Natural Urges as (Mis)Leading Forces in Annie Proulx’s Naturalistic New England and Newfoundland Fiction

Los deseos e impulsos naturales como fuerzas (des)orientadoras en la narrative concerniente a nueva Inglaterra y terranova de Annie Proulx

Maja Daniel
UPV/EHU
daniel.maja@ehu.eus

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Resumen
La premisa que se plantea en este artículo radica en la denominación de Annie Proulx como una escritora naturalista del siglo XXI. La importancia del milieu, de las características colectivas de la sociedad y su influencia en los personajes, y la suerte (o desgracia) del contexto histórico, son factores cruciales e inestimables para el desarrollo del argumento. A la sexualidad se le otorga una atención muy especial; el deseo parece ser una fuerza incontrolable. Los impulsos sexuales rigen las vidas de los protagonistas y, junto con los vicios y los más básicos instintos, les encaminan (o más bien desencaminan) a la hora de tomar decisiones vitales. El objetivo de este artículo es destacar estos impulsos y analizar la importancia que tienen como factores determinantes. Los ejemplos que se aportan pretenden reflejar algunas de las características arquetípicamente naturalistas expuestas en la narrativa de Annie Proulx que toma como escenarios Nueva Inglaterra y Terranova.

Palabras clave: Annie Proulx, naturalismo, sexualidad, Nueva Inglaterra, Terranova

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Abstract
This paper's premise is that Annie Proulx is a naturalistic writer; the mode she adapts in her narrative is recognized as the twenty-first century variety of naturalism. The importance of the environment, of the surrounding society’s collective characteristics and the historical context its members happened to live in, are crucial and inestimable for the plots. Very special attention is given to sexuality; sexual desire seems to be an uncontrollable power. Natural urges govern protagonists’ lives and, together with most basic instincts, impulses and vices, lead, or rather mislead them in their choices. The goal of this paper will be to point these urges out and analyze their importance as vital factors. The examples provided will aim to reflect some of the characters’ archetypically naturalistic features Annie Proulx displays in her New England and Newfoundland fiction.

Keywords: Annie Proulx, naturalism, sexuality, New England, Newfoundland

The initial hypothesis of this article states that Annie Proulx's fiction is inscribed with the tradition of literary naturalism. The mode this contemporary writer adapts in her narrative seems to reflect the twenty-first century variety of this, from its very beginnings controversial, movement. For American literary naturalism does not cover only a short period between 1890 and 1915 and is characterized by a fixed and unchanging theoretical framework; quite on the contrary, as Keith Newlin points out, it remains a vibrant and active field, a genre reinterpreted by each generation according to the critical theories and cultural concerns of its time (1-2).

In case of Annie Proulx, her works are written following the documentary method and they feature such qualities as concreteness and circumstantiality. Proulx conducts her research in a truly scientific way. She generally spends at least a year in a place where her work is going to be set; she studies its history, its people, the names, the climate and, of course, the landscape together with "human marks on it." As she specified in Missouri Review, she also examines "earlier and prevailing economy based on raw materials" and "ethnic background of settlers" ("An Interview"). The information she uses comes from

1 Some sections of this article come from the author’s doctoral dissertation entitled “Dangerous and Indifferent Ground: Naturalism and Regionalism in Annie Proulx’s Fictional Realm” (2017)
different sources, in most cases not official ones (manuals of work and repair, book of manners, local histories, graveyards, bulletin boards, scraps of paper, etc.). She draws sketches and fills her inseparable notebook with all types of details.

The author’s main concerns and the commonest themes in her work are linked to place, with all its geographic and historical characteristics, understood as a habitat for its residents. Furthermore, economic issues, (hence, social conditions) play a crucial role as a background in the development of her novels and stories. The method Annie Proulx is often referred to, even by herself, is the one used by the historicists in *Annales School*. As Proulx herself recognized in 1999: “I was attracted to the French *Annales School*, which pioneered minute examination of the lives of ordinary people through account books, wills, marriage and death records, farming and crafts techniques, the development of technologies. My fiction reflects this attraction.” ("An Interview").

