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Naturalistic Sensibility and Modern Korean Literature: Kim Tongin

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the origin of the naturalistic sensibility in modern Korean literature. To this end, this study focuses on the Korean writer Kim Tongin and his analogous relationship with his western forerunners of naturalism. An established opinion is that Korean naturalism is nothing but another name for fatalism, and that Korean naturalists misunderstand the nature of Euro-American naturalism. However, Kim’s choice of subject matter, deterministic themes, and literary techniques typical of western naturalists, demonstrate his intellectual and artistic affinities with his western predecessors. After tracing the historical and cultural contexts of the early twentieth century in Korea through the sustained discussion of Kim’s life, the dissertation explores the model writings of Émile Zola and Frank Norris, the canonical naturalists. Then, the following chapters are devoted to a discussion of Kim’s canonical works, “A Sorrow of the Weak,” “The Seaman’s Chant,” “Potatoes,” “Frenzied Sonata” and “The Story of Kim Yōnsil.” Examining the three short stories and two novellas, this study highlights the ways in which this author achieves his ultimate goal of depicting the human animal governed by heredity, environment and chance development. The study concludes by claiming that Kim finds a great medium for capturing a realistic picture of colonial Korea in the style and method of literary naturalism.
CHRONOLOGY

1900  Kim Tongin is born on 2 October in Pyongyang (a northern province in Korea, now the capital of North Korea).

1914  Kim studies at Tokyo Institute in Japan.

1915  Transfers to Meiji Institute in Japan, where he develops an interest in film and literature.

1916  Composes a tale in Japanese for class circulation.

1917  Returns to Korea because of his father’s death and inherits a fortune.

1918  Marries Hyein Kim in Pyongyang in April. He alone returns to Japan in September, enters an art college in Tokyo, and studies aesthetics. On Christmas day, the first draft of the Independence Manifesto of Korean students in Japan is written. This day, Kim decides to publish a literary coterie magazine.

1919  Attends an event held by Korean Overseas Students for the declaration of independence and is arrested for a day. Returns to Korea in March. The March First Independence Movement occurs. Kim publishes Creation (Ch’angjo), the first literary coterie magazine in Korea, and prints “A Sorrow of the Weak,” his first novella in the magazine. He is imprisoned for three months for violation of publication law.

1921  “The Seaman’s Chant” published. Creation ceases publication in May.

1922  “Flogging” published.

1925  “Potatoes” published.

1927  Suffers bankruptcy. Wife Hyein Kim leaves him.

1928  Attempts with his brother to establish a film production company and fails.
1930  *The Young Fellows* is serialized in *Tonga Daily News (Tonga ilbo)*. “Frenzied Sonata” is published.

1931  Marries Kyungae Kim in April. Family moves to Seoul, the capital of South Korea.
     Writes to support family and suffers from insomnia.

1933  Works for forty days as the director of the Fine Arts and Literature Department in *Chosón Daily News (Chosón ilbo)*. Novel *Spring in the Unhyun Palace* is serialized in the *Chosón Daily News*.

1934  Writes and serializes “Studies of Ch’unwon” (“Ch’unwŏn Yŏn’gu”) in *Samch’ŏlli*.

1938  Imprisonment because of crime of “lèse majesté” against the Japanese emperor.


1945  Liberation of Korea realized.

1948  *General Ulgimundok* is serialized in *Tae’yang Sin’mun* but not completed because Kim contracts meningitis.

1950  Korean War breaks out on 25 June.

1951  Dies on 5 January of meningitis and multiple other illnesses.
INTRODUCTION

How great is the power of mankind! Indeed, we human beings have come straightforwardly without being distracted. Therefore, the establishment of Utopia almost arrives before us. *When science joins hands with art, the beautiful Utopia will be built up here.* (Kim, “Truthful Way of Human Life” 190 emphasis added)

I am not denying that we received the influence of European and American literature and of the Japanese literary world, but . . . as long as [literary] works are not viewed as imitations, it is not true that trends were formed and developed through either importation or a deliberate act. (Yŏm 210)

Simply put, Korea’s modernization was Westernization. After the nation was colonized by Japan in 1910, Korea rapidly changed. Above all, nationalistic intellectuals increased in number while they went through a national crisis. Koreans were indignant about and humiliated by Japanese colonization because, as Bruce Cumings points out, “Korea’s political, economic, and social level was not so far from Japan’s as to justify a civilizing colonial mission” (486). For that reason, Korean intellectuals hoped to acquire as fully as possible the advanced knowledge and technology of the West in order to terminate Japanese colonialism in the peninsula. When leaving for Japan in order to pursue higher education, they hoped soon to regain their national sovereignty and help fellow Koreans determine their own identity.

One of the ways that they could do this was through literature. In Japan, Korean writers earnestly read and studied Euro-American literature and attempted to establish their own modern literary tradition in Korea through experimentation with the concepts
and literary methods of their Western counterparts. Kim Tongin is a key figure in this historical development and a primary means of understanding the new direction taken by Korean men of literature. He manifested the naturalistic sensibility in his most acclaimed tales and registered the influence of Western literary naturalists.

Kevin O’Rourke identifies Kim “as an Oscar Wilde type figure complete with morning coat, carnation and cane, a tragic figure in his own private life.” O’Rourke continues: “He is called realist, romantic, nationalist, aesthetic, naturalist – every possible –ism seems to be tagged to his name” (O’Rourke, Introduction 9, emphasis added). It is true that there are still different opinions regarding Kim’s literary identity. However, many critics see Kim Tongin as an advocate for what was termed pure literature. Bruce Fulton clarifies the meaning of this term:

Kim Tongin is important . . . for initiating a debate that continues to this day in the Korean literary world: Should literature be written as an artistic end in itself, or should it engage itself with the nation, the people, and contemporary societal and political realities? Kim fell squarely on the side of literature as art, and, with like-minded fellow students in Japan, he founded the journal *Ch’angjo* (*Creation*) in 1919 in direct opposition to the enlightenment propensity of Yi Kwangsu’s novels. (621)

Indeed, Kim Tongin severely criticized Yi because his fictional characters were idealized and unrealistic. But is it possible to say Kim is completely indifferent to “contemporary societal and political realities”? By publicly addressing his disagreement with Yi Kwangsu, the best known enlightenment figure and nationalist artist, I believe, Kim Tongin successfully disguised himself as an artist of pure literature in order to find a way to freely compose realistic works that vividly depicted colonial reality and Koreans’ plight. To him, the style and method of literary naturalism were perfect for capturing a realistic picture of
the colonial Korea. Therefore, his contemporary readers and even future readers in the twenty-first century in Korea can interact with characters that resemble actual people of the colonial period.

In this study, I focus on the Korean author Kim Tongin who registered fully, beginning in the 1920s, the influence of progressive Euro-American literature. This dissertation especially pays attention to a particular kind of literature, now associated with the school of literary naturalism, that had a profound effect on Kim and that resulted in his making important contributions to the literature of Korea. Although this study is limited mainly to the recognition of Kim’s most significant naturalistic writings, it is also intended to shed light on the development of modern Korean literature in general. Because significant literary works produced by Korean writers in the 1920s were the artistic embodiment of naturalistic sensibility in the period, the study of Kim Tongin will shed new light on the discussion of modern Korean literature.

In Chapter One, I introduce the reader to the life of Kim Tongin and focus on Kim as a naturalist. Chapter Two explains what is typical in the school of naturalism, and it is intended to prepare the reader to see how Kim Tongin gravitated toward the production of art very much like that of Zola and Norris.

Chapter Three analyzes Kim’s first novella, “A Sorrow of the Weak,” which clearly demonstrates the naturalist’s appearance. I discuss how Kim chooses and depicts sensational material, such as sexual desire, for the purpose of capturing human truth. In Chapter Four I explain the synthetic aspect of Kim’s naturalistic literature by carefully examining “The Seaman’s Chant.” Like his American forerunner, Frank Norris, Kim attempted to integrate the form of realism and the content of romanticism into his naturalistic fiction. This chapter also addresses the fact that Kim is not a fatalist, but a naturalist, who is loyal to the principles of naturalism: scientific objectivity and
Chapter Five explores Kim’s well-established naturalistic masterpiece, “Potatoes.” The chapter shows how this short story registers the powerfully working deterministic force of environment in a person’s life. Chapter Six discusses “Frenzied Sonata,” which has been considered as an aesthetic tale. This chapter, however, demonstrates that the tale renders naturalistic themes by introducing the naturalistic determinants of environment and heredity and the theory of chance development. I continue to examine Kim’s last naturalistic novella, The Story of Kim Yŏnsil, and its meaning in Kim Tongin’s canon in Chapter Seven. This story of degeneration adds to and commemorates Kim Tongin’s major contributions to the Korean literary world in the early twentieth century. His naturalistic sensibility penetrates through his literary masterpieces, which are fully covered in this dissertation.
Kim Tongin² (1900-1951) is not a familiar literary figure for most American readers. But in Korea, along with two other major realist writers, Yŏm Sangsŏp (1897-1963) and Hyŏn Chingŏn (1900-1943), he is recognized as one of the representative literary artists of the twentieth-century who greatly contributed to establishing the character of modern Korean literature. His most significant works exemplify the development of a realistic, as well as naturalistic, literature keenly sensitive to actual conditions in the flux of everyday life. Although he has long enjoyed visibility as a prose fiction author, his importance as a catalyst in Korean literary history has been better appreciated since 1965, when the Tongin Literary Prize was founded to recognize and encourage talented Korean writers of short fiction. Despite his historic importance, relatively little primary data concerning Kim’s life is available. His memoirs of his thirty years of activity in the literary world are the main source of information.

Kim Tongin was born on October 2, 1900, in Pyongyang, the present-day capital of North Korea, to a wealthy Christian family. He came to maturity in a religious environment. His father was one of the elders in a Presbyterian church in Pyongyang. His father departed from Korean tradition, not only in religion but in the scholastic experience he provided his son. As with many others of the first generation of modern Korean authors whose parents could afford international schooling, Kim received his higher education in Japan.³ There he was introduced to literature from the West, for the most part in Japanese translation as he explained in his memoir My 30 Years in the Literary World. According to these autobiographical essays, his move to Japan for study at the age of fourteen deeply influenced the formation of his personality and life. Although his father expected him to be
a lawyer or medical doctor, his intellectually curious and passionate nature led him to literature, especially to prose fiction.

The Meiji Institute, which Kim attended in Japan from 1915 to 1917, intensified his eagerness for literary experience. This missionary school in Tokyo, founded in 1886, was known for having produced many renowned Japanese writers and literary scholars due to its encouragement of the liberal arts and the study of literary traditions. Unlike other local Japanese schools, the Meiji Institute offered various courses on American and European history, culture, and literature. The school’s non-Japanese academic atmosphere appealed strongly to students from a relatively isolated colonial land such as Korea, stimulating their desire to learn more about the Western world (Kang, *Studies* 331). At the Meiji Institute, Kim learned to compose poems and short stories. After reading a Russian novel, the title of which Kim never specified, he became more drawn to the world of literature. Thenceforth, he spent most of his time reading Western writers such as Hugo, Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant, and Oscar Wilde. With Chu Yohan (1900-1979), Kim’s best friend from the Pyongyang days and later a leading poet in the Korean literary world, Kim often discussed Western literature and the new directions Korean literature should take. As he related in *My 30 Years*, he thought little of Japanese literature, and instead he read and translated Western literature. Kim was devoted to the reading of the Russian realist Tolstoy, whose works he admired most (393).

After his completion of middle school curricula, Kim made a temporary return to Korea because of his father’s demise. Coming back to Japan in 1918, he registered at Tokyo Kawabata art school. There he, like Yohan, as one of the privileged members of his native land, came to feel responsible for helping to establish the autonomy of Korean society; this was in part because of the American president Woodrow Wilson’s advocacy of self-determination at the close of World War I, which inspired a wave of nationalism.
among Korean intellectuals. For example, on Christmas day of 1918, Korean students
gathered in Tokyo to protest both the injustice of the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1876
and its annexation in 1910, and to advocate the restoration of Korea’s independence (My
30 Years 380). At the Christmas meeting, they passed a resolution to establish the
February Eighth Korean Overseas Students’ Independence Movement and planned another
activity, the March First Independence Movement.

Although Kim supported such political activity, he preferred another way to
demonstrate his patriotism. His choice was nationalistic, but indirect and subversive:
literature. Regarding his refusal to write the first draft of a declaration of independence for
the overseas students’ group, Kim explained that he and other Koreans with like artistic
interests could contribute most to the welfare of their country by developing a native
literature (My 30 Years 381). Accordingly, in 1919, the year of the March First
Independence Movement, Kim began publishing Creation (Ch’angjo) at his own expense.
It is now recognized as the first professional literary coterie magazine published in modern
Korea, and it served as a medium in which the modern Korean voice could be heard.

When Kim started his career as a writer, the modernization of native literature was
already in process, beginning in the early years of the twentieth century. Through the early
1910s, a transitional “New-Style Poetry” (Shinch’e si) and a “New Fiction” (Shin Sosol)
flourished. As Bruce Fulton observes, “The new fiction dealt with contemporary history,
addressed real-life social problems, depicted intrafamily intrigues, or inspired patriotism
through portraits of national heroes in Korea and abroad” (621). Indeed, such transitional
literature bridged the old and the newly emerging concepts of life in twentieth-century
Korea and the world beyond its borders. After the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910, a
spirit of nationalism prompted Koreans to legitimize Hangul (Korean vernacular
language) as the literary language of all Koreans, and writers like Kim Tongin called for
writers to come “to grips with the necessity of preserving their own language and literature in an increasingly repressive colonial environment” (Fulton 620). While experimenting with Korean language, Kim also strove to overcome enlightenment advocates such as Yi Kwangsu (1892-1950) and Ch’oe Namsŏn (1890-1957).

Yi Kwangsu started his literary career with a nationalistic agenda intended to enlighten his compatriots. His first and best novel, The Heartless (Mujŏng, 1917), has been acclaimed by most scholars as the first example of the modern novel in Korea. But he shared many things in common with the “New Fiction” writers: both aimed to promote popular enlightenment and national self-strengthening. To Kim Tongin, who was “one of Yi Kwangsu’s most vociferous critics” (Shin 423), Yi was thought of as old-fashioned, or—to use a Western term—“Victorian.” Yi’s novels, written in the vernacular, usually have idealized characters functioning as role models for the Korean people. In The Heartless, for example, the protagonist Hyŏngsik is a man of intelligence and high morals. Although the main plot is the archetypal love-triangle relationship of a schoolteacher, Ri Hyŏngsik, with two women, Yŏngch’ae and Sŏnhyŏng, Yi’s real goal is not so much to entertain as to bring forth a nationalistic awakening among Korean readers. Moving beyond the issues of men’s and women’s love-relationships, the author tries to teach a moral lesson to readers. At the same time, he tries to draw patriotic feelings from his readers’ hearts. In a closing scene, a pensive Hyŏngsik urges the Korean (Chosŏn) people to devote themselves to the improvement of the nation: “Who is giving us the money to take the train, and money for tuition? Korea. Why? So that we can acquire strength, knowledge and civilization, and bring them back with us. [. . .] Let us work so that when we are old, we will see a better Korea” (The Heartless 342). Yi Kwangsu here speaks to his readers through Hyŏngsik’s voice, reminding them of the urgent necessity of nationalistic enlightenment in modern Korea. Because Yi considered literature a tool for
empowering the Korean people, he willingly took the role of preacher, stressing individual
self-determination achieved through literacy, education, and reformation of social
structures.\footnote{11}

But Kim Tongin, who insisted on the intrinsic value of art for its own sake and
proposed realistic rather than idealistic representations of human experience, did not think
Yi’s novels were truly artistic. In his 1934 essay, “Studies of Ch’unwŏn” (“Ch’unwŏn
Yŏn’gu”), Kim critically discussed the aesthetic qualities of Yi’s novels and addressed his
own theory of fiction writing. He listed the weaknesses of Yi’s novel The Heartless in this
critical review. According to Kim, Yi’s writing was overwhelmed by his main goal of
rendering instructive messages, causing problems of inconsistency in characterization and
exaggeration of characters’ personalities (“Studies of Ch’unwŏn” 502). As opposed to Yi’s
dedication to enlightenment of the masses and his didactic nationalist tendencies, Kim
emphasized the superior status of true-to-life literature. Unlike Yi, Kim decided to write
not of life as it could or should be, but of life as it actually was.

Kim Tongin’s essential goal in creating literary art was opposite to Yi Kwangsu’s.
Refuting Yi’s doctrinaire literature, which propagated the writer’s ideas on morality,
education and the improvement of social life, Kim championed the value of literary
realism in Creation. For the same reason, he criticized leftist literature—one of the
pervasive trends during the 1920s—for the same shortcomings seen in Yi’s writings:

We did not agree with Ch’unwŏn [Yi Kwangsu’s pen name], our forerunner,
about literature. Ch’unwŏn used literature as a sort of weapon for social
reform, or as a propaganda machine. That attitude or doctrine was what
we did not acknowledge as a right one. Because of that, we Ch’angjo
writers did not ask Ch’unwŏn for a novel even after he had been a member
of the Ch’angjo group for two years. We were not generous enough to tolerate
a novel intended to encourage good and to punish evil. In the same context,
we could not countenance literature aiming to reform society. Literature only exists
for literature, and if it has another purpose, we can not approve it as literature.
That was our contention. *We also thought the “real” is the supreme component
in the construction of a novel.* *(My 30 Years 409, emphasis added)*

Literary critics have accordingly regarded Kim as the first advocate of pure literature for
its own sake in modern Korea because of the above comments. But his intention when
placing such heavy emphasis on a-political purity was two-fold, given the strictness of the
Japanese colonial censorship under which contemporary writers such as Yi Kwangsu
wrote. Kim himself received a warning from the department of censorship because his first
novella, “A Sorrow of the Weak,” includes a lurid sex scene; however, his situation was
not so serious a one as those faced by his contemporaries whose political positions were
clearly demonstrated. Since the Japanese were already familiar with sexual sensationalism
in their own confessional novels, Kim was classified as a problematic but less dangerous
literary figure. In short, Kim could avoid the oppressive influence and intervention of the
Japanese colonial government by openly declaring his dedication to pure literature.

Nevertheless, Kim’s pure literature was a realistic one that tested the limits of the censors.

Kim Tongin not only refuted Yi’s doctrinaire orientation but questioned the value
of the literary genre of the novel per se. Although he also went astray to novel writing
himself in his later years, Kim did so only because of desperate living conditions, to obtain
sorely needed income. He never took pride in the fact that he wrote several novels. To Kim,
the novel was a longer version of prose fiction worthy only of serialization in newspapers.
His understanding of the novel was based on general opinions of the public in his time. He
associated the novel with lower class entertainment: novels were typically printed in
installments in newspapers, the most vulgar of all media *(Kang, Studies 416)*. Therefore,
Kim did not evaluate Yi’s work as a truly artistic product. Rather, he believed that the short story was the appropriate form for pure literature and the best prose art form possible.

Such a cultural circumstance may be attributed to the unique condition of the colonial Korean publishing industry. It was still a time in which writers were not able to make a living solely from writing. In the early twentieth century, the newspaper was the one main outlet in which to publish novels and source of pay for fiction writers. But the newspaper companies, with their eyes to profit, demanded more commercial than artistic fare. Under these circumstances, no matter how unreasonable the publisher’s request was, it was necessary that a writer develop the story’s main plot and conclusion to please subscribers. In addition, the number of writers grew greater and greater over time, whereas the places they could publish their works were limited. Except for newspapers, the only remaining possible route to publication was coterie magazines. However, the number of pages in coterie magazines was small, and this resulted in the transition of writers’ interest from long novels to the short story. Therefore, to Kim Tongin and his contemporaries, pure literature came to mean the short story.

Having turned away from Yi’s didactic writing style as well as the novel form, Kim put all his energy into the creation of exemplary short stories. In fact, this one form of prose fiction, the short story, was a clear sign of European and American influence since it was “a distinctly western literary form with no previous history in Korea” (O’Rourke, Introduction 3). This new form of prose fiction attracted young intellectuals like Kim Tongin who were eager to learn new ways of thinking and writing. In addition, translation from Western languages directly into Korean was uncommon. The conduit of knowledge and learning for Korean intellectuals was mostly Japanese, and translations went from the Western languages to Japanese, and finally to Korean. What emerged from that conduit was a greater number of short stories than longer prose fictions, and their availability was
a main reason that modern Korean writers actively experimented with the form. Kim was irresistibly attracted to the genre developed by Western writers such as Guy De Maupassant, Edgar Allan Poe, and Anton Chekhov, and his best works were short stories, whereas his later novels were intended mainly for financial gain.

