notes later in the novel: “The hotel was running things now. Maybe at first the things that had happened had only been accidents....But now the hotel was controlling those things and they *could* hurt” (334). As it gains power, the Overlook takes power from the Torrance family. Naturalist critic June Howard could be describing the hotel and the novel itself when she says, “The special status of fate and fatalism in these novels is evident....It sometimes seems that the naturalists’ ‘world’ is constructed not according to indifferent laws but as a trap or even a torture chamber” (49). The hotel ultimately victimizes Jack the most, as he goes insane and ends up dying in the explosion of the hotel’s boiler, literally trapped inside the “torture chamber.” Even early on in the novel, however, Jack realizes he is beginning to lose his free will, when he thinks, “He had not acted but had been acted upon” (116). This way of thinking allows the Overlook to take control of Jack more easily than Wendy and Danny, and although they are damaged, they do end up escaping the hotel. *The Shining* is another example of forces outside of science that can determine people’s lives, and it connects his horror to the tradition of literary naturalism, but unlike *Cujo*, with its mad dog as believable perpetrator of dread, *The Shining*’s Overlook Hotel shades naturalism into the supernaturalism that so closely resembles its realistic cousin and expands the definition of contemporary literary naturalism.



## CHAPTER FIVE. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Throughout this paper, I have shown that bestselling horror writer Stephen King can also be considered a literary naturalist by showing how he utilizes the themes and motifs of the naturalist tradition in his horror tales. Nearly all of his work, even when dealing with supernatural creatures or forces, holds to a degree of realism, at least through the characters if not the plot. As Tony Magistrale says, “King is one of the great writers of magical realism. He possesses the unique ability to structure tales of fragile and ordinary human beings embattled against supernatural forces they neither comprehend nor can hope to surmount physically” (*The Moral* 68). This use of realism, whether it be of a realistic or a supernatural quality, shows King’s dedication to portraying “ordinary human beings in extraordinary situations,” as Norris says. While only a few of his works have been discussed here, many more could be included as examples that show his use of realism.

Just as the literary naturalists often do, King also uses different types of determinism to show how his characters’ lives are shaped by forces over which they have very little control. While King utilizes the “Hobbesian paradox” to account for both free will and determinism present in his work, there are always forces that limit the amount of free will his characters have. The various types of determinism seen in other examples of literary naturalism, such as Norris’s and London’s works, include genetic and environmental determinism, social determinism, technological determinism, and even a type of cosmic determinism. These types of determinism can also be seen clearly in King’s works.

The final point discussed was how King’s horror can be reconciled with literary naturalism to show him as a naturalist as well as a horror writer. I argue that many of the early naturalists and some critics have expanded the meaning of naturalism to include aspects of

horror; Jack London even wrote a piece on why readers enjoy “the terrible and tragic in fiction,” and he says, “Deep down in the roots of the race is fear. It came first into the world, and it was the dominant emotion in the primitive world” (167). In King’s works, horror is often used as allegory to critique social institutions and problems, and fear is the vehicle that may convince people to act to change social problems. In this way, horror seems to be an element compatible with literary naturalism.

### **Future Work**

There are many directions in which this topic could go. While I feel I have shown King to be a literary naturalist in this paper, I have only scratched the surface of his large catalog. For example, I intentionally did not include any works from his magnum opus, *The Dark Tower* series, which could be studied in the context of literary naturalism. I also did not look at any of his science fiction, which critic Eric Carl Link thinks is one direction contemporary literary naturalism is taking. He says, “much of the energy of American literary naturalism in the twentieth century was channeled into the rise of science fiction as a dominant cultural force” (“Defining” 73). This idea could be explored further using King’s science fiction. The connection between horror and literary naturalism could also be explored further, looking at different authors to see if there are other connections, or if King’s writing is a special case. Whatever direction future work in this field takes, it seems clear that literary naturalism is indeed still very much present in contemporary fiction and has even evolved and expanded from its original meaning.

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