In addition, the majority of the writer’s texts are built on a naturalistic approach to the forces of nature as determining the characters’ lot; the importance of the environment, of the surrounding society’s collective characteristics and the historical context its members happen to live in are crucial and inestimable for the plots. They are filled with examples of scenery and characters that are nothing like those conventionally associated with each region’s identity (her settings tend to be particularly culturally powerful), and even less with their mythic images. Proulx deals with "preassigned" images of such places as New England, Newfoundland or the American West, and responds by “a deliberate deflation of scenic and mythic preconceptions of a landscape and its people” (Kowalewski 11).

Natural urges govern, in many cases, protagonists’ lives. Impulses, instincts and vices, in the majority of cases resulting from an uncontrollable sexual desire, lead (or rather mislead) the characters and condition their choices. As a matter of fact, the sexuality itself, such as presented in the texts to be examined, strikes one as being enough to judge on the naturalistic foundations of Proulx’s narrative.

These sexual urges, precisely, together with other destructive impulses derived from hate, vindictiveness or different kinds of addiction, will be pointed out here. The texts chosen to be analyzed include Proulx’s two New England writings, the collection of short stories *Heart Songs and Other Stories* (published in 1988 and containing nine stories; two more were added to the 1995 edition, this time entitled simply *Heart Songs*) and her first novel *Postcards* (1992); likewise, the Newfoundland novel *The Shipping News* (1993) will
provide some of the examples. Such short stories as the ones by Proulx, as R. V. Cassill put it, are “a refuge for those who want to explore the human condition as sentient men and women” (qtw. in Rackstraw). The two novels, with their protagonists being victims of the desire, their whole lives conditioned by their sexual encounters, provide singularly interesting naturalistic perspectives. The decision of not including among the commented texts Annie Proulx’s *Wyoming Stories* (certainly not less naturalistic, if not more so) is based on several reasons; chief among them is the fact that in the writer’s Wyoming stories the nature, the western landscape itself, seems to be the protagonist, not the characters. The settings, with its particularly powerful untamed environment, dominate it all and determine characters’ actions almost entirely.

Before dealing with the study of Proulx’s naturalistic characters, a brief introduction regarding the literary naturalism per se, and particularly the American one, shall prove supportive. Oddly enough, even after more than a hundred years from its pivotal moment, it is burdensome, indeed, to define it. Frank Norris, back in the late 19th century, used a comparison in his description: “This is not romanticism – this drama of the people, working itself out in blood and ordure. It is not realism. It is a school by itself, unique, somber, powerful beyond words. It is naturalism.” (1108). Charles Child Walcutt, only some decades ago, admitted:

The true character of naturalism has not been determined. In one form it appears a shaggy, apelike monster; in another it appears a godlike giant. Shocking, bestial, scientific, messianic – no sooner does its outline seen to grow clear than, like Proteus, it slips through the fingers and reappears in another shape. (3)

Hence, some purely historical facts concerning the movement will be provided hereunder. By the end of the nineteenth century the new belief of humans as helpless beings in a constantly changing universe, pointing their vices (some of them inherited), their incapacity to control violent impulses and destructive feelings, or their unmanageable sexual urges, was not only widespread among European scientists and novelists, but its influence was also palpable in America. The philosophy of positivism and the recent discoveries in natural sciences were crucial to inspire Émile Zola, the fountainhead of the movement. In his literary creations, Zola’s treatment of his characters was unchangeable: they were treated as if they were animals constantly transformed by the environment.
Man was to be a product originated from the struggle for existence, remodeled with time by his/her surroundings. The concept of heredity gained prominence; it was inestimable and was supposed to explain many of degenerations of a character. Impulses, instincts, and urges as vital forces pushing characters to act were studied. Very special attention was given to sex; its importance was exaggerated. Sexual desire was considered to be an uncontrollable natural power, a physical need, almost like hunger or thirst. The romantic idea of love disappeared. The same happened with the romantic concept of nature. From now on, as Lars Åhnebrink points out, “nature should be studied and reproduced objectively and truthfully" and “naturalist chose phenomena which had an everyday, close-to-the-soil, and often repulsive effect on the reader; sounds became noises and odors bad smells” (29). With reference to Darwinism, which “was both a continuation of and a challenge to Enlightenment assumptions” (Lehan 55), the scholar observes that as a theory of natural selection, Darwin emphasized the accidental rather than a necessary unfolding of matter in time. Consequently, in literary naturalism instead of presuming the reality of evolution, the forward process, its “throwbacks," resulting from devolution and degeneration, are given far more attention.