Kim also thought, rightly or wrongly, that the short story was the mainstream of international literature (“How to Write a Novel” 108). For Kim Tongin, short stories by Poe, Maupassant, and Chekhov could more easily draw the readers’ attention than the novel and rivet it through to the concluding events than could the novel:

There are obvious distinctions in their forms. Simply put, the novel is a relatively loose registration of life. But, the short story is carefully selected registration of life presenting a single effect and the most concise form of prose fiction for revealing one meaning. The short story is more purely sensed and appreciated in readers’ minds after reading, whereas the novel is broadly and loosely sensed. (“At the Library of a Literary Aspirant” 229)

Further, with the short story form, Kim felt he could most fully and intensely fathom the reality of human experience through logical and scientific observation, and from his early years in Tokyo on, Kim loved reading detective stories because of the logical relations between cause and effect that they depicted. The short story was an ideal genre because of its rationality, succinctness, and rapidly developed plot. Accordingly, his own emphasis of his writing on economy of language, intellectual clarity, and dynamic plot development were the means to Kim’s success as a short story writer (Kang, Studies 418).

The same factors that contributed to Kim’s facility with the short story can be seen in the formation of another aspect of his public persona. By publishing the magazine, Creation, Kim believed that he paved the way for the creation of a pure, truly Korean literature as he defined it in progressive, modern terms (My 30 Years 381). But as I
emphasized earlier, his advocacy of pure literature should be understood in the light of the unique condition of modern Korea. The concept of pure literature to Kim was not identical with that of aestheticism. Rather, his pure literature directly referred to what he thought of as fact-based, scientific realism.

But there are still several different opinions about Kim’s artistic identity current among Korean literary scholars and critics. One group of scholars considers him a naturalist. The second sees him as a realist, while the third believes that Kim Tongin is a romantic. Because Kim often emphasized the paramount value of beauty in artistic works, he has also been considered an aesthete. More importantly, Kim Tongin himself insisted that an essential role of the writer was to picture life truthfully, as it was. In that sense, he is a self-described realist. But more specifically, Kim is a scientific realist or naturalist like Yŏm Sangsŏp, since, under the increasing influence of science in the twentieth century, he fully revealed a deterministic worldview in his writings.

Kim is not the only literary naturalist who has been subjected to these multiple categorizations and, in consequence, been seen as self-contradictory or “confused.” The same situation has confronted those seeking to understand the theories and practices of two other naturalists: American Frank Norris and French Emile Zola. They too qualify as realists and romantics, as well as naturalists, and, as in Kim Tongin’s case, they too produced literature in which a synthesis of the traits of all three “schools” of writing may be observed.

Kim’s world view is almost identical with Zola’s in terms of its philosophical determinism. Unlike Yŏm Sangsŏp and Hyŏn Chingŏn, who are indeed realists rather than naturalists despite their recognition as naturalists in Korea, Kim Tongin demonstrates a firm grasp of Zola’s and other Western naturalists’ points of view and literary methods. Kim also tried throughout his career to develop his own critical system and his fictional
technique, although these were not as sophisticated and logical as his Western predecessors’. Considering that in Kim Tongin’s time Korea simultaneously accepted all literary trends that Western culture and civilization offered without any clear differentiation between one and another, it is understandable that Kim sometimes appeared contradictory.

So in addition to close readings of his individual work, in order to understand Kim’s intentions, clarification is also made possible by viewing his writings in light of Frank Norris’ definition of naturalism. Although Kim never mentioned Frank Norris or disclosed that he read any of his works, Kim’s ideal for literary creation appears to have been very similar.

Frank Norris’ study of Zola and his naturalism is an immediate source of elucidation of Kim Tongin’s core ideas. In his 1896 article, “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” Norris argues that “Naturalism is a form of romanticism, not an inner circle of realism” (86). His affirmation was made against a then generally accepted idea, that naturalism is an extreme product of realism. As Norris pointed out, Zola’s novels typified what was in the 1890s seen as the exact opposite of realism:

   Everything is extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even, with a vague note of terror quivering throughout like the vibration of an ominous and low-pitched diapason. It is all romantic, at times unmistakably so, as in Le Rêve or Rome, closely resembling the work of the greatest of all modern romanticists, Hugo. (86)

But, Norris continued, naturalism is different from traditional romanticism. As Donald Pizer notes, Norris’s and Zola’s naturalism “incorporated both the concern for surface detail of realism and the sensationalism and depth of romanticism” (Literary Criticism 69). In other words, naturalism is a hybrid offshoot of realism and romanticism or a synthetic
succession to both. Like Norris, Kim mainly focused on illustrating the truth of life within a detailed presentation of fact as he knew it, but did so in the romantic way typical of Zolaesque naturalists.

The following chapter is intended to define the essential characteristics of naturalism as manifested in the works of two outstanding authors, Émile Zola and Frank Norris. Before turning to the earnest discussion of Kim Tongin’s accomplishments of the same kind, the readers of the present study—some of whom may not be intimately familiar with those essentials—will, it is hoped, more clearly and easily discern the frame of reference within which Kim stands forth as a literary naturalist.
“For most people Naturalism has a vague meaning” (Norris 85). This comment by Frank Norris, in “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” still applies to many contemporary scholars and critics. Norris disagrees with the prevailing idea that naturalism was considered as “a sort of inner circle of realism” (85). This idea is as prevalent now as it was in 1896. According to Norris, naturalism—unlike literary realism which mainly treats events in everyday life of ordinary people—includes extraordinary and grotesque events.

His arguments in the essay are, in short, against the then-established theory that defined naturalism as little more than extreme realism. Realistic literature, which, in Norris’ time, was represented by William Dean Howells’s writings, was seen by Norris as the opposite of naturalistic literature as well as of romantic literature. Both romantic and naturalistic writers freely use their imaginations to capture the truth in life and the human heart. Naturalists are close to romantics in that they deal with matters that Howellsian realists consistently avoid. In other words, for Norris, Zolaesque naturalism was a “vibrant revival of the probatory romantic tradition” (McElrath, Frank Norris 18). In order to delve far enough into life, naturalists went beyond the surface of everyday and “average” experience into the extraordinary and grotesque.

Apart from this romantic trait among its essential characteristics, naturalism has a solid philosophical foundation which distinguishes the naturalistic novel from other kinds. This philosophical framework of materialistic determinism is what coheres individual works written in the naturalistic style. Therefore, before turning to individual writers and works, reexamining what is literary naturalism in its essential concepts and major tendencies is necessary and valuable. The term describes a type of literature that attempts
to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to the depiction and analysis of human beings. By the 1880s in Europe, writers who came to be known as literary naturalists were revealing that they were deeply influenced by Darwinism and its encouragement of the study of human beings in their relationships to their surroundings and to heredity. These writers used a version of the scientific method to write their novels, studying human beings as they are governed by their instincts and passions, as well as by other deterministic forces of genetic inheritance.

Fortified with the theories and burning with the fever of science which swept the second half of the nineteenth century, Émile Zola, the founder of this school of writing, enthusiastically declared the novel to no longer be an art but a science in his collection of essays entitled *The Experimental Novel (Le Roman Expérimentale)* 1880). The naturalistic author, Zola declared, is neither a judge nor an actor; he merely presents the facts of his story. The author is not a moralist, but an “anatomist” who contents himself with telling what he finds in “the human being” (25). According to Zola, the novelist, like the scientist, should be an “observer” and “experimenter.” He believed that the novel, by using the methods of the scientist, would be raised to the level of a scientific demonstration, the voice of ultimate truth to him and others of his time.

Greatly inspired by Claude Bernard’s book about medical experimentation, *Introduction à L’Étude de la Médecine Expérimentale* (1865), Zola introduced and fully developed a deterministic and materialistic philosophy in his artistic works. The same determinism that governs a stone, Zola affirmed, governs the brain of man and must be pictured accordingly. Here science entered the domain of the novelist, who now had become the analyst of man in his individual and social actions. Through accumulated observations of facts and scientific analyses of phenomena, the novelist should describe human behavior as closely related to the demonstrable material factors that have
conditioned it.

After the example of Zola, naturalist writers in the West pictured nature as Darwin did, an indifferent force shaping the lives of individuals and groups. In such a deterministic universe, the characters are often shown making futile attempts to exercise free will. They are governed by natural forces more than they govern themselves. In many naturalistic novels, the force at work is represented as a “brute within” that drives a character’s actions and causes both unexpected predicaments and an unforeseen downfall. Characters do struggle to retain a veneer of civilization and rational self-control, but they often fall prey to the “brute” and the consequences unleashed by its influence.

Along with the strong effect of heredity, another unavoidable influence that determines the human condition is environment. In his inscription to *Maggie*, Stephen Crane said that the novel “tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless” (14). Zola also emphasized the importance of environment: “Man is not alone; he lives in society, in a social condition; and consequently, for us novelists, this social condition unceasingly modifies the phenomena” (*Experimental Novel* 20). Zola’s words show how important he considered not only the physical environment but the social interactions among human beings.

In order to depict human life as it is, naturalistic writers admit all possibilities in choosing materials they want to treat. While realism, which confines literary materials to everyday life and the average experience of ordinary people, is not sufficient to embrace the “whole” truth, naturalism remains the realm of unlimited depiction of truth. In many cases, however, naturalist writers select relatively lower class people as protagonists so that they can effectively render the obvious influences of heredity and the equally strong effects of their surroundings. The poor in education, intellect, and material life are most often chosen to be portrayed in naturalistic novels because they more dramatically embody
the vulnerability of human animals in harsh surroundings like those of a jungle. Naturalist writers could bring into their works any subject matter and story development, no matter how repulsive, to expose the sordid complications of human life.

Naturalists thus examine the potentially tragic condition of human beings, and Émile Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877) is a model example of the naturalistic novel in its depiction of alcoholic and sexual degradation among lower-class Parisians. At the same time, however, Zola strives for universality while representing extreme conditions. As Leonard Tancock explains in the introduction to his translation of *L'Assommoir*, Zola’s purpose is to show that "the wretched slum dwellers of Paris are also very average human beings" (7). Above all, observed Kim Tongin, Zola attempts to write a work of truth about the common people ("About Modern Novel" 21).

For that reason, *L'Assommoir* at first presents a slow but very realistic development in its picturing of its characters’ personalities and the nature of their daily experiences. The main characters of the novel-- Gervaise, Coupeau, and Coujet—draw the reader's attention with much sympathy in that they are figures we easily run across in everyday life. True, Gervaise, the heroine of the novel, is an ordinary working-class woman of her time. She has been abandoned with two young children by her worthless lover Lantier. But this is far from an uncommon experience, then and now. This innately diligent, good-hearted young woman is designed by Zola as both a likeable person with whom one can empathize and a pathetic victim of life who is subject to irresistible "forces at work" in the natural order (Pizer, *Theory and Practice* 20).

Gervaise has many good qualities in her character: she is kind, affectionate, equable, and generous. But as the translator of the novel for Penguin Books, Tancock, points out, “these qualities imply also that she is soft, unable to say no, content to let things drift, ready to find excuses for doing nothing” (11). That is, she is a typical
naturalistic heroine in that her personality and behavior are easily influenced by what takes place in her environment. After Gervaise is abandoned by her lover Lantier, her good-natured neighbor Coupeau persuades her to live with him. Even though she does not really love Coupeau, she soon forgets her hesitations and marries him because she hates to make him or anyone else upset. Throughout the novel, as Zola repeatedly notes, a genetically determined force that leads Gervaise to her downfall is an essential of her character. She always wants to make others happy: “It wasn’t true that she was strong minded; on the contrary, she was very weak and let herself go wherever she was pushed, for fear of upsetting anybody” (62). Gervaise’s softness in her attitude to herself, as well as to others ironically produces disastrous results. When she confronts unpleasant circumstances, she chooses not to fight or try to amend them but to adapt to them. Gervaise is also aware of this feature of her personality. Discussing marriage with Coupeau and explaining her goals in life, Gervaise admits: “Her only weakness, she said, was that she was over-kind, she liked everybody, she devoted herself to people who only paid her back by hurting her” (L 53). In a vicious environment, Gervaise’s central trait drives her into a total downfall.

Like Gervaise, Coupeau has many good qualities in his personality and becomes a good husband. But, in the naturalistic novel, as in nature described by Darwin, unpredictable chance occurrences have much to do with the course of a character’s life. The chance development, in addition to heredity and environment, plays an important role in L’Assommoir, irreparably determining the Coupeaus’ life. This event is the unpredictable consequence of his deciding to do no more than smile at his own daughter, Nana, when he was working on a roof top. Explains Coupeau, who is crippled by his fall from the roof,

My old Dad fell and broke his neck one day when he was pissed. I can’t go so far as to say he deserved it, but anyhow there was an explanation. . . . But I
was dead sober, like John the Baptist, not a drop of liquor in me, and then I
go and tumble down just through turning round to smile at Nana! (L 131)

His fall becomes an opportunity for the genetics inherited from his alcoholic father to
surface. Coupeau can no longer work, turns to drink and soon finds himself under the
control of his alcoholic heredity, resulting in the total failure of his new family's situation,
as well as his personal life.

Before he fell from the roof, neither hereditary nor environmental omens appeared
to threaten their life of quiet prosperity. After “four years of hard work” (L107) at the
laundry at which Gervaise is employed, the Coupeaus had paid off all their debts and had a
home of their own with their own furniture. Moreover, being filled with the expectation of
some day having her own shop, Gervaise imagines that her ideal will be realized soon.
Although Coupeau’s accident delays her purchase of the laundry, Gevaise rises in life with
the financial help of a good-natured neighbor, Goujet.

By owning her laundry business, Gervaise seems to be ascendant and to be on the
verge of spectacular success and hard-won happiness. At first, Gervaise prospers both
financially and personally in her new business. She is well liked and respected by her
neighbors. But there is an ominous foreshadowing of the decline that will inevitably
follow the Coupeaus, as is seen in Chapter 5. In a vulgar scene that an inebriated Coupeau
creates at the laundry, Zola implies that their fall is right around the corner. Feeling
repulsion at his drunken state, Gervaise, the respectable businesswoman with a proper
sense of self-respect, resists his sexual advances at first.

But he had hold of her and wouldn’t let her go. She abandoned herself,
feeling a bit giddy with this mountain of washing and not in the least upset
by Coupeau’s boosy breath. And the smacking kiss they gave each other full
on the mouth amidst the filth of her trade was a sort of first step downwards in their slow descent into squalor. (L152)

Although envy of the Coupeaus’ success by his relatives, the Lorilleux, and their increasing conflict with their as-jealous neighbors, the Boches, also threaten Gervaise, she enjoys the climax of her business success by staging a birthday party for herself in Chapter 7. But then, during the party, the crucial event which accelerates Gervaise’s decline occurs. Lantier, her former lover who deserted her, returns to Gervaise’s life. When the vicious and sinister figure of Lantier reappears at the party, he still has an emotional hold on her as the first man in her life, her companion for eight years, and the father of her two children. With her usual habit of avoiding conflict, she accommodates his desire to reenter her life. Lantier even moves into the Coupeaus’ home and again becomes her lover. This marks the second step of moral and psychological degeneration of Gervaise, initiated two chapters earlier when she accommodated her inebriated husband amidst the soiled laundry awaiting her attention.

Therefore, her struggle up from the lower class to enter the middle class, which once was successful, now counts for nought. Her life has now taken a downward course; she is slowly weakened more and more in the squalid and degrading conditions in which she henceforth finds herself. From Chapter 8 on, the interaction of heredity and environment dramatically continue to control Gervaise and her family’s fortunes. Surrounded by a miserable and corrupt urban atmosphere, Gervaise becomes negligent and totally loses control of her life. As a result, her workmanship declines, she loses customers, and at the end her economic situation deteriorates completely. Explains Zola,

But Gervaise felt nice and cosy in the middle of all this. She hadn’t noticed the shop getting dirtier and dirtier, she just grew as accustomed to dangling wallpaper and greasy woodwork as she was to wearing torn skirts and
not washing her ears. The dirt itself was a comfy nest in which she loved
snuggling down. It was a real thrill to let things slide, to wait for the
dust to stop up the holes and cover everything with velvet, to feel the
house weigh you down into an idle numbness. Her peace and quiet came first,
the nest could go to hell. She had stopped worrying about her debts which
went on mounting. She was losing her sense of right and wrong – she would
pay or not pay, it was just vague and she preferred not to know. (L 279)

This shows Gervaise’s wholly demoralized state. She does not care about anything except
satisfying her most basic animalistic instincts.

In fact, like Coupeau, she has inherited the tendency to drink from her father. And, at last, as she is repeatedly offered drink, as her husband becomes a burden and her
business a failure, her debts prove overwhelming, and her hopes for the future are
extinguished, the heretofore hidden gene responsible for a predisposition to alcoholism
prompts her to yield to the consolation of liquor. Alcohol, her a means of escape and
consolation, leads her to the worst state of senselessness. Her self-indulgence in over-
eating and drinking in order to forget her worries leads her to a total loss of her former
personality and descent into the extreme laziness seen in Coupeau earlier in the novel.

Despite her initially strong opposition to drinking, Gervaise falls prey to
alcoholism. Lilian Furst explains Gervaise’s inevitable attraction to alcoholism: “she has
an ingrained physical and moral predisposition to alcoholism, which has greater force than
her will power or her conscious desires” (49). Situated in this uncontrollable environment,
Gervaise ends up being a helpless victim. When Coupeau, who has suffered with terrible
delirium tremens, dies, Gervaise remains alone facing the cold neglect and contempt of her
neighbors. She has no more choice in her desperate life except to continue to slide
downward.
She lasted out like this for months, sinking lower and lower, swallowing the vilest insults, drawing a little nearer to starvation each day. As soon as she had a few coppers she drank them and banged against the wall; people made her do the dirty jobs round the place. One evening somebody bet she wouldn’t eat something disgusting; but she did, to earn ten sous. (L 422)

To the neighbors who make fun of her miserable hunger and hopeless state, Gervaise no longer exists as a person. Before long, deserted and forgotten, Gervaise is “discovered in her hole, turning green already” as the novel come to its end (L 422).

In *L’Assommoir*, Zola focuses much of his interest on and repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the influence of environment and heredity on ordinary people’s lives. In effect, the milieu in the novel, the filthy and immoral slums in Paris, encourages characters who are soft in mind and will and are particularly vulnerable to environmental influence to unconsciously slide into a state of despair and corruption. Heredity, which takes the form primarily of a predisposition to alcoholism in this novel, powerfully produces the atavistic developments recorded. With the help of chance occurrence, harsh environment and hidden heredity eventually work together to make the characters’ struggle for survival futile. These are typical factors embodied in the themes of Zola’s naturalistic novels.

Working with real materials which can be found “here and now,” Zola also uses imagination to the fullest. *L’Assommoir* includes many sensational and sordid scenes unavoidable in dealing with degeneration of characters, but the novel’s emphasis, as Zola states in his preface, is on the everyday and commonplace. In order to present life as it is, Zola not only chooses a modern subject from contemporary lower-class life but also treats it in an unusually forthright and direct way. The unconcealed vulgarities and the coarseness of the language in *L’Assommoir* appropriately complement Zola’s endeavors to embrace lower-class life as it is.
Frank Norris, an American disciple of Emile Zola, admired him for his “daring exercise of both imagination and reason” in capturing the truth of life and human conditions (McElrath, *Frank Norris* 18-19). His understanding of Zolaesque naturalism, as revealed in his essays on Zola, directly informs Norris’s concepts and practice of prose fiction, and is essential to historians’ present definition of the naturalistic movement in America (Pizer, *Literary Criticism* 69). As he argued in “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” Norris does not see Zola as a realist: “But that Zola should be quoted as a realist, and as a realist of realists, is a strange perversion” (85). According to Norris, Zola did, of course, accurately represent the human conditions in the modern world; what Norris saw in Zola’s novels was as true to life as anything he found in William Dean Howell’s works. However, more important to Norris, Zola also plumbed the depths of the extraordinary, grotesque, and irrational factors in human experiences. In “Zola’s Rome,” another essay written in 1896, Norris thinks highly of Zola’s realistic side dealing with “the exterior aspects of Rome” (61). About Zola’s excellence in capturing the outer aspects of Roman life and even Vatican bureaucracy, Norris writes admiringly: “Zola sees Rome through the eyes of his character Pierre, and he sees it in its entirety. When the great naturalist has done with a description, one may be sure that the last word has been said” (61). Yet at the same time, Norris pays more attention to Zola’s remarkable artistic sense of bringing romantic features to the materialistic surface.

But *Rome* is not all mere description and ecclesiastical intrigue. A red thread of passion runs through the story. The critics who can see no romance in Naturalism may reflect upon this story of Benedetta and Dario. It involves a thwarted love affair, a stabbing at night in the shadow of a doorway, and culminates in the poisoning of Dario by his rival Prada, and Benedetta’s death upon the dead body of her lover, the whole affair
taking place in and about an old Italian palace. Certainly all this is
romance enough. (62-63)

Here is what appealed most to Norris as a naturalist writer: Zola’s ability to handle the
extraordinary, grotesque and even disgusting in human nature and experience. As he
declares in “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” “Terrible things must happen to the characters of
the naturalistic tale” (86). And this is just as true in Norris’s novels as in Zola’s. In both
McTeague (1899) and Vandover and the Brute (1914), Norris explores and pictures on an
equally grand scale the fictional territory of the abnormal and terrible.

In fact, McTeague was inspired by a real crime which happened in San Francisco
in 1893. The Sarah Collins murder, along with Zola’s fictional works, was a direct source
of inspiration causing Norris to want to write McTeague. Among others of Zola’s novels,
L’Assommoir had the greatest effect on the creation of McTeague. As Pizer explains, it is
easy to find traces of L’Assommoir in McTeague, for example, McTeague’s and Trina’s
happy life in earlier chapters, its love triangle, and its detailed description of middle- and
lower-class environment (“Genesis” 291). The protagonists’ gradual decline after initial
success and prosperity are the most crucial characteristics shared by the plots of both
novels.

As the story goes on, terrible things happen to McTeague and Trina as they did to
Gervaise and Coupeau. Given the fact that McTeague has traits inherited from his
alcoholic father, there exists a potential danger. However, at the beginning of the novel,
they do not appear active. Although Mac is dull and slow, he is kind and simple in his
character. Mac, who owns his own dental parlors, is living a placid life, satisfied with his
monotonous but secure state until Trina enters his life.

Mac, like Gervaise, experiences success in his life by transcending the limitations
of both his low intelligence and, especially, his humble origins. About Mac’s youth, Norris
tells the readers:

The six lugubrious airs that he knew, always carried him back to the time when he was a car-boy at the Big Dipper Mine in Placer County, ten years before. He remembered the years he had spent there trundling the heavy cars of ore in and out of the tunnel under the direction of his father. For thirteen days of each fortnight his father was a steady, hard-working shift-boss of the mine. Every other Sunday he became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol. [. . .] He had learnt [his profession as dentist] after a fashion, mostly by watching [a] charlatan operate. He had read many of the necessary books, but he was too hopelessly stupid to get much benefit from them. [. . .] When he opened his “Dental Parlors,” he felt that his life was a success, that he could hope for nothing better. (2-3)15

Unlike his parents, Mac has come to enjoy the pleasures of middle-class life. As his mother wished, he achieves success by becoming a practicing dentist who has his own offices. In his uncomplicated routine, Mac feels contentment and even enjoyment. Despite Norris’s earlier comment on his alcoholic father, in succeeding chapters Mac seems to be more like his mother—achievement-oriented. His decline begins after his marriage to Trina.

Trina Sieppe, who is Mac’s friend Marcus’s cousin, enters this simple and childlike young man’s life when she comes to him for dental work. Her presence first confuses him, then triggers his latent sexual instincts. When Mac administers ether to Trina for oral surgery, he stares at her unconscious form. Norris adds a comment on the promptings at work: “The animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that in him were so close to the surface leaped to life, shouting and clamoring” (Mc 30). Unable to control the animal in him, Mac suddenly “leaned over and kissed her, grossly, full on the
mouth” (Mc 31). This scene reminds readers of the one in *L’Assommoir* where drunken Coupeau, without any sense of shame, forces Gervaise to kiss him. While the scene in *L’Assommoir* introduces “the first step downwards in their [Coupeau’s and Gervaise’s] slow descent into squalor” (L 152), Norris implies in his scene what are common animalistic instincts in humans. The explanation about Mac’s action following the scene indicates Norris’s understanding of sexual desire as a natural and inevitable human instinct which awaits activation in every child of man.

Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and of his father’s father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation, tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?

But McTeague could not understand this thing. It had faced him, as sooner or later it faces every child of man; but its significance was not for him. (Mc 32)

At the same time, by placing the scene in an early chapter of the novel, Norris takes Mac’s sexual desire as a practical motivation for proposing to Trina. The Victorian moral code which Mac has known forces him to propose marriage to Trina. Although she first refuses his aggressive proposal, he once again proposes when he kisses her at the B Street Station: “Suddenly he took her in his enormous arms, crushing down her struggle with his immense strength. Then Trina gave up, all in an instant, turning her head to his. They kissed each other, grossly, full in the mouth” (Mc 84). About this second meeting, Pizer points out that Norris “is concerned not with a special flaw in McTeague or Trina, but with a sexual determinism affecting all men” (“Late Nineteenth-Century” 310). The sexual determinism brings Trina and McTeague together.

When Trina and Mac move toward their wedding day, their progress as a couple is
accelerated by the fact that Trina has won a $5,000 lottery prize. On the surface, Trina and Mac enjoy a happy period in which their life improves more and more. “Under Trina’s influence in their home environment, the cruder traits of the onetime miner disappear” (McElrath, Frank Norris 43). Mac has not only won Trina but, as an engagement present from her, obtains his other major wish, the gilt molar to be used as an advertisement for his dental parlors.

In observing Mac’s and Trina’s progress in life in light of L’Assommoir, as McElrath relates, there occur two other, less happy, ominous developments in the plot following their marriage. The first is Marcus’s ever-increasing rage over having given Mac permission to court his former sweetheart and thus having been deprived of the $5,000 lottery prize that might have been his had he married Trina. Marcus’s uncontrollable jealousy and anger at the McTeagues results in a violent confrontation between Mac and Marcus, which sets the stage for a fatal blow he will deliver to the dentist and his wife. Marcus’s revenge on Mac and Trina will prove fatal for both.

Meanwhile, another major development occurs as Trina’s greed begins to loom larger and larger as a defining trait of her character. Winning of the $5,000 effects a dramatic change in her personality and when Mac makes a mistake in a real-estate transaction, Trina harshly blames him and hysterically cries, “Thirty-five dollars just thrown out of the window.” Norris adds at this point; “Every instinct of her parsimony [is] aroused” (Mc 205). Like Marcus, Trina is enraged by the loss of money. Her obsession with money becomes even more obvious as Mac is deprived of his occupation by Marcus’ reports to the California regulatory authorities that McTeague does not have a diploma qualifying him to practice dentistry. At the hour of trial for the couple, Trina, who fears economic privation more than anything else, is willing to give up Mac to protect her lottery money.
As with Gervaise’s and Coupeau’s, Mac’s and Trina’s degeneration rapidly progresses. In a state of extreme depression and irritation, Trina endlessly reminds Mac of his impotence and unintentionally changes the personality of the man who has been an essentially docile husband. In Chapter 15, as Mac is leaving their wretched flat to search for a job, Trina lies to him, saying that she has to buy heating oil and meal tickets and cannot give him a nickel for car fare:

“Always after me about money,” muttered the dentist; but he emptied his pockets for her, nevertheless.

“I—you’ve taken it all,” he grumbled. “Better leave me something for car fare. It’s going to rain.”

“Pshaw! You can walk just as well as not. A big fellow like you ’fraid of a little walk; and it ain’t going to rain.” (Mc 290)

But Trina was wrong. It does rain. When he walks homeward without a job, in a cold drizzle which chills him to the bone, Mac reflects on what he has suffered and blames niggardly Trina whom he believes has become “worse than old Zerkow,” the miserly junkman who lives in their neighborhood (Mc 291). At this time, Heise, a Polk Street shopkeeper, calls Mac into a saloon and treats him to whiskey for his health. A latent hereditary trait is activated: like his father, Mac becomes violent. Mac soon becomes a drunken “beast” like his alcoholic father.

It was curious to note the effect of the alcohol upon the dentist. It did not make him drunk, it made him vicious. So far from being stupefied, he became, after the fourth glass, active, alert, quick-witted, even talkative; a certain wickedness stirred in him then; he was intractable, mean; and when he had drunk a little more heavily than usual, he found a certain pleasure in annoying and exasperating Trina, even in abusing and hurting her. (Mc 305)
When he is drunk, his timidity and passivity under normal conditions disappear. In fact, Mac’s degeneracy is immediately prominent, as may be seen in his violent and sadistic abuse of his wife:

> The people about the house and the clerks at the provision stores often remarked that Trina’s fingertips were swollen and the nails purple as though they had been shut in a door. Indeed, this was the explanation she gave. The fact of the matter was that McTeague, when he had been drinking, used to bite them, crunching and grinding them with his immense teeth, always ingenious enough to remember which were the sorest. Sometimes he extorted money from her by this means, but as often as not he did it for his own satisfaction. (Mc 309)

Mac is totally changed. His one-time meek and caring attitude toward his wife is not seen anymore. Indeed, he experiences keen gratification when hurting his wife.

As Mac becomes a sadist, Trina makes the necessary adjustments. From the beginning in their married life, Trina showed fear about losing her sense of personal security. According to McElrath, she has a mania for external order and stability because her “remarkably weak ego” was shaped in a household “where independence was not encouraged but conformity to her father’s will was” (Frank Norris 45). She can’t accept the loss of what is a source of security, Mac, and so she endures his abuse. Worse, Trina comes to enjoy the pains instead of resisting the violent abuse. Trina thus experiences further degeneration as Mac’s sadism is matched by her masochism:

> And in some strange, inexplicable way this brutality made Trina all the more affectionate; aroused in her a morbid, unwholesome love of submission, a strange, unnatural pleasure in yielding, in surrendering herself to the will of an irresistible, virile power. (Mc 309-310)

Her perverted love for her husband when he is brutal progressively becomes stronger.
With this masochist type of reaction, Trina adjusts herself to the married life that has become a nightmarish disaster.

Trina’s descent becomes even more bizarre since, at the same time, her attachment to and veritable worship of money is as grotesque as the marriage. As a German-Swiss descendent, according to Norris’s theory of racial traits, Trina inherited a passion for saving from her ancestors. Early in the novel, Norris explained,

It soon became apparent that Trina would be an extraordinarily good housekeeper. Economy was her strong point. A good deal of peasant blood still ran undiluted in her veins, and she had all the instinct of a hardy and penurious mountain race—the instinct which saves without any thought, without idea of consequence-saving for the sake of saving, hoarding without knowing why. (Mc 134)

But, as McElrath points out, it is clear that more than Swiss ancestry is at work by the time she hysterically chides Mac for losing $35 (Frank Norris 45). In addition to this instinctive niggardliness, her obsession for security makes her cling frantically to her money. More than anything else (even than her husband), she feels, money can give her the most solid protection. The more she feels this way, the worse becomes her attachment to money. She even speaks to money as she does to other human beings.

“Ah, the dear money, the dear money,” she would whisper. “I love you so!
All mine, every penny of it. No one shall ever, ever get you. How I’ve worked for you! How I’ve slaved and saved for you. And I’m going to get more;
I’m going to get more, more, more; a little every day.” (Mc 308)

Although Trina would not surrender any possible source of security in her increasingly threatened life, she loses all of a sudden, on the same day, both Mac and the money that was not invested with her uncle. Without warning, Mac disappears after stealing the
savings that she has kept out of his reach. Another bit of tragic news, received shortly thereafter, was that she has also lost her source of personal income: she cannot continue her manufacture of Noah’s Ark sets because her chewed hand has become infected and two of her fingers and her thumb have to be amputated.

Trina’s physical and mental condition worsens as she next works as a scrubwoman in a kindergarten. Although, at first, she seemed to lament Mac’s desertion, she is much more upset about the loss of her money. Therefore, she repeatedly thinks that she will not forgive Mac. And her passion for money correspondingly deepens:

Her avarice had grown to be her one dominant passion; her love of money for the money’s sake brooded in her heart, driving out by degrees every other natural affection. She grew thin and meager; her flesh clove tight to her small skeleton; her small pale mouth and little uplifted chin grew to have a certain feline eagerness of expression; her long, narrow eyes glistened continually, as if they caught and held the glint of metal. (Mc 354)

She is not satisfied at receiving the interest on the lottery money she deposited with Uncle Oelbermann. Thus she decides to retrieve it in gold pieces from her uncle. Only the money gives her the feeling of safety and satisfaction.

She had her money, that was the main thing. Her passion for it excluded every other sentiment. There it was in the bottom of her trunk, in the canvas sack, the chamois-skin bag, and the little brass match-safe. Not a day passed that Trina did not have it out where she could see and touch it. One evening she had even spread all the gold pieces between the sheets, and had then gone to bed, stripping herself, and had slept all night upon the money, taking a strange and ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat piece the length of her entire body. (Mc 360-361)
By this time Trina has largely forgotten about Mac and finds her sole source of satisfaction in seeing and playing with her money. When Mac returns, penniless, for aid, she rebuffs him. Driven by rage, he beats her to death, fleeing with her sack of gold coins. The story of the degeneration of the two erstwhile lovers thus comes to an end: Mac meets his own fate in Death Valley during his flight from the law.

As this chapter has examined, Zola and his American disciple Frank Norris are faithful to the philosophical premise of degeneration in character. They believed that, just as animals were transformed by the surroundings to which they adapted, man was refashioned by the environment in which he lived. In the preface of his novel L’Assommoir, Zola emphasizes the role of milieu in the lives of ordinary people:

I wanted to depict the inevitable downfall of a working-class family in the polluted atmosphere of our urban areas. The logical sequel to drunkenness and indolence is the loosening of family ties, the filth of promiscuity, the progressive loss of decent feelings and, as the climax, shame and death. It is morality in action, just that. . . . It is a work of truth, the first novel about the common people which does not tell lies but has the authentic smell of the people. (L 21)

In order to prove this belief on environmental impact more effectively, naturalist writers often selected men and women from the lower classes. Zola and Norris posit that the lower classes are easily dominated by outer forces such as poverty, and at the same time, are most driven by instincts. The weak and passive characters of the naturalistic novels are “afflicted by an hereditary taint and submissively responded to, and affected by, their milieu” (Ahnebrink 268). Wretched environmental conditions and hereditary traits work hand in hand to lead lower class characters in L’Assommoir and McTeague to degeneration. Gervaise and McTeague are “both poor creatures who want above all a place to rest and be
content, yet who are brought low by their needs and desires” (Pizer, “Late Nineteenth-Century” 311).

Another important factor which enables those two major influences to work together hand in hand is chance development. Such chance developments as Trina’s winning of the lottery prize and Coupeau’s falling from a roof are necessary devices for writers who desire to provide “a meaningfully coherent explanation” (McElrath, *Frank Norris* 53). In the naturalistic universe, where nothing spiritual or transcendental exists, natural laws control everything. Random and unpredictable chance, which intersects natural laws, complicates the interaction between heredity and environment.

Because they are mainly dealing with man and all his primitive impulses and instincts, Zola and Norris give serious consideration to instincts and hidden, unconscious urges as great driving forces. The frank portrayal of sex is another characteristic of naturalistic writings. In both novels, love is no longer ethically conditioned but is reduced to sexual desire. As a strong natural force, sex controls characters in such a manner that they cannot escape its influence.

Being attracted to this method of scientific observation and concrete illustration of human nature in Western literary works, some Korean writers in 1920, decades later than European and American writers, adopted the spirit of literary naturalism and began to publish experimental stories of their own. For both Korean and Japanese intellectuals who experienced rapid change from feudal society, it was a shocking but fresh discovery of a new literature, especially pertinent to Korea. Japan volunteered to accept this Western influence. Korea had another reason for finding naturalistic writing pertinent after it was forcefully invaded by Japan. Korean people not only suffered a loss of national identity but, on a more personal level, a keen sense of limitations on the exercise of free will because of Japanese domination. Korean intellectuals consequently began to pay close
attention to their condition as veritable pawns of the Japanese. They had good reason to agree with the Western naturalists who depicted people as controlled by various deterministic factors. Kim Tongin, among other Korean writers in the early twentieth-century, found literary naturalism a compatible means of describing and interpreting Korean experience: socio-economic conditions in Korea were similar to those in Europe and the U.S. that originally gave rise to Euro-American naturalistic fiction.

It is within this historical context that I will discuss Kim Tongin’s three short stories and two novellas. I chose these five tales because they are the naturalistic masterpieces in Kim’s canon. “A Sorrow of the Weak” (1919) and The Story of Kim Yŏnsil (1947) are his first and last published novellas. They have not yet been translated into English, and so my own translation will be used in this dissertation. I will discuss each story according to its order of publication.
CHAPTER 3  
“A SORROW OF THE WEAK”: THE ADVENT OF THE KOREAN NATURALIST

Kim Tongin wrote his first novella, “A Sorrow of the Weak,” for his magazine *Creation*. When this story was published in 1919, the Korean literary world encountered for the first time a blatantly naturalistic subject — sexual instinct and its influence on human behavior — in an artistic work. Sexuality is of central significance in this story and the story’s concentration on sexuality took Korean literature in a new direction. As noted in the previous chapter, many young intellectuals in modern Korea had been under the influence of Yi. Now Kim Tongin attempted to counter Yi’s moralistic performances by writing stories more truthful to everyday life and every individual. As Won Hyunggop points out, Kim focused on the issues of sexual desire and its consequences throughout the story, without attempting moral lessons or inspirational uplift of the reader.\(^{16}\)

More specifically, “A Sorrow of the Weak” was a critical reaction to Yi’s idealism regarding man as a noble creature superior to others in the instinct-governed animal kingdom. Whereas Yi featured idealized platonic love in his novels, Kim’s story instead pictured the heroine as becoming sexually aroused, which certainly shocked at least his conservative Korean readers. Indeed, Japanese government censors judged that he had gone too far beyond the bounds of decency, and he was imprisoned for several months for having violated the publication law (Won 314). At the earliest stage in his career, then, he emphasized the fact that human beings are sexually driven creatures, like the beasts of the jungle. Thus, when initially describing his heroine’s appearance, Kim intentionally stressed her sexual attraction for men: “Elizabeth was looking around on the bus to find a seat. She saw – hatred in old women, jealousy in young women, and love in men – in all of their eyes. . . . Men cast their eyes on Elizabeth repeatedly. She knew that they secretly
The protagonist, Elizabeth Kang, is a pretty young woman, who works as a resident governess at Baron K’s house. In her employer’s house, Elizabeth has a good relationship with the mistress and gets along well with the children, but Baron K is the exception: as with all Korean men in 1900s, he is the master of his own household who exercises absolute authority over everyone who lives there, especially the women. Elizabeth’s parents have died and this 19-year-old has no relatives except an aunt who lives in a far away country town; she needs to work in order to continue her education. Losing her parents when she was young, she grew up without adult guidance and, more importantly, the maternal care through which a daughter can learn about the relationship between love and sex. For that reason she is very naïve, and, for a 19-year old, behaves immaturesly. This is seen when she falls in love with a young college student named Lee Whan. Although she is infatuated with Lee, hers is more like one-sided love.

One day when she visits her friend Hyesook, she hears that Lee Whan is a cousin of another friend, S. Having earlier confessed her feelings for Lee Whan to Hyesook, Elizabeth realizes that Hyesook shared her secret with S because of the way they laughed at her. But as she returns to Baron K’s house, her feelings of embarrassment give way to happiness as she thinks of Lee Whan. When Elizabeth enters her room, her friends’ laughter again resonates in her mind. Even though she is unsure how Lee feels toward her, she once more indulges in idle reveries of her happy future with him:

[with Lee Whan], and other unrelated fantasies came and went. After two hours of the endless fancies and nice thoughts [. . .] She was falling to sleep. [. . .] She went to bed and lay upon it completely naked. She soon fell asleep after enjoying the same fantasies that recurrent
Kim was absolutely intentional when he had Elizabeth sleeping naked in this scene. Prudent readers have good reason to anticipate what would happen next. Elizabeth’s sexual encounter with Baron K is prearranged since she is already aroused by her romantic fantasies.

In the middle of a dream, Elizabeth is awakened by the baron, who has entered her room uninvited. Up to this point in the story, he has barely acknowledged Elizabeth’s presence, simply treating her as an employee. But, this night, he gives her special attention. Despite her inexperience, she knows what the man wants from her – as does Kim’s reader. Elizabeth’s receptive reaction to Baron K’s aggressiveness is intended to be sensational for contemporaneous readers because she betrays their expectations regarding decent women in Korean society. Kim already transcended the moral limits in literary art when he presented the heroine in the nude. But he goes even farther when Elizabeth does not repel the baron. Both her inexperience in relationships with males and her subservient position as a female employee account in part for this.

Without saying a word, Baron K stared Elizabeth in the face.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” [she asked].

Avoiding Baron’s eyes, she turned over in her bed making a strange giggling sound — a begging laugh, no, a beggar’s laugh [she thought].