In works of the American naturalists characters’ lives are, too, generally determined. According to Åhnebrink, instincts, heredity, environment, and social and economic conditions, together with the absence of free will (both determinism and fatalism lead to its denial) made their characters free from any responsibility for their acts. Charles Child Walcutt stresses such elements of the naturalism in America as violence and taboo (understood as “improper” topics found in the province of physical survival: sex, disease, bodily functions, obscenity, or depravity). Donald Pizer, similarly, underlines that the source of the strength and persistence of naturalism in America was not Zola’s philosophy or literary method, but rather the French writer’s impulse toward depicting truthfully all ranges of life (therefore, those provoking ethical or aesthetical revulsion and disgust as well). Pizer’s conclusion is that

Naturalism has been in America a literature in which the writer depicts man under pressure to survive because of the baleful interaction between his own limitations and the crushing conditions of life and in which the writer also proffers, through his symbolism, an interpretative model of life. (168)
The group of canonical American nineteenth-century literary naturalists seems to consist of such renowned writers as Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and Frank Norris. Nevertheless, as Donna M. Campbell indicates, there was a second, a parallel group of writers frequently identified as naturalists nowadays, but classified in the twentieth-century literary history simply as “women writers;” Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow. They too belonged to this “new generation of Americans ... writing fiction that questioned Victorian orthodoxies and challenged the by-then prevailing realism of the day, a realism that seemed too genteel to confront the difficult social realities of a nation undergoing constant change” (Campbell 223).

Proulx is sometimes perceived as an heir of these first female naturalists. Her fiction deals with a variety of social problems resulting from harsh environments and lack of professional opportunities. Furthermore, it encompasses a wide range of human limitations, weaknesses, basic instincts or vices as ruling forces. The living conditions, in its majority extremely difficult, make the characters develop very little resistance to their bodies’ needs. The theme of sexual urges, the protagonists’ unmanageable sexuality, proves outstandingly frequent and its influence on the plot is unquestionable. In *Heart Songs* is where the largest amount of naturalistic, which in this case means perverted and led by their most primitive instincts, characters are found.

“Bedrock” is one of these writings; everything happens for and because of (though at the beginning the reader can only presume it) the protagonist’s sexual appetite. It is also an important example of one of many stories in which, as Kent C. Ryden put it, “rural farmhouses ... can be facades for all manner of human perversity, and the pastoral hills breed horrifying social pathologies and violence” (81). The protagonist, Perley, marries a girl younger than his daughter a month after her brother unexpectedly leaves her in the widower’s farm. Although Maureen does not stand out in domestic chores, she beguiles the old man the very first night. In spite of more and more frequent manifestations of violence exercised by Maureen on her husband, Perley finds himself unable to oppose, always succumbed to his desires. In addition, he realizes “he couldn’t hit her; he deserved what was happening” (48). The announced reason of Perley’s remorse is explained in the final paragraph of the story: Perley, years before, raped Maureen when she was just a child, “the dirty little thing,” and had not regretted it until the woman’s revenge made him suffer. For this prosperous farmer the girl was not only from a different social class, but
almost a different species, a one moved and protected by instincts, for no moral underground had ever been received by this needy, starving creature. The incestuous relationship between Maureen and Bobhot Mackie, her brother, their sexual intimacy "that of an old familiar couple" (54), turned out to be the only affection, the only durable feeling and protection they could count on in their miserable lives.

And yet, the Mackie inferior "species," extremely poor, sloppy, incestuous and depraved, Bobhot a hard drinker, managed to survive. Not only survive, but to succeed; guided by instincts and necessity of revenge or maybe some twisted sense of justice, they took over Perley’s farm, they were in charge now. Young, desperate and battle-hardened, the Mackies turned out to be much fitter than the old, lonely widower.