“O my!” she exclaimed to herself. “Isn’t this the laugh of a prostitute, a prostitute’s behavior?”

Elizabeth’s rejections of his advances failed several times, and by the end [of the ordeal] she came to hate herself. She was not sure with whom she was angry. But she was angry with this unknown one and said emphatically -- but still in a low voice— twisting her body,
“No, No.”

There was still no answer from him. ("SW" 14-15)

As the scene clearly shows, a conflicted Elizabeth experiences profound disorientation. It is obvious that she feels embarrassed and uneasy before Baron K’s gaze. Like a powerless animal, Elizabeth tries to avoid confrontation by laughing nervously. Elizabeth mentions both beggars and prostitutes who are too powerless to claim their rights or wishes. By comparing herself to these groups of people, Elizabeth suggests that she was in a subordinate position. But more importantly, in terms of Kim’s naturalistic intent, she slowly reveals the awakening of the sexuality that has been dormant within her. She knows well that she ought to resist the baron. Nevertheless, in her total confusion, and in her state of nudity, she yields to her sexual drive. Paying close attention to Elizabeth’s reaction to the temptation, Kim demonstrates his real interest in the animalistic instincts normally concealed in humans. Like other female characters such as Trina in McTeague, Gervaise in L’Assommoir, and Maggie in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, Elizabeth is trapped because of her instinctive desire and the romantic fantasies that activated it.

After this event, Elizabeth becomes more audacious and active in her affair with Baron K. He regularly visits her in her room, and she waits for him with feelings of hungry expectation. Their secret relationship continues until she finds that she is pregnant. Although she wants to have an abortion, Baron K asks a doctor to prescribe a tonic. Mistaking the tonic as a medicine for abortion, Elizabeth waits for its effects, but ultimately realizes that she is instead getting healthier. Meanwhile, she is neither teaching the children nor attending school, and this provides the baron an excuse to discharge Elizabeth. He convinces his wife that Elizabeth is sick, hiding her pregnancy, and is not able to look after their children properly. Feeling rebellious toward the baron, Elizabeth storms out of his house, heading toward the town where her aunt is living, and thinks of
initiating a paternity suit.

Although Korea was going through modernization in every aspect of its social norms and customs, including class leveling, it was still not acceptable circa 1919 for an employee to sue an aristocrat. When Elizabeth tells her aunt of her intention to sue the baron, her aunt tries to dissuade her:

“No, you cannot sue him. We are lowly persons and he is an aristocrat. Isn’t it true?”

Elizabeth, who had not yet made a firm decision, now made up her mind because of her aunt’s words. She felt that she had to object to what her aunt had said.

“Is there difference between yangban [the aristocrats] and sangnom [the common people] in a trial?”

“But it is still the world of physical strength.”

Elizabeth frowned. Her aunt’s ignorance, when relating the issue of class to this nonsense about physical strength, made her feel angry. But, on the other hand, looking back on her past, she realized that her aunt’s words were not totally wrong. Nevertheless, she really wanted to bring the case to trial. (“SW” 39)

In fact, before this conversation with her aunt, Elizabeth has hesitated. She is not free from concerns about others’ reactions and the consequences of a trial. These include the complication of family life in Baron K’s household, hurting the baron’s wife who helped Elizabeth so much and even gave her a large amount of money when she left, and disapproving reactions of her school-mates and especially Lee Whan, her true love. The aunt’s comment on class difference, however, provokes her, and she decides to go through a trial, even though she knows that she cannot be the baron’s equal before the law due to
his higher social status. Thus, in addition to the sexual desire that represents the biological
determinant in naturalistic works like this one, the emphasis on class difference between
Elizabeth and Baron K draws the readers’ attention to the role that a social or
environmental determinant also plays in Elizabeth’s life.

Seeing a lawyer who appears on the baron’s behalf in the courthouse, Elizabeth
feels desperation. She is without legal counsel. Compared to the well-prepared and
knowledgeable lawyer, her defense is not persuasive to the judge. She knows nothing
about the law. The result is predictable from the beginning. Hoping to control the situation
to her own advantage, she is the one who is hamstrung by established procedures fully
understood by her adversary. Elizabeth loses the trial. The next day, Elizabeth seriously
reconsiders her life and fully realizes her weakness. Her situation becomes even clearer as
she looks upward in a small room she stays at her aunt’s house:

   Next thing to catch her attention was a spider web at the corner of the
   ceiling. Elizabeth looked closely at the center of it. While she was
   watching, a fly flew toward the web and then stuck to it. After a
   moment of shaking, a spider that had been invisible came out of
   nowhere to grasp the fly. At the moment, the web shook tremendously.
   But, after a while, the shaking of the web stopped, the fly appeared to have
died, and the spider alone crawled around. Elizabeth turned away, shivering.

   “What is different . . . between the case of that fly . . . and mine?

   What difference? . . . ” (“SW” 45)

The comparison of the helpless fly’s situation in the spider web to her own resonates with
other naturalistic writers’ illustrations of a “web of circumstance.” Kim thus emphasizes
the idea that this female character’s predicament was caused by uncontrollable
circumstances resulting from unpredictable chance developments. This careless and
simple-minded young woman was lured into and became engaged in an affair with Baron K. Then she was driven out of his house when her presence became a threat to the happiness of the family. Her final gesture in opposition to Baron K was only another failure.

Depressed after losing the case, Elizabeth becomes sick for several days and suffers a miscarriage. The scene in which she is holding the bloody fetus while lying in her bed was not only sensational by 1919 standards but also another markedly naturalistic development marking the beginning of degeneration, a typical plot development in naturalistic art. This is why Kang Insook relates Elizabeth to Zola’s characters: “They are aberrant as well as exceptional” (Studies 428). Elizabeth feels not only ambivalent toward her incompletely formed child but shows sign of incipient madness: “She wanted to chew up the bloody lump—there was hatred and love in it” (“SW” 52). This statement makes clear the heroine’s abnormal state of mind.

After eventually regaining her sanity, Elizabeth again reflects on her life. She fixated on the fact that she is truly powerless, and she suddenly relates her weakness to that of every human being. The heroine’s philosophical reasoning of her weakness leads her to a conclusion. “At the moment, some strange ideas came to her head. ‘A sorrow of weakness! What a great insight!’ she thought.” This prompts her to be “eager to compose something like an article or novel on this issue” (“SW” 52). Her voice abruptly becomes meditative and sermonic:

“Anyway . . . Yes, that’s right. The topic is ‘people in the 20th century’. I will start the first line with ‘The sorrow of the weak’ and close the last one with ‘the weakness of all modern people.’”

She mumbled while thinking about the story that she was going to write.

“[I] have to put the passage of twenty years of my life as a marionette
in my story.” Then [she] started writing her story in her mind.

Once she was sure that it was complete, she committed it to paper
and read aloud the last phrase, “every modern people’s weakness!” (“SW” 53)

That is, Elizabeth produces a story very much like Kim Tongin’s “A Sorrow of the Weak.”

She relates an individual’s experience of impotence in the face of forces — biological and social — which make that person feel like a marionette whose movements are determined for it and over which it has no control of its own. Like Elizabeth, Kim takes his reader to the point at which he or she is positioned to generalize. What Kim suggests through his character is that Elizabeth’s experience is not unique. To some degree we are all like marionettes and, sometimes, like flies caught in a spider web.

The reader who might have expected to encounter a moralistic and idealistically didactic message in the story, as seen in Yi’s works, is thus disappointed. Although this story ends with a sermonic passage about true love and true power, the ending sounds inadequate, considering the story’s general tone. There is the possibility of interpreting the passage as Kim’s suggestion of the weakness of Korean people who were doomed to suffer under Japanese occupation and his encouragement of his fellow Koreans to overcome the national plight through patriotism and solidarity. But “A Sorrow of the Weak” instead leaves a strong impression of pessimism by its representation of an unjust and painful reality that the heroine necessarily meets in a harsh environment throughout the entire story. Kim depicts a young woman’s disastrous sexual initiation with a realistic style, not calling for reform but choosing instead to picture life the way it sometimes truly is. “A Sorrow of the Weak” was Kim Tongin’s first story, signalizing the debut of a new writer, and he consciously chose very sensational material to capture the reality of human life in a deterministic world. His direct treatment of human desire, especially sexual desire, in the story was scandalous enough to challenge his contemporaneous readers’ rigid ideas.
about literature. It rings of truth as he objectively records the impact of forces at work in
the lives of human beings such as Elizabeth, bringing to mind like situations faced by
other heroines of naturalistic works such as Stephen Crane’s Maggie Johnson and
Theodore Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt.
CHAPTER 4

“THE SEAMAN’S CHANT”: A SYNTHESIS OF REALISM AND ROMANTICISM

After making his debut before the literary world with the publication of “A Sorrow of the Weak,” Kim Tongin wrote one of his most widely appreciated stories, “The Seaman’s Chant,” in 1921, and as Kim Chunmi points out, while the former story has been regarded by many as a work of realism, the latter has been seen as an exemplary romantic tale (11). Yet these critics’ interpretations do not do justice to what Kim Tongin achieved in “The Seaman’s Chant.” This story, too, displays remarkable characteristics of literary naturalism. As is to be expected in a naturalistic work, the story is realistic, as well as romantic. As with Frank Norris’s theory and practice, literary naturalism is the combination of realism and romanticism for a special purpose. Donald Pizer writes, “Norris placed realism, romanticism, and naturalism in a dialectic, in which realism and romanticism were opposing forces, and naturalism was the transcending synthesis” (Theory and Practice 120). According to Norris, Pizer continues, naturalism integrated “both the concern for the surface detail of realism and the sensationalism and depth of romanticism” (Literary Criticism 271). Kim Tongin does the same in his naturalistic tale.

The voice heard at the beginning of “The Seaman’s Chant” is undeniably, even exuberantly romantic. The narrator tells the reader, It was heavenly weather, but not the kind where there is hardly a speck of cloud and the sky seems unapproachably high, as if looking down on men with contemptuous haughtiness. It was the kind of heavenly weather when the sky looks down on us through the low, pink blossoms of cloud as if it were an earnest sympathizer with men, offering to be our friend. It was a loving sky. I was lying at ease on the green grass at the foot of the slope of Peony Hill,
facing the Taedong River that incessantly pours blue water into the Yellow Sea.

(189)  
The narrator is, at this point, obviously not a naturalistic thinker; for the naturalist, nature is never sympathetic to mankind, but indifferent or—to use the narrator’s own word—sometimes seems at least haughty, if not contemptuous. Indeed, enchanted by the beautiful scene created by the arrival of spring, the narrator, in words suggestive of Wordsworth and Thoreau, reflects, “I cannot help thinking of Utopia whenever I see the beautiful scenery of spring and hear the fullness of the murmur of spring. What is our end in striving like this hour after hour? Isn’t it for construction of a Utopia?” (“SC” 189). He praises nature as giving him a taste of perfection and is filled with the emotional ecstasy frequently seen and heard in romantic era poems.

Such a passage is what prompted Kim Yunsik in 1987 to declare Kim Tongin a romantic writer and to criticize him severely for being one. He has no patience with Kim Tongin: assuming that Kim himself is the narrator, he complains,

Silently observing the Taedong river’s flow is only for people who don’t have to do anything for their living. Doing so has nothing to do with seeing life as it actually is. Tongin’s behavior is totally opposite to that of Chu Yohan who made everyday life the subject of his artistic works. (405)

In this criticism, Kim Yunsik identifies Kim as the polar opposite of a true realist author such as Kim’s close friend, Yohan. He considers Kim Tongin an idealistic, romantic trifler and pampered dilettante, who was born to a rich family in Pyongyang and could not understand or picture life as ordinary people see it.

What escapes Kim Yunsik’s notice, however, is that there is considerable realistic content in “The Seaman’s Chant.” The writer soon shows that there is another side to life besides what the narrator experiences as he introduces a second character. As the narrator
hears a nearby seaman begin singing a lugubrious song, his state of mind gradually moves from one of romantic ecstasy to one more typical of the post-romantic, modernist sensibility of Kim’s own time. The narrator recalls the fact that there is more than beauty in nature as he listens to a familiar kind of song sung in a sorrowful voice. This particular variety of song, known as Paettara’ki, typically evokes a melancholic response. Several years earlier, during his first visit to Youngyu, the birthplace of that music, the narrator heard such a song and learned of its origins. Paettara’ki is a traditional Korean seaman’s chant, a type of folk song sung by seafaring people who live on the northwestern coast of Korea. Curious as well as emotionally affected by what he hears, the narrator begins to search for the singer after his song ends. When he finds the man, he is not surprised by his appearance. It reflects his profession as well as the internal turmoil projected in his song: “His looks were as I imagined. His face, nose, mouth, eyes, and limbs, all were square, and his forehead featured deeply grooved wrinkles, and his dark eyebrows bespoke his torturous past, and also the simplicity of his personality” (“SC” 191). Being curious about this stranger, the narrator asks the man to tell of his life experiences. Thus the reader learns that this man, after a tragic event, left his hometown to wander for twenty years.

The seaman’s narrative tone, in contrast to the narrator’s complacent and fanciful voice, is appropriate for his tale of life’s complexity. Kim effectively combines the two different voices in the tale. The seaman talks in an especially somber way about what has happened to him and his family. The life-changing event that the seaman shares with the narrator is related to his relationship with his wife and his brother. He and his brother lost their parents when they were young, so the seaman, as the older brother, took charge of the family. As the brothers grew up, both married and lived near to each other. All four were happy, yet their happiness was marred by the seaman’s jealousy, which drove him to doubt his wife’s faithfulness and to become so enraged that he even battered her from time to
time. Unlike her husband, who was possessive and unsocial, the wife was of a gay temper
and got along well with everybody. Because everyone liked her, the seaman was jealous
about all of the relationships that his wife had formed. He particularly resented his brother
in this regard:

    His brother was a well-built man with a dignity unusual in a country youth,
    and was of fair complexion, even though he was always buffeted by the sea wind.
    That might have been a sufficient reason in itself [for the seaman] to
    be jealous, but he really couldn’t contain his fury since his wife was especially
    kind to his brother. (“SC” 193)

As seen in this passage, he was unable to control himself when his wife and his brother
were together, and the seaman became vexed when his wife treated his brother
affectionately. Thus, the seaman was prone to misinterpret purely coincidental events
when they seemed to indicate her infidelity. Here was a man whose common sense is
quickly overridden because he was governed by jealousy.

    Although Kim Yunsik gives no credit to Kim Tongin for thus realistically
    introducing the seaman’s story, criticizing it as only a romantic combination of
extraordinary, grotesque events which have nothing to do with everyday life (Study of Kim
476-477), acknowledgement of these true-to-life elements is crucial when evaluating a
work that is, in fact, realistic and psychologically probative. The seaman’s life story
unquestionably adds verisimilitude to the work, given the fact that such aberrant behavior
does occur in real life, and is the signature of highly emotional and irrational people.
While the seaman appears bizarre in his own account of his life, his type is not an
unfamiliar one in literature and in life. Indeed, Frank Norris – romantic, realist, and
naturalist – pictured the same type in McTeague. Marcus Schouler, whose jealousy and
greed eventually result in his death, is a realistic representation of this kind of personality.
His dominant passion determines his life. Midway in the novel, Marcus almost kills McTeague because of his envy of McTeague’s wealth and his extreme wrath:

“If it hadn’t been for me,” Marcus continued, addressing himself directly to McTeague, “you wouldn’t have had a cent of [Triana’s lottery prize]—no, not a cent. Where’s my share, I’d like to know? Where do I come in? No, I ain’t in it any more. I’ve been played for a sucker, an’ now that you’ve got all you can out of me, now that you’ve done me out of my girl and out of my money, you give me the go-by. Why, where would you have been to-day if it hadn’t been for me?

*     *     *

“This settles it right here. I’ve done with you. Don’t you ever dare speak to me again” – his voice was shaking with fury—“and don’t you sit at my table in the restaurant again. I’m sorry I ever lowered myself to keep company with such dirt. Ah, one-horse dentist! Ah, ten-cent zinc-plugger—hoodlum—mucker! Get your damn smoke outa my face.” (Mc 142-3)

Like Marcus, who next throws a knife at Mac and almost hits him, the seaman was governed by his possessiveness and uncontrollable passion. Thus, when he was aroused by this strong emotion, he usually ended up beating his wife, sometimes his brother, even his sister-in-law. Then he often comforted himself with violent sex—more like rape than otherwise. His behavior is very primitive and animalistic, as is that of many other characters in naturalistic works. For example, McTeague too physically abuses his wife when, like the seaman, he finds himself unable to exercise full control over her.

Despite his problematic character, however, the seaman and his wife lived together for a long while and, when things went well, they even seemed a happy couple. But then a sensationally provocative event occurred. As Frank Norris observed in his essay, “Zola as
a Romantic Writer,” “Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale” (274) – if it is truly naturalistic. Kim clearly meets this requirement in this short story. On a day when the traditional Korean fall holiday of Chusŏk was drawing near, he went shopping to buy a mirror for his wife. Since he lived in a small country town, he had to depart early in the morning for the far distant market. On his way home in the evening, he was very happy imagining his wife’s excitement and confident that the trouble he took to purchase this present was a profitable investment in their happiness. But at his house, an unexpected scene confronted him and triggered his rage.

Spread in the middle of the room was a table laden with cakes, and his brother, whose hood was all loosened and hanging behind his neck, and the fastening ribbon of whose jacket was almost untied, was standing in a corner. His wife’s hair was undone and the waist of her skirt had slid down to the hips. His wife and brother, on seeing him, did not stir a step, as if not knowing what to do.

The three just stood there like that for a while, lost. Then, his brother at last managed to speak: “Where has that rat escaped to?”

“Oh, a rat! A magnificent rat you were catching!” [replied the seaman].

He threw away his bundle, and even before he finished speaking, he grasped his brother by the collar. (“SC” 196)

What he had seen confirmed his long-standing doubts about his wife’s fidelity. Now developing a commonplace theme in naturalistic literature, Kim Tongin vividly describes how unpredictable turns of events, coincidences, determine the course of his characters’ life experience in unanticipated ways. The scene before him and its suggestion of an adulterous liaison seemed to confirm the seaman’s distrust of his wife. Losing his self-control, he punched both his wife and his brother, and drove the brother out of the house,
telling his wife that she should kill herself: “You dirty bitch! You deserve to die! Why don’t you drown your dirty body in the water and go to hell!” He continued to beat his wife until he had no strength left and then threw her out of the house, shouting: “Feed the fish bellies well!” (“SC” 197). Refusing to listen to their explanations of what had transpired, he was certain that both had betrayed him.

Despite the seaman’s unshakeable conviction, however, it turned out that appearances were deceptive. Blind to alternative readings of the scene because of his distrust of his wife and predisposition to jealousy, he subsequently learns that he had been too hasty in his leap to judgment.

The village faced west toward the sea, so night came later there than in other places, but it became dark at about eight o’clock. To light a lamp, he moved his back from the wall and went about to look for a match.

The match was not there in its accustomed place. He was feeling about here and there, and pushed his hand into a heap of old clothes when there came a squeaking sound and something ran out from the heap and rapidly trotted away to the other side.

“It really was a rat!” he cried out in faint voice and dropped down there, all his strength drained out of him. (“SC” 197)

The seaman now realized that he had made a series of misinterpretations concerning his wife and his own brother and that his long-standing doubts had caused disastrous consequences with the timely help of circumstances. Although he realized that he had misread the situation, he waited for his wife to return instead of searching for her right away. The night passed, but his wife did not come back. Instead she was found on the shore the next day, but was “not the pretty, vivacious woman she used to be, but a dead woman swollen to double her size and with foam in her mouth, in the mouth that used to
Along with the chance development that made the seaman lose control of himself and, later, “be out of his mind” as he brought her corpse home (“SC” 197), this sensational death of the wife enhances the naturalistic character of the tale. As with the focus on Elizabeth’s bloody fetus in “A Sorrow of the Weak,” naturalistic fictions typically include such horrific developments for the purpose of shocking the readers into an awareness of the less-than-benign aspects of life in the natural order. But the seaman’s misfortune did not end here. After the wife’s funeral, he suffered another loss because of his behavior.

They buried her the next day without much ceremony. On the face of his brother who trod behind him on the way home from the grave there was an expression of blame, as if [he were] saying, “What have you done, brother?”

His brother disappeared from their small village the day after the funeral. A couple of days went by without people taking much notice of his absence, but five or six days passed and his brother still did not return. When he made inquiries, he learned that someone who fit the description of his brother was seen several days before walking tiredly toward the east, with a small cloth sack on his back and with the red rays of the evening sun on his back. (“SC” 198)

Now alone, the seaman was overwhelmed by feelings of guilt because he knew that he had ruined his loved ones’ lives. To punish himself for his wrong doings, “At last he became a seaman, and boarded a ship to be at least always near the sea that had swallowed up his wife, and to inquire about his brother wherever he went” (“SC” 198).

Once again, chance – playing the prominent role assigned it by literary naturalists – advances Kim’s story when, nine years later, the seaman, shipwrecked and almost
drowned, meets his brother again. When he came back to consciousness, the seaman saw his brother tending to him. “Strangely enough, he was not even surprised, and slowly spoke to his brother, ‘Why, brother! How have you come here?’” The seaman’s brother was silent, then answered at length, “Brother, it all is fate” (“SC” 199).

The fictional situation is one that allows for a “happy ending” with the two brothers reconciled and – so to speak – living happily-ever-after together. This could appear a viable conclusion to any number of nineteenth-century romantic stories. Modern romantics, realists, and the famously grim naturalistic authors, on the other hand, typically do not opt for tragi-comedic resolutions of their plots. And so, Kim has his two brothers go their separate ways after this brief encounter, never to meet again.

As “The Seaman’s Chant” reaches its conclusion, fate is again referenced, this time by the seaman himself. When the narrator asks the seaman why he did not visit his hometown for a long time, he answers, “‘Well, things never go as one wants them to, . . . fate is the most powerful’” (“SC” 192). Then once again in reply, to the narrator’s question about his destination, the seaman answers that he will wander around according to his fate. Both brothers hold the traditional belief that the course of one’s life is “fated” to run in a predetermined way. At first glance, one may assume that Kim Tongin is of a like mind. As at the beginning of the story, however, there is good reason to distinguish Kim from his characters. For “fate” – traditionally conceived – is based upon the assumption that there is a supernatural intelligence governing how one’s life proceeds and that outcomes such as that of “The Seaman’s Chant” are determined by that supernatural intelligence. While the brothers may think that such is the case, one will search in vain in this and other works by Kim for signs that he acknowledges any supernatural dimension to life.

Kevin O’Rourke argues that “Korean naturalism and European naturalism have very little in common apart from the pessimism generated by the background of political
defeat and a certain bond of connectedness forged by determinism as a philosophy in the West and the notion of *Unmyŏng* (fate) in the Korean tradition” (“Realism” 652). According to O’Rourke, then, Koreans are fatalists, whereas the more rationalistic Euro-Americans are determinists. But this distinction is mostly a matter of semantics. Considering the fact that the concept of determinism was new to Korean intellectuals in the early twentieth century, it is understandable that Korean naturalists occasionally used the word *Unmyŏng* to explain things that happened to their characters. In a transitional phase, they needed a period of adjustment to become familiar with the new terminology of the twentieth century, and thus they themselves did not shy away from using fate as a figure of speech. While fate implies a metaphysical agency that predetermines a person’s experience, the philosophical determinism which naturalists strongly advance emphasizes natural cause-effect relationships. Kim Tongin breaks with tradition in this respect. In the story, the seaman’s personality and behavior, in fact, caused the tragic consequences. Kim completely excludes the serious consideration of the quasi-religious presence of fate.

Contrary to O’Rourke’s assumption, Kim adopts the new, modern way of looking at the human condition developed by his Western predecessors. Attracted by objective and analytical ways of approaching human behaviors and events, Kim creates characters who are governed by instinct and their character traits, and consequentially experience degeneration. When the seaman’s story ends, the narrator, who was a utopian dreamer at the beginning, feels that human life is indeed unpredictable and deterministic. He becomes aware of the sadness of life by fully registering the existential predicament of the seaman. With a newly gained vision of life after reading this story, the reader, too, is more sensitive to the human condition. This is what the naturalist Kim Tongin aimed to achieve by writing this tale.

Kim enables his reader to attain a more comprehensive view of life by
sensationally depicting the seaman and the narrator with a harmonious combination of realism and romanticism and modeling his own ideal of a truly naturalistic literature:

   When the essentials of realism – which determine how the story must be told – and romanticism – which has to do with the choice of events that vividly dramatize the truth – were successfully harmonized with each other, modern fictional literature attuned to modern people’s taste finally flourished. The characteristic of modern fictional literature which was appropriate for modern readers synthesized the two literary conventions, realism and romanticism, satisfying modern readers.

   (“The Triumph of Modern Novel” 178)

As seen in this statement, Kim Tongin is identical with Norris in his concept of the ideal type of fiction. Like Emile Zola and Frank Norris, Kim believed that a story must be told in a realistic way to be credible and to facilitate acceptance of the truths revealed through the extraordinary events it features. As he repeatedly insisted, Kim dedicated his life to literature that aimed to register human reality as it was. His complex vision of life is especially well-embodied in the art of “The Seaman’s Chant.”
CHAPTER 5

“POTATOES”: A STORY OF DEGENERATION IN COLONIAL KOREA

Kim Tongin’s most acclaimed story “Potatoes,” published in 1925, epitomizes his style as a literary naturalist. Indeed, its manifestation of a naturalistic sensibility is so self-evident that scholars prone to classify Kim as either romantic or realistic are forced to acknowledge that such is the fact of the matter. While Kim Yunsik never takes seriously the idea that Kim Tongin is a naturalist and concludes only that “Potatoes” is a work that typically shows “Tongin’s individuality” (Study of Kim 253), others have no difficulty with recognizing “Potatoes” as what it is. Kang Insook classifies Kim’s literary works in two categories: naturalistic and non-naturalistic (Studies 326). While considering “The Seaman’s Chant (1921),” “The Frenzied Sonata (1929),” The Story of Kim Yongsil (1947) as non-naturalistic writings, Kang declares that “Potatoes” is undeniably naturalistic in that the theme of the tale is that of the thoroughly deterministic role played by environment (Studies 430). Kevin O’Rourke points out that Kim’s protagonists “walk an inevitable path toward defeat” and cites “Potatoes,” which visualizes the defeating forces of “poverty and cupidity,” as a model work of Korean naturalism (“Realism” 652-653). Kim Chunmi writes that critics including Cho Yonghyun, Choen Yidoo, and Kim Woojong separate Kim’s literary works into categories of naturalistic, humanitarian, nationalistic, aesthetic, psychological, and romantic. But they all agree that “Potatoes” is an exemplary piece of naturalism (3-6).

As such, “Potatoes” serves another important function in any definition of Kim Tongin as an artist: the naturalism of the other works treated in the present study stands in higher relief because of the context provided by this particular short story. More obviously than in any other story Kim aligns himself with naturalistic writers such as Émile Zola and
Frank Norris, as he develops the theme of “Potatoes.” Kim’s purpose in “Potatoes” is to show how deterministic forces at work shape the heroine’s personality, how the environment influences her behavior, and how both developments propel her into a long slide downward into a degenerate condition reminiscent of that of Vandover in Norris’s _Vandover and the Brute_ and Gervaise in Zola’s _L’Assommoir._

Like Gervaise, the young heroine of the story named Pok-nyō is introduced as a kind, simple-minded and essentially good person. Born into a respectable family living in the household of a gentleman-scholar, Pok-nyō in her girlhood displayed a natural innocence, and at the same time registered the wholesome moral influence exerted by her parents.  

And although the strict discipline they once had as members of a gentleman-scholar’s household had disappeared from the time they fell in the world to the rank of farmer, still, more than in other farming families there was a sort of clear, strict, yet undefinable family code that remained in her house. Now Pok-nyō, who had grown up in the middle of this, of course regarded it as perfectly normal to bathe naked in the stream in summer with the girls from the other houses, and to run around the district with nothing but trousers on, but if she did, still she carried in her heart a sort of vague sense of refinement in regard to what is called morality. (6)  

Although she is too young to understand and to develop her moral consciousness on her own, Pok-nyō seems to attain it because of her relationship with and the influence of the members of her household. However, the worsening economic condition of the family dramatically changes Pok-nyō’s life. The first downward step occurs when the family must leave the gentleman-scholar’s residence and turn to farming for subsistence. The second
step downward is a more dramatic one. Just as Gervaise struggled to support her drunkard father when she was only eight years old and had a miserable childhood, Pok-nyō is sold to support her family when she becomes fifteen. Without providing a detailed explanation of her family’s economic state or the background developments leading to the sale of Pok-nyō, Kim Tongin simply records the fact and proceeds to provide a full account of the long-term consequences for Pok-nyō. Like Gervaise, whose life is negatively affected by three men in her life – her irresponsible father, malicious lover Lantier, and insensitive husband Coupeau— Pok-nyō’s life is shaped deleteriously by the husband who purchased her. Both Gervaise and Pok-nyō are victimized in a patriarchal society in which the males exercise their authority for their own selfish ends. But in Pok-nyō’s case, another factor looms large: the extreme poverty of people living in a colonized land is implicit in her tale. All the Koreans who are described in the story suffer the ills of economic privation and are mainly lower class agricultural laborers. In fact, they represent the Korean peasants who worked very hard only to produce the wealth that the Japanese extracted from them under colonial rule.

Given that Kim was an intellectual in a colonized country and wrote his major works during colonial times, it may surprise some that he avoids direct mention of the colonial government and its exploitation of the colonized. He does not refer to the Japanese at all – understandably, given the retaliation that would very likely have occurred in 1925. But the depiction of Pok-nyō’s situation itself does show how Korean people experienced degradation at the time of this national tribulation. Kim straightforwardly renders the downfall that a lowly peasant woman in colonial Korea could suffer.

There was a good reason that the ruin of Pok-nyō’s family is simply mentioned by Kim, with no additional comment on the cause. A nonchalant report of the fact implies that her family was not a special case, but a general phenomenon in colonized Korea. In
addition to this historical representation of Korean reality in the early twentieth century, “Potatoes,” more importantly, examines the potentially tragic condition of all human beings, focusing on the factor of irresistible environmental influences, especially economic ones.

Pok-nyŏ’s condition hardly improves when she becomes a wife. The widower in the laborer class to whom Pok-nyŏ was sold is shiftless and impudent. Marrying this extremely self-indulgent man who spent all his money to buy his little-girl-wife, Pok-nyŏ soon finds that she is expected to support both herself and her worthless husband.

Husband and wife discussed various ways and means, saw that there was no alternative, and so finally came inside the walls of Pyŏngyang to work as labourers. But the man was an idler and he couldn’t make a go of labouring.

He used to go off to the Yŏngkwan Pavilion with his A-frame on his back and spend the whole day looking down at the Taedong river. How could even labouring work out! (“Po” 95)

Unlike Pok-nyŏ who works hard and is diligent, the lazy husband is inclined to do nothing. As a result, the couple cannot afford to remain where they have lived, and so Pok-nyŏ takes a third step downward.

After she and her husband move out of the comparatively benign urban environment of Pyŏngyang into a rural area where all kinds of violence and crime prevail, the couple is greatly influenced by the harsh and unforgiving new environment. Kim writes, “Fighting, adultery, murder, theft, prison confinement – the shanty area outside the Seven Star Gate was a breeding ground for all that is tragic and violent in this world” (“Po” 93). In the newly chosen place for living, the couple “lived on in poverty” (“Po” 97). But still Pok-nyŏ is loyal to her role as a virtuous wife. Making all possible excuses for
doing so, she begins begging for her husband and herself. She has become desperate, but her vague moral sense still prevents her from practicing an easier way to earn money that other young women in the area have:

- Her face [. . .] was on the pretty side. Taking an example from the work the other women in the area usually did, she could have gone now and then to the house of a man who was earning [. . .] moderately well and she would have been able to make fifty or sixty jon a day, but as one who had grown up in a gentleman-scholar’s house she could not do that kind of work. (“Po” 97)

Although continuous stress and dreadful hunger cruelly plague Pok-nyō, because of her early upbringing, she cannot countenance the notion of prostitution.

- But, by living with her lazy husband, Pok-nyō gradually becomes as coarse and opportunistic as he is, and the harsh environment dramatically changes her attitude toward life. Since moving to the shanty area, she has been employed for slave wages at the backbreaking labor of picking caterpillars. She and the neighboring women toil under the merciless heat of the sun. With the other female laborers, she first works hard without recognizing some of the less reputable businesses going on there. But, eventually, Pok-nyō overcomes her reluctance and becomes involved in an affair with the overseer of the workplace: “From that day Pok-nyō also became one of the laborers who without doing any work got more wages” (“Po” 99). Bringing to mind Theodore Dreiser’s Carrie Meeber, she adapts to the environment in which she finds herself. Soon, she is no longer the hard working and virtuous wife. As the narrator tersely comments, “Pok-nyō’s moral attitude, even her view of life, changed from that time on” (“Po” 99). Indeed, she is forced to choose this way to survive.

- Once she finds the easiest way to meet her and her husband’s needs, Pok-nyō has
the practical justification for her behavior, and she keeps selling her body without any sense of guilt or shame.

Up till now she had never once thought of having relations with another man. That wasn’t the work of a person; she knew it as the type of thing that only an animal does. Or if you did that kind of thing, for all she knew you might crash down dead on the spot. That was how she saw it.

But where would there ever be as strange a business as this again? She too was a person, and yet when she thought of having done something like that, it was something that wasn’t at all out [of the question] for a person. As well as that, you do no work, and yet make more money, there is the intense pleasure, more gentlemanly than begging. [. . .] If you were to put it in Japanese it was the grace of three beats to the bar, that’s what it was. Wasn’t this precisely one of the secrets of living? And this wasn’t all, for, from the time this business took place she even found, for the first time, a sort of confidence that she had become a person.

From then on she took to putting powder on her face, just a little at a time. (“Po” 99-100)

It no longer appears to her an animalistic activity. Rather, from then on, with the money gained by this illicit profession, Pok-nyō not only gives more attention to her appearance but does so because her sense of self-esteem has been elevated. Pok-nyō’s attitudinal change reveals that Kim has no conventional ideal about women’s sexual behavior. The narrator’s voice is not censorious, as is to be expected of a literary naturalist maintaining an amoral perspective on human behavior. Indeed, Pok-nyō appears to enjoy her new way of life and is considerably more light-hearted than she was when being the virtuous wife— as is seen when she is asking one of her clients for a loan:
If he started making excuses Pok-nyŏ immediately ran up and hung onto
his arm.

“Surely you’re going to lend me the money – I mean, with all I
know about you?”

“My God, every time I meet this woman it’s an uproar. All right. I’ll
lend it to you. In return, eh? You understand, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean. He, he, he, he.” (“Po” 100-101)

Kim once said that he wrote “Potatoes” to show the tragedy of ignorance (“Unappreciated
Sight” 313). Pok-nyŏ’s behavior is due to poverty in the first place, then ignorance, and
finally the powerful influence of surroundings. Like Norris, Kim attempts a more
“scientific” explanation of the genetic and environmental causes in human behavior by the
credible characterization of realistically drawn characters such as Pok-nyŏ and her
husband. When she married, she still was a young girl, who had no firm consciousness of
morality. Then her husband fails to provide Pok-nyŏ any guidance or standard for moral
choices by neglecting his obligation as a husband. He is the main reason that his
inexperienced wife sells her charms to sustain their living. As the writer states, the
husband knows how his wife now gets the money she brings him but doesn’t care at all.
He rather encourages her to continue: “Her husband, stretched out on the warmest part of
the floor, would give his silly laugh, implying that in the long run this was a good thing”
(“Po” 100). Pok-nyŏ herself similarly delights in the rewards of immoral behavior. In an
environment in which only the strong can survive, Pok-nyŏ comes to be governed by
animalistic instincts; that is, those of self-preservation and a sexual appetite which is
aroused and satisfied through prostitution, even though acknowledgement of the sexual
drive was considered shameful, especially for women of that period.
Maintaining this lifestyle with her husband, Pok-nyō continues to adapt to circumstances. Like other neighboring wives, she too goes out at night to steal potatoes and cabbage from a Chinese man’s vegetable garden. This means, of course, another step down in her degeneration. But, when she is caught stealing by the owner, this encounter seems to have a happy rather than disastrous outcome for Pok-nyō. It offers her a great economic opportunity because, unlike other men she has been dealing with until then, Mr. Wang, the Chinese farmer, is rich enough to pay a great deal of money for the sexual entertainment she provides.

Meanwhile, Mr. Wang’s presence indirectly shows how foreigners took the better positions in the socio-economic order while the natives were deprived of their opportunities that the land provided. Considering the oppression under the colonial regime, it is understandable that the author tacitly criticizes foreign powers via his representation of the terrible downfall of the main character. While Pok-nyō is flourishing because of her improved economic status and her new profession, that downfall looms in the immediate future.

The continual meetings with Mr. Wang apparently change Pok-nyō’s life: “Pok-nyō gradually gave up selling her charms to the neighborhood beggars. Poknyo and her husband were now among the rich of the shanty area” (“Po” 103). However, as in many naturalistic fictions, the rise to a higher level proves ultimately to result in a fall. After Mr. Wang decides to buy a young girl as his wife, Pok-nyō’s profiting from her sexual favors comes to an end. The Darwinian environment to which Pok-nyō has nicely adapted suddenly changes. She is no longer the fittest. Being accustomed to making easy money, Pok-nyō naturally feels uneasy about the anticipated turnover the sudden marriage of Mr. Wang will bring. On the day the bride arrives, Pok-nyō visits Mr. Wang at his house late at night. She first intends to threaten the newly wedded couple and take Mr. Wang back from
the bride. But Mr. Wang dashes her hopes. Governed by a desperate feeling that she is losing her sole financial resource, Pok-nyō makes an energetic but futile response by threatening them with a scythe. She soon discovers that her strength is not a match for Mr. Wang’s. The sharp blade in Pok-nyō’s hand is seized by Mr. Wang in a moment. “Spewing blood from her throat,” Pok-nyō dies (“Po” 195).

But the story does not end there. Kim gives us a dour coda. Similar to Zola, who stresses the interrelation among members in families and societies as a causative factor in the outcomes of his characters’ lives, Kim also shows how one member influences the other through Pok-nyō and her husband’s case. Along with the shanty area, which forms the physical environment of the story, Pok-nyō’s husband had been the other major environmental determinant strongly influencing her life. To emphasize this, Kim Tongin adds the last few paragraphs and highlights the husband’s action after Pok-nyō’s death. The husband doesn’t show even a little sadness or regret over Pok-nyō’s sudden death. He is only interested in how much money he can extort from Mr. Wang because he has now lost his sole means of subsistence. After the negotiation between the husband and Mr. Wang concludes, Pok-nyō “is loaded off to a public graveyard” (“Po” 105). No account follows this simple statement ending the story. As Philip Rhav has observed, “the old egocentric formula ‘man’s fate is his character’ has been altered by the novelists of naturalism to read ‘man’s fate is his environment’” (583). To powerless women like Gervaise and Pok-nyō, men are a primary determining force.

Tracing Pok-nyō’s gradual degeneration, Kim Tongin focuses on the factors of irresistible environmental influences, complicated by colonialism and economic privation. Pok-nyō strives to get away from extreme poverty by doing what little she can do as a young woman. Her downward movement is significant if one is to grasp Kim’s main points in this short story. For him, human experiences are pretty much like those of
animals. Pok-nyō effectively represents the human animal driven by deterministic components of the natural world.
“Frenzied Sonata” (1929) has not been interpreted as naturalistic. Rather, translated by Zŏng In-sŏb in 1969, with the title “Sonata Appassionata,” it has been understood as a work in which Kim Tongin reveals his aestheticism by having the story teller within his short story, the art critic Mr. K, converse with a friend about the life and artistry of a pianist and composer, Paek Sŏngsu. During their conversation, K explains at length his article of faith: that the production of great musical art is of supreme importance and warrants the use of any means imaginable to ensure that an artist of genius such as Sŏngsu can compose his works. That K expresses Kim’s own point of view as a radical aesthete is the interpretation advanced by the Korean literary scholars who have commented on this short story.

In her monograph, *Study of Kim Tongin*, Kim Chunmi does so by tracing the influence of like-minded Japanese writers such as Arishima Takeo (1878-1923) and Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886-1965) during the Taishō Period (1912-1926) when Kim Tongin happened to be in Japan. Kim Chunmi focuses on the fact that Kim’s stories manifest some similarities to those of these Japanese authors, such as bizarre characters who are artists of genius, grotesque events, and themes having to do with obsessional pursuit of the experience of the beautiful. These provide the critic with a plausible hypothesis of their intertextual relationship. As a part of her project, Kim Chunmi closely compares Kim’s “The Story of a Lunatic Painter” (“Kwangwhasa”1935) with “The Tattooer” (1910) by Tanizaki, who is especially well-known as a representative Japanese aesthete.

Assuming that Kim Tongin is as much an aesthete as the Japanese author, Kim Chunmi argues that the character Solgŏ in “The Story of a Lunatic Painter” and Paek
Sŏngsu in “Frenzied Sonata” are “Tongin’s alter-egos. Like Tongin himself, they fulfilled their goal of creating great art at the expense of their whole life” (224). According to her argument, K, Kim’s “spokesman,” justifies Sŏngsu’s criminal behavior in terms of its being absolutely necessary for the creation of great art.