Another story full of references to the family relationships, incest, heredity, impulses and survival is "Stone City." The narrator, a newcomer engaged in an adulterous adventure with a Vermonter Noreen, discovers the story of the Stone City, a place where several families of the Stones lived years before the action develops. According to the villagers’ words, "the Stone boys was all wild, jacked deer, trapped bear, dynamited trout pools, made snares, shot strange dogs wasn’t their own and knocked up every girl they could put it to." (29). Their little community followed no rules of civilized world, but only their own "natural laws." The leader, the old Stone, a tyrant who controlled the family members by beating and keeping them in fear, "had kids that was his grandkids" (30). Floyd Stone, Noreen's stepbrother, was the one who dragged the whole "city" to its end the day he shot a man standing on a caboose porch of a passing train for no reason; the only explanation laid in overdrinking: "Floyd was just like all his brothers and cousins, had a crazy streak in him when he was drunk; he’d do just anything, just anything." (35). Villagers got furious, for they had enough of Stones’ excesses from a long time, and assisted the police in arresting Floyd. What followed was all violence, both parts implicated. Since the Stones did not want to surrender and hand over Floyd, the crowd itself, “ready for action, real savage,” administered its justice. After a fierce battle, Floyd was found and arrested, but it was not the end of the assault. The crowd undressed everyone except women and children, poured hot tar on them, and then threw chicken feathers all over their bodies. That was the enraged people’s vengeance, violence provoked by violence. “Christ, ... what kind of people were these?” (36) was the narrator's reflection. The inutility of such an impulsive action, of the abandoning of human restraints and giving oneself to pure
instincts, is pictured by the sad personal story of Banger, one of the participants of the assault; his house was deliberately set on fire by the revengeful old Stone, and his wife and a child burnt inside.

In Proulx's Heart Songs there are stories where moral decay, vices, or ugliness of the New England rural way of life are not only present, but they actually attract some of the city characters, epitomizing a sort of new fashionable aesthetics. "Heart Songs" is one of these texts, its protagonist the "connoisseurs." Snipe, when moved to the rural Vermont, "recognized in himself a secret wish to step off into some abyss of bad taste and moral sloth," and felt "a dirty excitement" (74) when contemplating the landscape full of junk. In love, as he first believed, with one of the members of the "rednecks" Twilights, the fat Nell, he longed for "the freedom of dirty sheets" (83). The description of the moment he could finally carry out his sexual desire abounds with references to almost all human senses; immediately after their sexual act, the scene of one of the Twilights bloody wound is depicted, sensory references maintained: "Drops of blood fell heavily into the sink, puddling with the jelly. Snipe could smell Eno's underarms, a sharp skunky odor that mixed with the reek of sex and sugared fruit." (84). Pure and romantic concept of intercourse, once again, is not what characterizes the naturalistic fiction, indeed.

As to Proulx's New England novel, Postcards, and the theme of sexual urgency there, the very first paragraph of the novel evidences its importance; as a matter of fact, Loyal Blood's incapacity of controlling himself, his raping and killing Billy, is a direct cause of his latter life-long exile: "Even in the midst of the involuntary orgasmic jerking he knew. Knew she was dead, knew he was on his way." (83). Moreover, it is meaningful that the reaction his body develops afterwards, a kind of an allergy for any women's touch, is a straight consequence of his unclear conscience, his flesh and his mind closely connected. "Luckily" for Loyal, his need of the intimate contact with women was not crucial in his life; he knew he would suffer out of loneliness, with no wife and no children, "the pitiful easement of masturbation" (59), but felt he was able to stand it and go on living. However, it was not the case of a secondary character, Mr. Nipple; his sexuality the most important sphere in his being. Mernelle remembered her neighbor as "the old man rubbing his hand over her heinie when she was on the ladder in the barn" (203), when she was only a child. Even when already married, to a girl he previously had gotten pregnant, the man kept "tomcattin" every night and with different women. But then, when about forty-five, he was
diagnosed with a prostate cancer and after an operation became impotent. And that was the end of him. After Mr. Nipple's only purpose of life was gone and after six years of torturing his wife by trying to convince her to die together, he finally hung himself.