Along with Kim Chunmi, Kim Eunjŏn also sees “Frenzied Sonata” and “The Story of a Lunatic Painter” as representative works of aesthetic philosophy that combine the ideas of art-for-art’s sake and hero worship of the artist figure (167). She too regards K as Kim Tongin’s agent. Therefore, K’s sanctioning of Sŏngsu’s criminal acts on behalf of art for its own sake is again the basis for reading the short story as Kim Tongin’s defense of aestheticism. In Zŏng In-sŏb’s commentary in A Guide to Korean Literature, we find the same assumption of K and Kim Tongin being of one and the same state of mind, Zŏng referring to what K says as a statement that Kim makes through K: “According to the author, artists in society lose their raw creativity and expressiveness when they are forced to create by rules governing their art” (7).

Unfortunately, this type of criticism that assumes a character’s narration is the writer’s manifestation of his own point of view, or his actual statement thereof, can cause a completely incorrect interpretation of the work. This is not to say that a character cannot articulate the author’s perspective. As will be seen, when all that transpires in “Frenzied Sonata” is taken into account, K does serve Kim Tongin’s own thematic purposes on one occasion. But, once again there is good reason to recall the truism that characters in a literary work need not be identified with its author; especially in “Frenzied Sonata,” as will be seen, K is to be differentiated from the omniscient narrator whose voice is also heard and who actually represents Kim as author.
K’s narration of the story of Sŏngsu to his fellow intellectual is heavily dependent on what Sŏngsu told him not only in person but also in the long autobiographical letter he later wrote when “locked up in a lunatic asylum” (19). K explains that Sŏngsu is indeed a true genius responsible for “powerful art, strong art, art full of wildness” (“FS” 26). But the peculiar qualities of the works of this prodigy were made possible, he explains, only by a series of terrific events that stimulate his creativity. In order to create his powerful musical compositions, Sŏngsu repeatedly committed crimes of arson and worse to excite himself to the point at which he could do so.

K starts his account of Sŏngsu’s life by recalling his deceased college classmate, Sŏngsu’s father. Like K, he was a student of musical composition, but he failed to prosper as a composer because of his undisciplined, hedonistic way of living and, later, his profound alcohol addiction. His innate but untamed genius was openly admitted by his colleagues, relates K: “He was a rare genius, indeed! We often sighed for him because of his genius, but the world never knew that such a horrible genius existed” (“FS” 20) because of the degeneration he underwent. Abandoning his work to live a wild life of self-indulgence and dying before Sŏngsu’s birth, this unfortunate faded away from his contemporaries’ memory as time passed. Thirty years later, his son enters K’s narrative under extraordinary circumstances.

Late one night as he usually does, K goes to a church to meditate, and there he witnesses in the distance a house on fire. At the moment he is looking upon the scene through one of the windows, he sees a man open the door of the church. In the darkness, the man, who turns out to be Paek Sŏngsu, comes inside in a very emotionally unstable, disoriented condition. Then he too looks down upon the house on fire without noticing K’s presence. Sŏngsu finally collects himself and prepares to leave the church, but, before he
reaches the door, he sees a piano. He seats himself before it, and begins to play wildly. Enchanted by the powerful sensation the rhapsodic music provokes, K, on the spot, begins to transcribe a portion of it, which K later entitles *Frenzied Sonata*. After Sōngsu’s frantic performance, K approaches and speaks to him. To his surprise when looking at Sōngsu’s face, K instantly recognizes him as the son of Paek, the deceased musical genius. Sōngsu’s musical talent is obviously not a product of formal study; but it overflows with immense expressive power, and K acknowledges his genius at once. In his subsequent conversation with Sōngsu, K learns that Sōngsu is homeless and has no friends or family; therefore, he invites the untutored genius to move into his house. Staying there, Sōngsu feels obligated to produce good music for K’s enjoyment. However, despite K’s high expectations for, and encouragement of, this prodigy, Sōngsu cannot compose anything except ordinary, decidedly dull melodies. The power and energizing effect K experienced from Sōngsu’s first performance at the church is not revived as time passes. Both K and Sōngsu gradually become tired of unproductive days. After they spend several weeks together this way, another fire breaks out in the neighborhood, and Sōngsu is again there to witness it. Rushing back to K’s house, Sōngsu sits before the piano, plays at length, and puts the bars to the paper himself. Another great musical piece entitled *Angry Wave* comes into being that day, and he begins to produce a series of powerful works.

Months later, Sōngsu is confined in a lunatic asylum as a convicted criminal. There Sōngsu sends his confessional letter to K, which brings him up to date on what has transpired since the composition of *Angry Wave*. Sōngsu also tells him much about his personal history prior to their meeting each other. Sōngsu has inherited not only his father’s talent but his wild nature. Unlike his father, however, his mother was a good and gentle person. Although they were poor, Sōngsu grew to be a healthy, emotionally stable young man under the influence of his mother’s absolute love and care. But, one day, his
mother became confined to bed with a serious illness. Without money to pay for doctors, Sŏngsu was desperate. On his way to call for a doctor, he happened to pass by a cigar store. In the store the owner was not present at his counter; Sŏngsu saw some money on that counter and took it. He was caught by the owner and put in jail. He petitioned to be allowed to go to see his ailing mother before he went to prison, but it was a useless effort. He spent a miserable half-year in prison, incommunicado, continually worrying about his mother. When he was released, he learned that his poor mother had already died, and Sŏngsu was angry and broken-hearted. His attempt to help her by means of the theft had failed; his desire to assist her during her sufferings had been frustrated. He could not be at his mother’s deathbed, and after his release from prison he could not even find his mother’s gravesite. Sŏngsu developed a sense of bitterness about the “merciless” shop owner: “But for this shop, or if I had been given four or five hours only, I would not have had my poor mother crawl out into the street and die there outside” (“FS” 24). Beside himself with anger, he set a fire at the tobacco shop on the night K and he saw it aflame. He was the arsonist whose hidden genius was thus ignited for the first time as music became the medium through which he expressed his rage.

With his mother’s benign influence withdrawn, Sŏngsu slowly but persistently abandoned himself to the wild and violent side of his personality while he stayed with K. As he explains in his confessional letter, he found that he was able to create a great piece of music only when he was stimulated by criminal actions, such as the first act of arson. Even worse, as time passed, his genius demanded more and more sensational provocation. Becoming obsessed with the production of great art, Sŏngsu uncontrollably followed the dictates of his mania. More and more he was inclined to commit crimes other than arson in order to be excited and inspired. As he tells K in his letter, “my interest in fire was gradually reduced in inverse ratio to the number of fires. The cruel flames of the fires,
forgiving nothing, could not stimulate my mind as much as before” (“FS” 25). Therefore, he sought more intense stimulants. For that reason, his crimes came to include the mutilation of a corpse, sexual intercourse with a recently interred woman, and even multiple murders (“FS” 26). Sŏngsu’s musical masterpieces were the direct products of his violent and blatantly grotesque crimes.

Sŏngsu, then, is a classic example of the abnormal artist-criminal who normally draws a morally reasoned reaction from the typical reader. But, instead of criticizing Sŏngsu, K justifies all of his acts. K’s way of describing Sŏngsu and his criminality reveals that he is not at all negatively judgmental and is far from conventionally moralistic. K’s ethics instead lead him not only to excuse all such crimes committed for the sake of art. His apologia is that Sŏngsu should be praised rather than criticized for doing what was necessary to give humanity such magnificent music.

The following passage in which K reasons on the value of Sŏngsu’s contributions to the world is the one focused upon by critics arguing that Kim Tongin is preaching aestheticism to his readers.

“But one may look at it this way, too, from an artist’s point of view. Since Beethoven, music has gradually degenerated and musicians can only admire flowers or women, or praise love, so that no strong melodies are to be found. In addition to this, there are strict rules of composition, which limit all the atmosphere of freedom in musical composition, just like the equations in mathematics. Under such restrictions, artistic creation will lose its meaning. Then human music will be purely a technique and cannot be art, unless a new development is introduced. It is sad for artists. Powerful art, strong art, art full of wildness – we waited for these for a long time. This was where Paek
Sŏngsu appeared. To tell the truth, the works of art which have been produced by him during these years are precious jewels which will light up human culture forever. Arson, murder, some petty houses, and unworthy creatures – these would be [insignificant] sacrifices for creating his art. Wouldn’t it be a more serious crime to spoil a great genius, such as may not appear once in a thousand years or ten thousand years, on account of some crimes he may have committed, or to leave him under conditions in which he could not create his art?” (“FS” 26)

*   *   *

This short story has a more complicated narrative structure than previous critics have noted. In addition to the omniscient narrator who has been given virtually no attention by them, there is a character-narrator who dominates the narrative and who fully declares his aesthetic philosophy and ethical precepts in the above monologue. But, the fact is that Kim Tongin himself organizes the narrative frame for the story told by K, and Kim’s is the voice of omniscient narrator. Despite his minimal presence, Kim begins and ends the short story, addressing the reader five additional times during its course. The voice heard in the opening paragraph in which Kim introduces himself to the reader is distinctly different in tone from K’s, and it emphasizes the concept that the story is about a common man representative of Asian and non-Asian alike whose experience – as peculiar as it may initially appear – is true to what transpires on “the stage of the human world.”

The reader may imagine that the story which I am about to tell happened somewhere in Europe, or may happen in Korea as it may be some years in the future. Such a thing may have happened somewhere on
earth, it may be happening now, or it may happen in the future. It is possible, certainly – that is all the reader needs to know.

Therefore, it is totally fine if you think of the hero of my story, Paek Sŏngsu, as someone called Albert, Jim, or Mr. Kimura, only if you understand that this story takes as its hero the animal also known as the human being, and deals with the things that happen in the human world. Let me tell you my story with this presupposition. ("FS" 19) 35

Kim Tongin is introducing a story about a man and what happens to him, rather than the character viewed exclusively as an artist by K. What is true of Sŏngsu, that is, may be true of others, whether artist or not. K limits the significance of Sŏngsu; Kim expands it to universal proportions.

Kim thus suggests that the abnormal experiences of Sŏngsu can be situated in any society. The abnormal is a recurring phenomenon in all groupings of men and women. This commentary also reminds readers of the fact that every human being is indeed an “animal” and prepares them for the realization that, like other species, the human animal is governed to a meaningful extent by the two major determinants: heredity and the as-powerful influence of milieu. In addition to this, in all other six passages that we hear Kim’s voice, he neither criticizes nor approves K’s point of view. Kim’s main role as omniscient narrator is simply providing the rationale of the story at the beginning and then explaining K’s and his fellow intellectual’s conversational circumstances. He successfully maintains distance from any kind of subjective judgment of his own, allowing readers to come to their own conclusions about both Sŏngsu and K. As the story moves forward, and K theorizes at length, there is another dimension of the story in which a theme quite different from that developed by K emerges. That theme is the naturalistic one having to do first of all with Sŏngsu’s heredity. The consequences of poor genetic inheritance are a
significant topic in typical naturalistic writings. Discussing Emile Zola’s *La Bête Humaine* (1890), for example, Berg and Martin emphasize the prominent role played by heredity in terms pertinent to the characterization of Sŏngsu:

In no other novel of the *Rougon-Macquart* series is violence so prevalent, or heredity so powerful a determinant of human behavior. The oxymoron of the title, combining animal and human qualities, reflects a primitive hereditary dimension that surfaces in the homicidal impulses of Jacques Lantier, brother of Claude and Etienne (30).

Sŏngsu’s morbid and anti-social behavior is different from Jacques Lantier’s in that Sŏngsu has at least a little more plausible motivation for his violent acts, the creation of great art. Jacques Lantier’s is, indeed, a more primitive urge rooted in heredity by Zola. His obsession is with having the experience of killing a woman for the sake of the pleasure that he feels doing so would provide. Kim Tongin, however, does register the overwhelming effect of heredity through Sŏngsu’s story. As a boy, he was guided by his mother without knowing anything about his father. The reader learns that “his mother was an honest woman and had devoted herself to his education . . . Because of this good education, the furiousness and wildness bestowed on him by nature could not find any outward expression” (“FS” 24). That is, his alcoholic father’s frenzied-genius genes – so to speak – were only latent when Sŏngsu was under his nurturing mother’s protection and care. Once the stable circumstances of his youth are abruptly changed due to his mother’s illness and the traumatic events that followed, however, the “brute” within came to the surface. Given that Kim announced that his main concern in the story is with the “human animal” (“. . . this story deals with the animal also known the human as its hero and with the things that happen in the human world”), there is good reason for readers familiar with Zola’s study of the “human animal,” or *bête humaine*, to associate Sŏngsu’s “frenzy” when
performing and composing with the as-frenzied state of Jacques as he does what he must to achieve the end to which he is driven by the urge that governs him. Thinks Jacques to himself after he has finally acted upon his compulsion to kill,

   At last, at last! He had satisfied himself, he had killed! Yes, he had done it. Boundless joy and an awful exultation bore him aloft in the complete contentment of his eternal desire. He felt a surprising pride, an enhanced sense of his male sovereignty. Woman – he had killed her, and now, as he had so long desired, he possessed her completely to the point of destroying her. She was no more and never would be anybody else’s.

   (La Bête Humaine 331-332)

Like Jacques, Sŏngsu is driven by animalistic lust for violence and destruction. So, it is not a coincidence that in one of his musical compositions the climax of the piece suggests “the howling of a fierce animal” (“FS” 21). Sŏngsu too advances in his behavior to killing people and his prosaic way of confessing this in his letter to K reinforces the shocking effect of the admission: “So, I reached the stage of murder. One piece of music was produced every time a death occurred. So [each of] the few pieces produced since then represent the life of one victim” (“FS” 26). The tone of voice is that of a person merely bringing another up to date on his doings, for what would once have been termed “unnatural” behavior for Sŏngsu has become natural. The need for increasingly powerful stimulations, upon which his creativity depends, takes him even farther into the “unnatural” as sexual intercourse with a corpse is his means of obtaining inspiration—another of the crimes that K judges the means justified by the end of producing great art. His line of reasoning is that whatever is in the nature of this artist at this point in his life, however perverse in the eyes of the reader, is not to be condemned. But perversion it is, as represented by Kim Tongin; even Sŏngsu is sensitive to the fact that he is beyond the
moral boundaries that his mother would have recognized. Identification of Kim Tongin with K is no more untenable a notion than when K thus reveals himself just as perverse in his thinking as Sŏngsu was in his actions. Despite K’s lucidly presented rationalizations, the events of the story fashioned by Kim speak for themselves: Sŏngsu’s brutal means to his ends are as unjustified as they are disturbing. It is ironic that critics see Kim as an aesthete, a devotee of the beautiful, who condones the repellently unattractive acts of Sŏngsu and who sides with K. K’s lack of sympathy for Sŏngsu’s victims is as repellent as Sŏngsu’s actions. Indeed, there is nothing of the beautiful to be seen in this short story—as critics who do not care for naturalistic writing often complain.

* * *

“Frenzied Sonata” is, however, a complex work of art, and K does serve another, more positive function in addition to providing the facts made available to the reader in this study of the aberrant. For, one of the ideas that he introduces and develops directly serves Kim Tongin’s purposes as a literary naturalist. As K is beginning to tell the story of Sŏngsu to his fellow intellectual, he at first seems to digress but is in fact preparing his auditor to realize later on in his narrative that the theory he is presenting has already been confirmed by what Sŏngsu went through many months earlier.

“How do you know that it is what we call ‘chance’ that may ruin a man, or insure his success?”

“That is not a new problem. It needs no specific thinking about.”

“Well, suppose there is a shop here. Just when it happened to be empty, with neither master nor assistants in, a gentleman happens to pass by – suppose the gentleman to be a good man, who has property and fame
enough. When he peeps into the shop, this sort of thought may cross his mind: ‘The shop’s quite empty, so a thief may break in; he could steal without anyone noticing. Why is the shop empty like this?’ With these thoughts he may—what shall I say?—he may pick up a tiny thing, something quite unimportant, which no one would covet, and put it in his pocket, because of some unexpected psychological abnormality in him, may he not?” (“FS” 19)

Once again as in the short stories previously examined, a “chance development” is given attention by Kim in K’s explanation of how unpredictable twists and turns in human experience bring individuals to conditions they could never expect or even imagine and which call into question the ability of an individual to determine his or her own destiny. More interesting is that Kim himself inserted the English word “chance” right next to the Korean word for the same in the original text, which suggests his knowledge of the term as it was then understood in western culture and employed by literary naturalists.

A near identical situation illustrating the role of chance in one’s life is seen in Frank Norris’s McTeague. As Trina wins the lottery and disaster follows, so in “Frenzied Sonata” the tobacco shop is empty, and Sŏngsu sees that money that may be used for a good end is on the counter, but, by chance, the taking of it results in disastrous consequences for his mother and him. Like Norris and Zola, Kim emphasizes foreseeable “cause and effect” relationships in all events, but also understands how unpredictable life can be. Therefore, this story poses following questions for readers to ask themselves: Would Sŏngsu be a criminal if his mother were still alive? If he did not pass by the store and steal anything, would he still have developed his strong impulses of violence and feel the need to murder others whom he did not even know? In fact, one cannot say, given just how unpredictable life proves.
Sŏngsu, who already experienced drastic change in life by this first “chance” event at the tobacco shop, falls under the influence of the second when he meets K following the outcome of the first, that is, his setting the shop on fire. It is a remarkable coincidence that he should enter the same church K regularly visits. Again, by chance, Sŏngsu’s environment is changed as K actively encourages him to perform even more abnormal acts to create great music. Were it not previously apparent that environment plays a role in Sŏngsu’s degeneration, his unfortunate movement from prison to K’s home emphasizes just how powerful a determinant one’s milieu can be. The influence of heredity, chance, and environment – the essentials of classic naturalistic art – are prominently presented before the reader.

*   *   *

As was noted above, Kim Chunmi insisted that Kim Tongin was an aesthete like K. But when advancing the interpretation, she had to qualify it in a significant way. She had to temper her assessment by terming him “sort of” an aesthete (230), thereby admitting that the designation is not so precise as it is for Tanizaki Jun’ichirō. The reason she did so will by now be obvious: unlike a prototypical aesthete who is dedicated to the pursuit of beauty, and who in his art labors to provide the experience of the beautiful, Kim Tongin in works such as “Frenzied Sonata” reveals himself a different kind of artist. What Kim Chunmi might also have observed is that Sŏngsu, unlike K, never expresses an interest in beauty, nor does he even attempt to create beautiful music. Music, instead, is the medium in which he expresses the emotional chaos that is his.

Kim’s naturalistic masterpieces have nothing to do with beauty, except very briefly in “The Seaman’s Chant,” at its beginning. There Kim Tongin has his narrator picture and celebrate nature’s beauty, but he soon replaces this uncritical portrayal of life’s
magnificence with the opposite representation evoked by seaman’s tragic life story.

Kim’s interest is in depicting life as it is, and that means he has to treat many unattractive aspects of human experience for that purpose. While reading “Frenzied Sonata,” what the reader experiences is certainly not beauty. The story was designed to shock, even appall, the reader who would prefer an aesthetically appealing tale about an artist’s life.

Kim Tongin, like other naturalist writers, dealt with the things rightly termed ugly much more than the beautiful. Despite many scholars’ interest in this short story’s aesthetic characteristics, “Frenzied Sonata” more dramatically reveals Kim’s preoccupation with the deterministic effects of surroundings and heredity assisted by “chance developments.” For this reason, Zŏng In-sŏb’s having dubbed the short story “Sonata Appassionata” is wholly inappropriate. Rather than a work intended by Kim as homage to Ludwig Von Beethoven and the aesthetic qualities positively associated with his opus 57, Kim crafted a story in which not an impassioned but a frenzied character and his “wild” musical creations were featured. It is the frenzy of an emotionally and intellectually disabled individual that is the focal point in the tale of degeneration.
Kim Tongin’s *The Story of Kim Yōnsil*, originally published as three discrete short stories between 1939 and 1941, appeared as a single, unified novella in 1947 after a delay of several years. Like other naturalistic authors, Kim was no stranger to censorship. In his autobiographical memoir, he records his difficulties in publishing his collection of three stories in book form due to Japanese censorship: “Out of my ambition as a writer, I submitted [the novella] for censorship in spite of my doubts. Not only disapproval [of the publication] but also confiscation of the manuscript was the result, as I had expected. I also had to be summoned to the department of [book] censorship and received a warning” (“About *The Story of Kim Yōnsil*” 325). Under strict Japanese colonial policies, Korean intellectuals including Kim frequently confronted this obstacle; however, although frustrated, Kim saved the manuscript for later.

After Kim finally published the book, his career as a writer was essentially over because of ill health, and he died four years later of meningitis and multiple related illnesses. The novella was the last effort of which Kim expressed pride. Most appropriately, the last work he considered to be a serious artistic production was a naturalistic one. As he explains in his autobiography, he could never take pride in his romantic treatments of historical figures featured in the saga-like novels he wrote for newspaper serialization. He differentiated between “popular” literature of this sort and works intended as high art such as *The Story of Kim Yōnsil*.

*The Story of Kim Yōnsil* is an important work, not only because this tale confirms the writer’s significance as a literary naturalist who keenly observed human nature as
determined by environment and heredity, but also because it documents a social problem that had developed in Korea in the 1920s and early 1930s. In this book, Kim calls into question the value of certain newly introduced western cultural trends, and the resulting problems, through the characterization of his heroine, Yŏnsil. Central issues in the story are the concepts of the “New Women” and “Free Love” that impacted Korean culture in the early decades of the twentieth century.

In *Writing Women in Korea*, Theresa Hyun explains that “women’s modernization in Korea was related to the introduction in the late nineteenth century of Protestantism, which influenced ideas on nationalist awakening and female emancipation” (43). Public education for women then became accessible with the establishment of modern schools by missionaries, and, because of newly available translations of literary works about foreign women, they began to embrace the image of the “New Woman” who enjoyed freedoms previously known by Korean males only. Early Korean feminists such as Na Hye-Sŏk, Kim Il-Yŏp, and Kim Myŏng-Sun appeared in the 1920s as literary celebrities and models of the liberated female. Another commentator, Kyeong-Hee Choi, defines the “New Woman” figure of the 1920s as “the ideal modern image for women in early modern Korea” (228). Choi, however, argues that, unfortunately, Korean women had only vague impressions of the type based merely on appearance and lifestyle.

Essential to the lifestyle of the “New Woman” was free choice in love and marriage. But, as Kim’s novella illustrates, a woman’s belief in free choice in love and marriage often meant allegiance to the practice of “Free Love,” rather than anything so conventional as becoming a wife. Thus, as a result of the radical behavior of those aspiring to “New Woman” status, some women became objects of gossip and invective among Koreans. As Hyun relates, the term “New Women,” which “at first used to refer to women who had been educated in the new way . . . gradually . . . came to be associated, in the
minds of some critics, with women who opposed the traditional sexual mores. In some quarters the New Women were considered little more than high-class prostitutes” (46). Bang Junghwan agrees, “The first group of Korean feminists idealized free love for the purpose of breaking down the double standard of sexual mores that were differently applied to men and women; one outcome, though, was the unfortunate consequence that such a progressive step often resulted in little more than stylish licentiousness” (http://www.personweb.com).

As Hyun also explains, many critics and readers believe that Kim Tongin’s The Story of Kim Yŏnsil uses one of the first Korean feminists, Kim Myŏngsung, “as a model to criticize the New Woman ideal” (103). Whether Kim Myŏnsung was Kim Yŏnsil’s real model remains questionable, but it is certain that this fictional tale reflects the writer’s critical consciousness of the historical period and its social development. Kim later clarified the reason he wrote the novella in his reminiscent essay, “About The Story of Kim Yŏnsil”:

Kim Yŏnsil, representing the “New Women” of Chosŏn [Korea] in the 1920s, was a literary woman and pioneer in the circle of women. In tracing her life story from her sixth or seventh year to her thirties, we can read the history of the “New Women” of Chosŏn. From the old society to the new one — from this end to the other end — they dashed toward new things, without a leader, definite opinions, or ultimate goals. They experienced a pioneer’s solitude and resulting sorrow. Whom to learn from, what to do, and how to do it? They rushed blindly. They courageously dashed to the things that were understood as “new” in their opinion without paying attention to others’ criticisms or insulting words. The first group of Chosŏn “New Women” became invaluable sacrifices as cornerstones and testing-subjects to establish
the image of new women in Chosŏn . . . Kim Yŏnsil is not a meaningless [figure] at all. She represents a necessary phenomenon in transitional periods in the development of one nation and a relatively reasonable price for national advancement. If we take such sacrifice as an instructive emblem for women, who are half of the nation, what would be so regrettable about that?

(325-326)31

In this essay, Kim frankly points out female colleagues’ blind pursuit of novelty. His objective observance and critical diagnosis of the actual problems faced by the first generation of feminists are primary features of the novella. Some readers may criticize Kim for having a condescending attitude toward women’s issues. But, as his closing comments on the work make clear, he is sympathetic to these feminists.

This novella follows the life of a young girl from her childhood into the first years of adulthood. At the beginning, Kim depicts and explains the initial setting of the story in considerable detail. By doing so, he prepares the reader to be aware that his focal interest is environmental influences on individuals. The female protagonist Yŏnsil was born to a typical family in the transitional period in Korea as the country came increasingly under Japanese domination. Her father was situated psychologically between two social orders, traditional and colonial. Years earlier, Yŏnsil’s grandfather had bribed a Pyongyang governor and effectively purchased a political position for his son from a fellow Korean. His ambition was that his son would become a member of the established upper class, but the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) occurred before his son attained the position, and the establishment of Japanese rule thwarted the arrangement. Still, although his goal was frustrated by failing to obtain an official post, Yŏnsil’s father had already developed a strong sense of upper-class status and embraced the aristocratic way of life; he had a concubine, and Yŏnsil was the only child of that extra-marital alliance.
After her biological mother dies, Yŏnsil’s situation worsens. Her father neglects not only his bastard daughter but his wife and their three legitimate children. He is often away from home. Yŏnsil feels herself an outsider in her own home, where she has no one on whom to rely for either guidance or emotional support. Her step-mother, unable to express her discontent with her husband because of the Confucian doctrine that the wife must be subservient in all respects to her husband, finds a way to discharge her anger at her neglectful husband by constantly scolding Yŏnsil. Whenever she berates Yŏnsil, the step-mother reminds her that she is the child of a lowly prostitute. She never refrains from denigrating Yŏnsil’s biological mother in the strongest terms. When she has to rebuke her own children, she always draws Yŏnsil into the scene by adding the phrase, “You are acting like you learned bad things from that daughter of a bitch” (262). In addition to the step-mother’s verbal and occasional physical abuse, Yŏnsil has to deal with her step-siblings treating her not as an older sister but as a maid. Yŏnsil’s father is no better than the other family members: “Although the only person who could and should love Yŏnsil in the household was her father, he rarely came home. Yŏnsil could not help growing up without receiving love” (SKY 262). Her lack of a loving environment has long-term consequences, determining her enthusiastic response to the possibility of being loved that the “Free Love” movement offers.

As Yŏnsil matures, her father, enjoying the favors of other women, continues to spend time outside the home. Frustrated and angry about her husband’s dissipation and irresponsibility, the step-mother refers to him as “an old libertine” (SKY 262). This contemptuous comment about her father is no surprise to Yŏnsil. Once, when she visited him seeking solace after a confrontation with her step-mother, she witnessed a sexual encounter between her father and a young concubine. Like Zola’s Nana, then, Yŏnsil is
growing up in sordid surroundings in which the only rough approximation of love is to be seen in her father’s extra-marital sexual escapades. Therefore, like Nana, who becomes a prostitute, she becomes insensitive to any ethical standards having to do with sexuality and male-female relationships in general. By describing Yŏnsil’s problematic family situation, Kim convincingly sets up the basic moral climate wherein the story of Yŏnsil’s degeneration inevitably develops. He demonstrates that this poor environment in her formative years functions negatively as she develops her personality and views of life.

Becoming more and more tired of the contempt and abuse of her family, Yŏnsil quite naturally wishes to escape from home. Thus, when she hears of a newly opened all-girl’s school, she becomes excited and applies for admission without her parents’ permission. To Yŏnsil, their approval does not really matter; she expects their objection to her plan to escape from their control.

Since it was a transitional time in Korea, most people still had out-of-date ideas about education for women. For example, it was one of the strict Confucian principles that boys and girls, after six years of age, should be prohibited from sitting together in the same place. But, more to the point, in this novella “decent” people did not want their daughters to go to public school where young women would receive lessons from male teachers. They were also afraid that their daughters would be rebellious and follow new ideas upon attending such a school. So they maligned schools such as the one Yŏnsil wants to attend, calling it “Kisaeng School” (SKY 260). Kisaeng is the Korean equivalent of Geisha in Japanese. But, Yŏnsil does enter the school after enduring verbal attacks for choosing to do so from her step-mother, and she studies there for two years, until the school closes due to financial difficulties. Because she cannot stand the treatment of her hostile family any longer, and after hearing that other girls have moved to Japan for greater opportunities in education, she rebels again. Yŏnsil decides to go to Japan.
She is fifteen when she makes this decision. As a part of her preparation for her move, Yŏnsil starts learning Japanese from her friend’s brother. This tutor’s sister is a Kisaeng, and they meet for lessons in her home. Once again, therefore, environment plays a key role in Yŏnsil’s experience. While regularly meeting with the tutor in this sexually-charged milieu, Yŏnsil herself becomes involved in a sexual relationship with the tutor. She thinks that it is a natural and even trivial matter that a man and a woman would have sexual relations. To Yŏnsil, who witnessed her father’s sexual license, sex is neither shameful nor important. As Kim informs the reader, to Yŏnsil fornication is simply a physiological phenomenon such as defecation and urination. With this immature, essentially biological understanding of love and sex, Yŏnsil then moves to Japan and is exposed to all of the “new” ideas. To Korean women such as herself, who are not inclined to observe Confucian social regulations and ethical principles, the new concepts of sexual equality and free love are ones to be blindly pursued and practiced. Modernity beckons, and she rushes toward it.

Once settled in her new life in Japan, Yŏnsil joins a social group called *The Korean Female Students Meeting*. There are only seven members, including Yŏnsil, and in this exclusive club they are proud of being pioneer feminists. Influenced by the members of the group, Yŏnsil now begins forming her self-image as a female intellectual. With a Japanese friend’s encouragement, she starts reading Western literary works. The first novel she reads is Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and the intense feelings she experiences while reading this hyper-emotional, romantic novel linger in her mind for several days. Another work that galvanizes her emotions is Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. Like Gustave Flaubert’s *Emma Bovary*, Frank Norris’s *Laura Dearborn*, and Kate Chopin’s *Edna Pontelier*, Yŏnsil’s introduction to literature of this kind is instrumental in her further
development of a romantic, idealistic orientation toward male-female relationships. She is strongly drawn to such imaginative works of art and decides to become a fiction writer. But her reading experience is very restricted in that she mainly reads romances. Based on her limited knowledge, she takes an oversimplified view of literature, “[feeling] she knew what literature was. [To her] literature and free love were inseparably related to each other. The novel was a prose form that registered interesting love relations while poetry was a brief celebration of love” (SKY 281). Furthermore, seeing literature as dealing with nothing but love, Yōnsil invents an appropriate epigram: “Love in life is art, and the art of the relationship between man and woman is love” (SKY 281). Embracing this article of faith, Yōnsil hopes to experience the delirium of love and the self-fulfillment it promises. But, as Kim explains, she does little more than equate love with sex: “Due to poor circumstances in her girlhood, Yōnsil regarded love as the same thing as sexual intercourse” (SKY 281). Once again, Kim Tongin reminds the reader that her problematic concept of love is the product of her environment.

Advocating free love and “open” marriage, as opposed to conventionally conceived marriage, Yōnsil becomes an active member of the social group. The main members of the meeting continue to encourage each other to be courageous in attempting free love, and Yōnsil ventures to take the opportunity to have the same kinds of experience that they have already had. She finally meets a Korean man who attends a college in Japan and begins imagining a romantic tryst with him. Because Yōnsil wants to experience the intense feelings that she supposes a passionate relationship with a man would provide, she immediately fancies the man to be in love with her. Without hesitation, Yōnsil decides to take the initiative:

The next day after school, Yōnsil planned to visit Yi Changsu. It took her some time to raise her courage. When she left her boardinghouse,
she reassured herself, saying that it was natural for young women in love to feel shy. Yŏnsil, who read many great Western writers and their depiction of female psychology, believed that it was a great mission that the new woman of this modern time should accomplish by overcoming timidity and courageously advancing. Furthermore, it was necessary for a pioneer to face and conquer this emotion. (SKY 283)

Here Kim implies that Yŏnsil forms her self-image as a pioneer feminist based on her readings of Western literature and what she has inferred from the behavior of fellow Korean women in Japan. The group members’ mutual support for the pursuit of free love instills in her the belief that only she who experiences true love of the modern kind can take pride in being a new woman. For Yŏnsil, who did not receive parental education on such issues and was rebellious against the traditional ways of life, only the idea of being a new woman and practicing new ways of doing things that have not been allowed most Korean women satisfies her. Publishing a love poem she composes for a magazine edited by Korean students in Tokyo, Yŏnsil takes pride in being the very model of advanced intellectual womanhood. After having a prolonged affair with Yi, Yŏnsil no longer shies away at all from bold engagements in free love. Indeed, she becomes notorious among Korean students in Japan.

Transferring to a music school in Japan that was well known as a place for free love, Yŏnsil is happy to think that she has discovered the exact environment in which to pursue her quest for full immersion in the free love culture. But to some extent, she is still unsatisfied because of her lover Yi’s passivity. Her friend Myŏngae’s observation that he is a timid Romeo while she is an aggressive Juliet embarrasses Yŏnsil (SKY 286). Myŏngae, too, is a member of the social group for Korean female students in Japan and a practitioner of free love. She dates a college student named Kim who is a famous playboy. However,
unlike Yŏnsil, Myŏngae is aware of Korean men’s hypocrisy: they act as though free love is morally right, but they actually abide by traditional standards when judging women. She consequently advises Yŏnsil to be discreet in engaging in a love relationship with a man and points out the necessity of maintaining a pretense that the relationship is platonic. Myŏngae herself is skillful in hiding her free love exploits and escaping scandal. Yŏnsil has read about platonic love in novels, but thinks it possible only in a dream world. Yŏnsil wonders, “For a pioneer feminist in Tokyo, was free love a necessary mission?” (SKY 288) She is convinced that it is. Unable to grasp the meaning of platonic love and apply it to herself, Yŏnsil persists in her practice of free love. “In fact,” states the author, “recently Yŏnsil had been having one-night love encounters with several men in the school, as well as with Yi, because she believed it childish to love only one man” (SKY 288-289). She soon feels that she is ready to join the ranks of those who hold forth about it authoritatively in literature.

Having already published a poem, Yŏnsil submits another one to the same magazine for publication and waits for it to appear. But, instead of her poem, she finds an article that makes clear to her fellow students that she is the subject, denounces her licentious behavior, and urges readers to expel students like her from the company of Korean intellectuals. Yŏnsil is angry with the man who wrote that article and his malicious attempt to expose her to public censure. However, instead of being embarrassed, she simply wants to punish him and mock his ignorance and outdated ideas.

“So? I don’t care.” She had the nerve to ignore it. She surely thought its writer was a contemptible fellow who still clung to old ideas. She felt superior to this inexperienced man because he did not understand free love, and thought that was why he uttered those stupid words. So she was not shamed by the content of the article. She just hated this foolish man who insulted
this rightful, most up-to-date, and most pioneering of behaviors. She was indignant about the fact she was cursed by the worthless fellow. (SKY 290)

At Myŏngae’s suggestion, Yŏnsil visits the author and does exactly what her friend has directed: avoid any dispute with the man and seduce him with her charm. He is willing to follow where Yŏnsil leads, and she gains one more lover on that day. Since he is not as passive as Yi, Yŏnsil feels that she finally has found the right person, one who can work together with her to realize true free love. Here, then, appears Kim’s subtle criticism of hypocritical contemporary males: they change in appearance but are the same inside. Through the depiction of this character, Yŏnsil’s new lover, Kim Tongin turns from the females he analyzes to ridicule the deceitful attitudes of the self-styled male intellectuals. Modern education and an advanced cultural atmosphere fail to affect Korean men’s long preserved patriarchal inclinations. They take advantage of the new women’s wild aspirations and ill-advised bravery, for the author of the article does nothing more than exploit Yŏnsil sexually and then abandon her. Criticism of Yŏnsil, as well, is implied. A self-proclaimed model of the new woman, she is not, finally, different from one kind of traditional Korean woman. She is, in essence, like her natural mother, the concubine.

The first generation of female overseas students, including Myŏngae, returns to Korea after graduation. Most of them marry the Korean students they met in Japan. But they do not, in fact, take the idea of marriage seriously. It is simply an inevitable decision, toward the end of securing a comfortable life. Kim does not admire the type: “These young girls, who did not experience life sincerely so far, did not know the worries of life. They lightly treated the most important issues in life and tried to resolve them in laughter and jokes” (SKY 297). In spite of their dedication to the ideals of free love and free marriage, their marriages are not for love.

Yŏnsil, however, is not about to succumb to such an expedient point of view. She
persists in her quest. When she hears about Myŏngae’s leaving, Yŏnsil is three months pregnant. She does not know the identity of the baby’s father, but she does not worry or even care about that. Then she sends home a picture of her child, her present lover and herself to express her defiant attitude in the face of convention. She rejects an arranged marriage by doing so, and, as a result, loses all contact with her family. This is the end of any correspondence with her father. When she decides to go back to Korea, she is still confident about herself and does not try to find a husband on her own. Rather, she gives up her child for adoption in Japan because the child will be a troublesome obstacle to her career as a free-love pioneer.

Yŏnsil’s way of living is virtually the same after returning to Korea. Upon her arrival there, she receives help from Myŏngae, who returned two years earlier and settled down in her marriage. Myŏngae has since established herself as a leading female intellectual and has made her house a main meeting place for literary men. Staying at Myŏngae’s, Yŏnsil can easily participate in these gatherings, but like Myŏngae, she is not actually able to understand what the literary men discuss. These young intellectuals in Myŏngae’s salon aspire to lead the Korean people, using their acquired knowledge to effect social amelioration. They are different from the more self-centered Koreans Yŏnsil met in Japan and from egocentric Yŏnsil herself. Their discussions of issues relating to literature and social reform make Yŏnsil feel inadequate -- though they neither influence her attitude nor make her doubt her dedication to the free-love cause to which she has committed herself.

As in other naturalist fictions which feature a decline in the fortunes of their characters and thus are classifiable as “novels of degeneration,” the female protagonist’s apparent prosperity as a pioneering feminist in The Story of Kim Yŏnsil is not, finally, a forward movement. While not recognizing the error of her ways of thinking and behaving,
as time passes Yŏnsil takes a turn toward more obvious degeneracy, and Kim Tongin sets up the perfect background to intensify the effect of the story’s naturalistic ending. While Yŏnsil stays cost-free at her friend’s house, the attractive young woman becomes a center of the literary men’s admiration and interest as they fail to recognize her intellectual limitations. In this respect, she is a success. Being stubborn in her desire to be free, and continuing to engage in free love by having a series of lovers, she is proud of herself since she has arrived at what she sees as a high point in her life. But, she has, in fact, initiated the process of her decline. Her comfortable position in Myŏngae’s home is soon to be taken from her because of her past experiences as a new woman and her persistence as a devotee of free love.

Mr. Kho, Myŏngae’s husband, had once been engaged in a love affair with Yŏnsil in Japan, but had never told his wife. Yŏnsil and he almost renew their intimacies but are caught in the act of flirting by Myŏngae, the self-styled advocate and practitioner of free love who becomes enraged when she finds her husband taking the same liberties. The two women curse each other and have a violent confrontation. Ironically, Myŏngae too, continues to have her own extra-marital affairs. Still, Yŏnsil is thrown out of her friend’s house.

Now alone and without her friend’s financial support, Yŏnsil moves into a hotel where she soon meets a new lover, Yubong Kim. Although she has already spent all the money she had saved, she is able to maintain the lifestyle she enjoyed in Japan and in Myŏngae’s home because Yubong and other lovers are glad to pay for her hotel room. Her still-prosperous but parasitic way of existence lasts for a while since Yubong, a wealthy womanizer, becomes her ever-dependable economic mainstay. They eventually decide to live together in the hotel.

But as time passes, Yubong’s attitude toward her begins to change. Yŏnsil also
becomes less attractive to her other admirers because her ignorance is inevitably exposed. She can never make insightful comments during their meetings and discussions. Most times, the topics are wholly unfamiliar to her, and when she is asked to give her opinion, she is unable to make cogent comments. Finally discerning her lack of intelligence, Yubong grows tired of living with her and begins to treat her cruelly. In fact, he treats her like nothing more than a concubine or *Kisaeng*. Then he insists that she perform truly degrading acts to please him.