*The Shipping News* is probably the less naturalistic of all Proulx's texts, for many of its characters are idealized and unrealistic; it seems as if the author let herself dive into the myth-charged aura of the island. In spite of that, depictions of many other Newfoundlanders correspond to their naturalistic models. Also, such topics as human senses and physical urges, truly unmanageable, are constantly present in the text. Characters dominated by their obsessive and contorted sexuality, incidents of rapes, sexual abuse or incest abound, indeed.

The wildest group of these characters in the novel is represented, undoubtedly, by the ancient Quoyles, the protagonist's ancestors; savage, violent people who followed their most basic instincts, who lived together, as a pack of wild animals, who procreated together and who did not belong to any other social group except their own. As a matter of fact, the Quoyles from *The Shipping News* resemble the equally wild Stones from Proulx's "Stone City." Such characters as those make the reader reflect over the "nature," understood as "condition," of any social group worldwide. Is seems as if in any society the presence of such "natural" people were necessary; the symbol of what humans might become when basic rules of "civilized" communities are not followed. Apparently, there is an assumption implied: what keeps us, the humanity, away from the incest, away from the extreme violence exerted daily, and especially on the weakest ones, is nothing but a few artificial principles of behavior. These principles, however, are fragile and it is not rare for a living creature to tend to remove such a burden and act... more naturally.

But there are two other characters in *The Shipping News* completely incapable of putting any restraints on their needs: the late spouses of Quoyle and Wavey, the protagonists, Petal and Herold, both completely dominated by their sexuality. Petal, "thin, moist, hot" (12) is described as "crosshatched with longings ... In another time, another sex, she would have been a Genghis Khan. When she needed burning cities, the stumbling babble of captives ... she had only petty triumphs of sexual encounter" (13). Certainly, the only feature of her husband Petal actually appreciated was his penis, "the biggest one yet" (13); her misfortune was the impossibility to enjoy it without the rest of the body: "She could not bear his hot back, the bulk of him in the bed. The part of Quoyle that was wonderful was,
unfortunately, attached to the rest of him.” (14). Yet, an interesting characteristic of Petal, somehow unnatural for a woman, was that she lacked maternal instinct. Her only achievement was to actually stay pregnant and give birth to two healthy daughters. But just a day before her and her lover’s death in a car accident, she sold her children to a pedophile, caught with his video camera ready to record and the girls undressed. Petal simply “didn’t feel like being a mama to anybody” (21). She was created to conquest, not to nourish, as if she truly was born into the female sex by mistake.

On the other hand, Herold Prowse (who never actually appears in the text in person, for he had been lost at sea years before Quoyle’s arrival) is recalled by those who knew him as a “tomcat” who “sprinkled his bastards up and down the coast from St. John’s to Go Around” and then “rubbed her [Wavey’s] nose in it” (304). The widow, though tried to keep her son’s father’s memory pure, in the end confessed her late husband “was a womanizer. He treated me body like a trough. Come and swill and slobber in me after them. I felt like he was casting vomit in me when he come to his climax.” (307-308).

Indeed, the theme of sex, in all its perverted varieties, is recurrent in Proulx’s Newfoundland novel. According to the protagonist’s aunt’s words, incest and an extremely early sexual initiation were not surprising among the locals. Her answer regarding Quoyle’s doubts as to his grandfather’s age the moment of his death was:

> Ah, you don’t know Newfoundlanders. For all he was twelve, he was your father’s father. But not mine. My mother – your grandmother –that was Sian’s sister Addy, and after Sian drowned she took up with Turvey, the other brother. Then when he drowned, she married Cokey Hamm, that was my father. (25)

Rape too seemed to be a part of the everyday life in the Quoyle family (both in the “wild,” the primitive family of the protagonist’s ancestors, and his parents’ generation) – Agnis was probably not the only girl raped by her brother in childhood. The last living cousin, the last representative of the old Newfoundland Quoyle clan, was Nolan. The reputation this member of the Quoyles possessed in the town was, indeed, more taboo-breaking than any other: “They say there’s a smell that comes off him like rot and cold clay. They say he slept with his wife when she was dead and you smell the desecration coming off him.” (162).
The above notwithstanding, the Quoyles were not the only Newfoundlanders whose lives were physically and emotionally crippled by their “fellow men.” For nearly all men (women less frequently), even those considered decent and respectable members of their community, are feeble when confronting their sexuality, the overwhelming power of their nature. The town’s newspaper informs about priests abusing the orphans, doctors assaulting their female patients, a choirmaster molesting more than a hundred boys... and then some more “intimate,” “domestic” cases:

‘here in Killick-Claw a loving dad is charged with sexually assaulting two of his sons and his teenage daughter in innumerable incidents between 1962 and the present. Buggery, indecent assault and sexual intercourse. Here’s another family lover, big strapping thirty-five-year-old fisherman spends his hours ashore teaching his little four-year-old daughter to perform oral sex and masturbate him’. (218)

In conclusion, the examples provided in this article pretend to reflect some of the characters’ archetypically naturalistic features the writer displays in her New England and Newfoundland fiction, and to support the initial hypothesis stating that Annie Proulx’s narrative is inscribed with the tradition of literary naturalism. My view is that such an assumption proves correct, supported by evidence, and no doubts remain as to the accuracy of the premise. Most of Proulx’s protagonists are driven by their bodies’ physical needs and vices; as a matter of fact, their lives are often determined by their sexuality and their untamed instincts. Rational and serene decision-making are features the inhabitants of these harsh areas disdain and perceive as flaws, dangerous whims in such inhospitable surroundings. Sexual appetites turn out to be just as strong as any other vital necessity, like hunger or thirst, and are in general improper and accompanied by violence. Violence itself seems to be the natural consequence of a wide range of feelings: rage, hatred, humiliation, jealousy, or deception. Vices, generally alcohol, make the characters waste their chance for a better future, a decent life, and valuable relationships; all they bring is moral sloth and brutality. To a certain extent, heredity is a factor that influences some of the figures.

When analyzing most of the characters of Heart Songs, Postcards and The Shipping News, it is observed that some are examples of survivors, perfectly adapted to their environment, while others fail in their struggle of everyday life. Nevertheless, given the author’s mastery
of irony, it is sometimes the case that the happy and the tragic ends unexpectedly switch places, leaving the readers astounded. Likewise, on the subject of the endings, although the majority of Proulx's New England short stories and her *Postcards* end tragically and leave the readers grief-stricken and hopeless, the case of *The Shipping News* seems different, as if contradicting the naturalistic rule stating the impossibility of a joyful outcome. Nonetheless, as the writer confessed in "Documentary: Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*:

I wrote an earlier novel called *Postcards* which was described uniformly and vigorously as dark, dark as the kiss of death, nobody's ever going to read anything as dark. And I got very tired of hearing that, and I said, "oh, my God; I'm going to write a happy one, you want a happy ending, I'll give them a happy ending." ... And in the end Quoyle achieves a happiness, but it's a rather poor happiness, if you stop and think about it; it's the absence of pain, and so what looks like a happy ending in nothing more than the absence of pain. (4)

In "Re-writing the American Naturalist Short Story: Annie Proulx's *Fine Just the Way It Is*" Aitor Ibarrola observes that "the author (...) reveals sympathy for those victims whose lives are unsparingly wasted" (133). This is my perception, too. In her treatment of the characters Proulx seems to be objective, though maybe not scientifically objective. She cannot help sympathizing with the most unfortunate and miserable ones. And it does not necessarily exclude her from the category of literary naturalists, but rather approximates some more to the first writers trying to apply naturalism in literature; not even Zola managed to conceal his critical view of society. For in the 19th century there was always a purpose in bringing into light the violence bursting frequently from despair, injustice, hopelessness or social determinism, and all the disgusting details of vice and its consequences. Some thought that the intention of those works was clearly revolutionary; some think today this revolution has never occurred. The prominence of strikingly similar problems in Annie Proulx's fiction, including vices, sexual abuse and violence, leads us, the readers, to a distressing reflection upon the condition of humanity both in the past and now.
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