The sexual act that Yubong asked Yŏnsil to perform was no longer as elegant, poetic or literary as those he wanted when they met the first time. It was, rather, filthy . . . like the act that Yŏnsil’s father and his concubine had performed one night in the past. Among more than ten men in her life, from the land surveyor with whom Yŏnsil first had an affair (he was the man who taught Yŏnsil the Japanese language) to a man right before Kim Yubong, no one ever asked for the obscene sex Yubong wanted. He ordered her to perform with him unspeakable acts that would make people blush from only imagining them. This too illiterate and unpoetic man, Kim Yubong, could no longer be a lover for Yŏnsil, a female pioneer. In addition, by using force with the lady, he revealed his coarse character. It was natural for Yŏnsil to become more and more estranged from the illiterate Kim Yubong.

*(SKY 310)*

Although Yŏnsil does not realize it, she has followed in her mother’s steps. Like her concubine mother, she is physically, emotionally, and economically dependent on men. She knows that the relationship with Yubong ran off the tracks a long time before, but she does not dare separate from him, given the fact that she has no alternative income. She simply continues the dull and meaningless cohabitation until Yubong finally leaves her. It
is not until several days later that Yŏnsil learns from a man named J that Yubong is living with Myŏngae. Yŏnsil does not feel sorry or sad. Her concerns are with having to leave the hotel, where she can no longer afford to live without the patronage of Yubong or other men. Upon J’s suggestion, she stays at his boarding house for ten days. Leaving him, Yŏnsil’s economic difficulty is accelerated, which leads her to the final stage of her degeneration.

For the first time in her life, she is exposed to the demands of purely practical concerns: economic wants stare her in the face, as they do many other Koreans suffering financial stress because of the colonial policies of Japan. Here Kim Tongin expands the scope of his novella and effectively parallels the socio-economic circumstances of colonial Korea to a personal story of degeneration. From the time that the country was annexed in 1910, the Japanese brutally suppressed Koreans. However, after the March First Movement in 1919, the Japanese government had to reconsider its ruling methods and initiated a conciliation policy. Welcoming the changes, Korean intellectuals took advantage of the new cultural policy. As a result, a number of magazines and newspapers were founded, and literary men received favorable treatment in early 1920s. This social atmosphere promoted exaggerated illusions about being a writer, of which Yŏnsil was a product (SKY 310). Just as illusory was the impression that Japan’s seemingly more liberal social policies were matched by less self-aggrandizing economic ones. As Michael Robinson keenly observes, “the overall objectives in Korea remained unchanged; however, naked coercion was replaced by a softer but even more effective policy of manipulation and co-optation” (45). Through the new colonial policy, the Japanese established more powerful and long-term control in Korea and, as long as the state of colonization lasted, Koreans were increasingly exploited and impoverished.

Nobody could escape the financial pressure. Yŏnsil had never experienced economic hardships until now. She could not remember who gave her money,
but she was always affordable. In addition, she had never felt that she needed anything, because what she wanted was always there and abundant. She had been living her life without imagining there were material difficulties. So she could not think of the solution when she, for the first time, faced economic distress. (*SKY* 318)

She can no longer obtain the resources she needs at a time when everyone is experiencing financial hardships. Although she is still known in some quarters as a female intellectual and writer, she has no literary works she can proudly present. She is not a real writer who produces profitable work. So it is impossible for her to support herself through writing. Having no practical skills, Yŏnsil cannot find a job. Only by selling her possessions at pawn shops can she pay her rent. Survival, rather than being a member of an intellectual or cultural avant-garde, is now her chief priority. She becomes desperate to find a way out of her predicament: “Losing love and giving up literature, Yŏnsil made every effort to avoid starvation. . . . ‘I can neither go hungry, nor beg.’ These were the only two options she could choose, but she could not pick either one. In that case, the best option for any human being was death” (*SKY* 321). She does consider suicide as an option.

Facing these worsening conditions, Yŏnsil decides to go home to Pyongyang. What awaits her at home, where her step-brother has already inherited everything from her late father, is simply cold treatment. She is neither a family member nor an invited guest to her brother; thus, when she leaves her hometown, she begs an old friend for and receives travel expenses to return to Seoul. Because she has failed to obtain financial help from her family, her living conditions in Seoul are dire; Yŏnsil falls into extreme poverty. Feeling hopeless, she searches for a cheap place in shanty areas and meets a middle-aged man who is a realtor and was, in fact, her first lover. They decide to live together, and Kim adds a cynical comment as Yŏnsil’s story ends: “Therefore, a couple of lovebirds were born here”
He, as the detached observer one expects to find in naturalistic fiction, maintains his objective point of view on his heroine. The self-conceived heroine of “Free Love” has descended to the level of a drab, worthy of the derisive sobriquet of “love bird.”

In *The Story of Kim Yōnsil*, heredity plays a role insofar as the father is a libertine and the mother is a concubine, but, the main focus of the story is on the environmental influence. Yōnsil’s home environment in her childhood and the intellectual atmosphere of the 1920s are the most crucial elements in her character formation. She eventually fails to become a positive model for female intellectuals in her time and merely sustains her existence by becoming a “mistress” to a worthless man who is far from her standard for an ideal lover. Through the characterization of Yōnsil and her story of degeneration, Kim Tongin shows how the particular path she takes is not profitable, but only leads to a shabbily tragic outcome. This story does not include a character’s death or psychological deterioration as in “Potatoes,” “The Seaman’s Chant,” or “Frenzied Sonata,” but the well-traced process of the female character’s degeneration is enough to express the story’s naturalistic theme regarding environment as a determinant of personality and the course of one’s life.
CONCLUSION

The rapid proliferation of scholarship on Korean and Korean-American literature is now facilitating the widespread study of modern Korean literature in the United States, and more attention is being paid to the writers of the early modern period due to the release in 2005 of the English translation of Yi Kwangsu’s first novel, The Heartless (1917). Like Kim Tongin, Yi is recognized as one of the pioneers of modern Korean literature. It was primarily in reaction to Yi’s moralistic writings that Kim chose to promote what he saw as a more purely artistic literature; and both men stand as the founders of two important literary traditions in modern Korea. Kim is now considered to be a classic author in Korea. Yet, until now, cultural historians writing in English have given no sustained attention to Kim Tongin. Except for three short stories, his works have not been translated.

Kim was born in Korea, a country in which tides of change radically altered old structures at the beginning of the twentieth century. He experimented with many voices and types of writing to achieve his goal as a modern writer. Western influence was often mediated by the cultural hegemony which Japanese intellectuals and artists exercised for several decades in the early twentieth century. Fervent learners and admirers of advanced Western civilization, Japanese authors explored and appropriated all kinds of modern literary trends in the West. In a comparatively short period of time, they aimed to master Western trends and establish their own tradition of modern literature. When Japan annexed Korea in 1910, Korean intellectuals felt the urgency of modernization even more acutely than the Japanese did. Thus, it was inevitable that they devoted themselves to the acquisition and use of the thinking and artistic practices of the modernized Western world. Young intellectuals in Korea rushed to a Japan that had become a new center of cultural
exchange, so that they could experience and acquire the advanced cultural characteristics and scientific knowledge of the West. When he was fourteen, Kim, like many young aspiring minds in the era, moved to Japan. Registering the influence of his years in residence there, he produced historic novels, short stories, criticism, and other types of writing throughout his career; however, some of his short stories that were rooted in Western naturalism should be considered to be his major contributions to modern Korean literature.

An established opinion is that Korean naturalism is nothing but another name for fatalism, and that Korean naturalists misunderstand the nature of Euro-American naturalism (O’Rourke, “Realism” 652). However, Kim shows a good grasp of Zola and other Western naturalists. His literary pieces undeniably reveal that he precisely understands the philosophical determinism embedded in Western naturalist masterpieces, and that he convincingly presents the working mechanisms of cause and effect relationships in his tales. His personal discomfort as a colonial intellectual accounts in part for his pessimistic vision of human experience; however, his scientific approach and detached observation of his fellow Koreans contain no trace of fatalism. Like Western naturalists, he simply believed that human nature deserved sustained observation and exploration, and what he saw and understood also accounts for the character of his best short stories.

The two novellas and three short stories that I discuss in this dissertation are the best indications that Kim’s ultimate goal as a writer was the depiction of the human animal governed by heredity, environment and chance developments. These works portray individuals whose lives have escaped their control, and who have become grotesquely deformed by the impact of drives and forces. Kim began his literary career with the publication of “A Sorrow of the Weak,” a naturalistic novella, and he continued to produce
exemplary short stories of the same kind in the 1920s. But, due to his extravagant lifestyle and resulting economic decline, Kim had to turn to the production of less artistic and intellectual material to support his family. That is, he had to write saga-like novels for newspaper serializations for two decades, despite the fact that he despised this type of literature. But he never succumbed to the cynicism of a hack-writer. He did not stop writing artistic short fictions for his own satisfaction, and the publication of The Story of Kim Yŏnsil in the 1940s demonstrates his persistent loyalty to the naturalistic mode of artistic production.

During the colonial period, this Korean author found literary naturalism the most appropriate means of describing and interpreting the experience of early twentieth-century Koreans. His choice of subject matter, deterministic themes, and literary techniques typical of Western naturalists, demonstrates most fully Kim’s intellectual and artistic affinities with his Western predecessors. The naturalistic sensibility pervasive in Kim’s masterpieces distinguishes him from other Korean writers in the early twentieth century. But, above all, he deserves recognition because, many decades after publication, his works continue to offer insightful and truthful observations of not only the Korean but the human condition.
NOTES


2 According to Korean convention, surnames precede given names. For the sake of clarity, when referring to Korean authors and scholars, I will follow the Korean rules of naming; however, in the case of Korean-American scholars, I will follow the Western convention.

3 Kim Yunsik says that Tokyo was an international city and a kind of branch office of the modern Western world (Study of Yŏm 26). The following comments made by Kim Myŏngsun, a female writer in the 1920s, support this assertion: “Tokyo of those days was a place to where all Chosŏn young people desired to go in the same way as they would visit the Garden of Dreams, at Heidelberg in Germany” (qtd. in Kang, Yŏm Sangsŏp 14). In other words, Tokyo was an alternative place, a replacement for Heidelberg or Paris, the Mecca of young Koreans in the modern Western world.

4 First, Kim Tongin entered the Tokyo Institute, and he attended the school for one year. Due to the school’s closing, however, Kim transferred to the Meiji Institute, the Presbyterian school in Tokyo. The institute was established by a doctor and pastor, James Curtis Hepburn, and was popular among Korean overseas students because of its liberal atmosphere. Kang Insook emphasizes the school’s international climate: “When the institute was established in 1886, there were eleven full-time faculty members and three lecturers. Twelve of them were English or American” (Studies 331).

5 In My 30 Years, Kim records, in detail, the night the Korean overseas students met in Tokyo. After they left the meeting, he and Chu had an ongoing discussion about political issues, and then about literature in general (380-390).
Kim’s major contribution to modern Korean literature is his effort to utilize the Korean vernacular instead of Sino-Korean style. For example, he distinguished present tense from past tense, and wrote in a colloquial style that became a model for later generations. Bruce Fulton emphasizes Kim’s important role in the modernization of the Korean language (623).

Kim Yunsik argues that Tongin’s competitiveness toward three individuals in his life shaped the writer as an extremely proud man. The three persons are his older brother, who was eighteen years older than Kim Tongin; his friend Chu Yohan; and his literary rival, Yi Kwangsu. Kim began his literary career by criticizing Yi’s literature. According to Kim Yunsik, he remained competitive throughout his life (Study of Kim 45).

Ch’oe Namsŏn’s poem “From the Sea to the Youth (1908)” is the model for “new-style poetry” in the transitional period. Yi and Ch’oe represent the first generation of modern Korean literature. Ch’oe was the publisher of two major magazines, Sonyŏn (1908-1911) and Ch’ongch’un (1914-1918). Both titles are best translated as Youth. Along with Yi Kwangsu, Ch’oe was an advocate of new education and enlightenment. For more information on Ch’oe, see Chizuko Takeuchi, “Ch’oe Nam-sŏn: History and Nationalism in Modern Korea,” diss., U of Hawaii at Manoa, 1988.

Chosŏn, an old name for Korea, was widely used by people until the liberation of Korea in 1945. At the present time, Korea is translated as “Hanguk.”

I use Ann Sung-Hi Lee’s recent translation of Yi Kwangsu’s novel The Heartless, which she includes in her book Yi Kwang-su and Modern Korean Literature: Mujŏng.

Michael Robinson classifies Korean nationalists into two camps: cultural nationalists and political radicals. Yi Kwangsu placed his faith in cultural nationalism because he thought that the reconstruction of Korea would be possible through education and shared values. Although Kim Tongin disagreed with Yi in many aspects, Kim can also be seen as
a cultural nationalist in that he hoped Korea’s liberation would be attained by cultural advancement (*Cultural Nationalism* 64-77).

12 Japanese naturalism was conceived between 1885 and 1899, and it is divided into “an earlier period” (1900-1905) and “a later period” (1906-1911). Although the writers of the earlier period of naturalism attempted to imitate the Zolaesque, the later generation did not follow the steps of their antecedents. Instead, the second generation naturalists inclined to romanticism and invented the “confessional novel” or “I-novel.” The only thing they had in common with Zola’s naturalism was their interest in sex. For a detailed discussion on Japanese naturalism, see Kang Insook’s *Studies on Naturalist Literature*.

13 Although focusing on Asiatic racial form, and on class issues in American naturalism, Colleen Lye also admits that “the literature of Naturalism is attracted to representing the socially unrepresented” (*America’s Asia* 8).

14 *L’Assommoir* is hereafter cited in text as *L*.

15 *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* is hereafter cited in text as *Mc*.

16 Although Won Hyunggop firmly insists that Kim Tongin should be categorized as the most representative literary naturalist in Korea, Korean literary scholars and critics still disagree about Kim’s literary tendencies. Most Korean scholars consider him a realist, not a naturalist, although they admit that some of Kim’s stories display many typical traits of naturalism, especially the ones from 1919 to 1926. Critics such as Sangkyue Kim, Hyeja Cheon, and Chunmi Kim compare Kim with Oscar Wilde and regard him as an aesthete (313-315).


18 Kang Insook, who has studied Korean literary naturalism in the works of both Kim
Tongin and Yŏm Sangsŏp, distinguishes Kim from Zola and his “group.” She infers that Kim might have not known Zolaesque naturalism because he never mentioned Zola’s scientific approach, nor did he admit that he was influenced by Zola. Instead, Kang argues that Korean naturalism necessarily has many similarities with the Japanese version because Korea indirectly imported the Western philosophical literary trend through Japan. But as she also acknowledges, Japanese naturalism was greatly influenced by Rousseau, as is evidenced in its emphasis on individuality, emotionalism, love for nature, and respect for interiority. Japanese naturalism, however, did not adopt Zola’s philosophical basis, but his methodology, such as “objectivity, imitation of reality, exclusion of the right of selection, and analytical approaches” (Studies 485). In contrast, Kim’s naturalism contains the philosophical essence of Zolaesque naturalism: a deterministic world view and distanced objectivity. Kang points out that scholars see Kim’s stories and novels, after “Potatoes (1925),” as realistic works. She also adds that few literary scholars include “A Sorrow of the Weak” among his naturalistic stories (Studies 289).

19 Kim Chunmi argues that Kim Tongin is a representative aesthete who was greatly influenced by Oscar Wilde and Japanese aesthetes in the Taishō Era. In her book, she includes Tanizaki Jun’ichirō and traces the relations of influence between this Japanese writer and Kim Tongin. She expresses a similar view to Ken Ito who maintains that the works of Jun’ichirō are about “sexual obsession (usually in sadomasochistic and fetishistic terms), femmes fatales, abnormal psychology, confused identities, and cultural dislocation” (116).

20 “The Seaman’s Chant.” Ch’angjo (Creation), May 1921, reprinted in Literary Works of Kim Tongin, Vol. 7; hereafter cited in text as “SC.” All quotations of “The Seaman’s Chant” are my translation.

21 For this chapter of the dissertation, Kevin O’Rourke’s translated version of the story is
used, and the analysis of the story is, for the most part, consistent with the translation. However, there is one major difference to be addressed. In Kim’s original text, Pok-nyo’s family are farmers who once belonged to the gentleman-scholar class although there is no lengthy illustration of it. As Korea was forced to take the step of modernization under Japanese colonial occupation, Korea’s traditional four categories of class became blurred. The new social categories of landlord and worker were introduced, and as a result, they simplified the class system. The social class categories in Korea in the late nineteenth-century differed from the economic class categories in the West, in that Korea operated in terms of a status-group category. For more information regarding the social class categories in early modern Korea, refer to Clark Sorensen’s “National Identity and the Category ‘Peasant.’”

22 “Potatoes.” Trans. Kevin O’Rourke, 93-105; hereafter cited in text as “Po.”

23 For this chapter, I used Zong In-sob’s 1969 translation. When necessary, I took the liberty of replacing portions of his translation with my own, in order to render the exact meaning of the original text.

24 “Frenzied Sonata” Trans. Zong In-sob, 19-26; hereafter cited in text as “FS.”

25 Accurate translation of this specific passage is crucial for grasping Kim Tongin’s true identity as a literary naturalist. I have here replaced Zong’s very different translation, which reads: “He may think of the hero of my story, Paek Sŏnsu, as someone called Albert, or Jim, or Mr. Kimura, as takes his fancy, but he should recognize this as happening on the stage of the human world, with a man as the hero” (117). Zong’s version thus obscures what Kim intended to make clear in the story. From the beginning, by emphasizing the animalistic nature of human beings, Kim planned this story as naturalistic.

26 The original “The Story of Kim Yŏnsil” was published as a short story in March, 1939. Continuing “The Story of Kim Yŏnsil,” Kim Tongin wrote “The Pioneer Woman” and
“The Brokerage,” in May, 1939, and February, 1941, respectively. The actual publication of the novella occurred in 1947 after Korea’s liberation.

27 “Control of the written word, an important aspect of Japanese colonial policy, was used to limit the spread of radical ideas within the empire and to curb criticism of Japanese colonial administration. […] Publication controls were most highly developed in Korea, but in Taiwan, where similar legal forms and administrative techniques prevailed, these were not as highly developed because other forms of control proved more suitable and a serious nationalist challenge never existed” (Robinson 312). Robinson also points out that publication in Korea was absolutely controlled by the colonial police. For detailed information about the rules and regulations of Japanese publication, see Michael E. Robinson, “Colonial Publication Policy and the Korean Nationalist Movement.”

28 Kang Insook emphasizes that Kim regarded the novel as less than a high art form because such lengthy serializations appeared in the low-brow medium of newspapers and were typically designed to appeal to the everyday reader and thus maximize sales. (Studies 415-419.) Kim Tongin himself recorded in several places that he had to write novels for newspapers due to his economic difficulties and, when he did so, he felt that he was failing to maintain his integrity as an artist: “Chunwon [Yi Kwang-su] and Yoseop [Chu Yohan’s brother] urged me to write a novel in Tonga Ilbo[Tonga Daily Newspaper]. However, I refused, saying that, insofar as they did not allow highbrow literature, I would not write for them. I had principles as strict as the Puritans, especially concerning literature” (Collected Works, Vol. 8, 451).

29 Theresa Hyun discusses “new feminine ideals” in detail in Writing Women in Korea: Translation and Feminism in the Colonial Period. As she explains, the term “New Woman” enjoyed currency in Japan during the 1910s and in Korea from 1920 to 1930 (42-59).
Kim Tongin’s character Yŏnsil’s name rhymes with the literary name of Kim Myŏngsun, Tansil. For this reason, many Korean readers identify the heroine of the novella with this first generation feminist in Korea. As a writer, Kim Myŏngsun took an active role in advocating women’s rights. In her major works, she illustrated love affairs between a married man and a single woman, a married woman and a single man, or partners who were both married. Her sensational personal behavior and radical writings caused her to be called a débauchée. For details on the life and literature of Kim Myŏngsun, see Carolyn P. So, “Seeing the Silent Pen: Kim Myongsun, a Pioneering woman writer,” Korean Culture, 15, no.2. Summer 1994: 34-40.


The meaning of the Korean word “Kisaeng,” which refers to a professional female entertainer, is close to the Japanese Geisha; it has a long history in patriarchal Korea. The Kisaeng typically served and entertained upper-class male clients and went through years of hard training from girlhood. They were required to learn how to compose poems, dance, sing, and play musical instruments.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Hyunsue Kim was born in Seoul, the capital of South Korea in 1970. After she earned her master’s degree, she migrated to the United States in order to pursue a doctoral degree in literature. She has worked as a graduate instructor in the department of English at Florida State University for 5 years. Her areas of research and teaching interest include realism and naturalism in American Literature; comparative studies in literature; Modern Korean literature and translation.