

The Unveiling of the American Dream: Theodore Dreiser's Authentic Portrayal in His Novels

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ABSTRACT:

Theodore Dreiser, a prominent American writer, played an important role in genuinely portraying American reality during the nineteenth and twentieth century's. This paper explores Dreiser's insightful narratives, aiming at the transformation of the 'American Dream' into a tragic reality in works such as "Sister Carrie," "Jennie Gerhardt," "The Financier" and "An American Tragedy." Dreiser's genuine portrayal extends beyond personal struggles to address emerging social issues spurred by industrialization. The protagonists, like Frank Cowper wood and Clyde Griffiths, embody spiritual strength and intellectual prowess, driven by a firm belief in their potential for success. Dreiser's fearless exploration of the dark side of the 'American Dream' is exemplified in "An American Tragedy" based on a real crime case. In this paper, the focus is on Dreiser's belief that American life is filled with tragedy and drama, and how it fully encapsulates the American experience of the twentieth century. His sympathetic portrayal of individuals who are lured by the power of money and fame accurately reflects the true nature of a nation that is constantly evolving and changing.

Keywords: American Dream, Realism, Social Issues, Tragedy, Naturalism, Intellectual, Prowess

INTRODUCTION

Theodore Dreiser, the renowned American writer played an important role in genuinely portraying the American reality during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He was at the lead of writers who exposed the deceptive nature of the 'American Dream,' sketching its ascent, decline, and the clash between idealized dreams and harsh realities. Dreiser's insightful narratives explored the transformation of the optimistic 'American Dream' into a tragic reality, exemplified in works such as "Sister Carrie," "Jennie Gerhardt," "The

Financier,” and “An American Tragedy.” His novels not only highlighted the personal struggles of his characters but also addressed emerging social issues brought about by the industrialization of America. The central theme in his works revolves around characters who are unsatisfied with their social status and dream of a better life and opportunities that could lead to prosperity. Through his literary exploration, Dreiser provided a deep and critical examination of the complexities inherent in the pursuit of the American Dream during a period of significant social and economic change. ‘His works reflect on different critical interpretations attempting to show how Dreiser’s heroes embody the essence of the American career model and illustrate the effects of this mesmerizing myth’. (Bernadette Veres-The Fall of the American Dream: In Theodore Dreiser’s “Sister Carrie” and “An American Tragedy”, 2010) Dreiser’s characters have a strong desire for wealth, perceiving it as the main path to happiness. Despite this, Dreiser refrains from passing judgment; instead, he exhibits a profound understanding of their motivations. Few novelists display such sensitivity in their portrayal of human beings. Dreiser’s empathetic approach highlights his ability to comprehend the intricacies of his characters’ aspirations, particularly their pursuit of fortune as a key determinant of fulfilment. In his deep exploration, Dreiser avoids simplistic judgments and offers a perceptive examination of the complex human condition. He paints all kinds of men – ‘the forceful money-makers; the weak ones who are born to fail and suffer; the brilliant women who walk in and conquer; the respectable men and the disreputable ones; the masters and the slaves; the happy ones and the victims of meaningless forces who are condemned to live a life of pain, frustration and denial.’ (Sacvan Bercovitch- “The Myth of America”, 2003)

In his Nobel Lecture, Sinclair Lewis, the first American recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, praised Theodore Dreiser’s revolutionary contributions to American fiction. Lewis acknowledged: ‘Dreiser more than any other man, marching alone, usually unappreciated, often hated, has cleared the trail from Victorian and Howellsian timidity and gentility in American fiction to honesty and boldness and passion of life’. Lewis credited Dreiser with breaking free from conventional timidity, paving the path for a new era of storytelling characterized by sincerity, audacity, and a vibrant portrayal of life. Lewis said: ‘Dreiser’s great first novel, “Sister Carrie”, came to housebound and airless America like a great free Western wind, and to our stuffy domesticity gave us the first fresh air since Mark Twain and Whitman.’ (http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1930/lewis-lecture.html)

In his novels, Dreiser adopts a unique approach to depicting the ‘American Dream.’ Instead of glorifying it, he integrates the dream into the authentic socio-historical backdrop of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century USA, revealing its actual destiny despite an idealized version. In the “Trilogy of Desire” comprised of “The Financier” (1912), “The Titan” (1914), and “The Stoic” (1947), Dreiser provides a realistic portrayal of the evolution of capitalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The trilogy’s protagonist, Frank Cowperwood, embraces a creed centred on success, disregarding moral principles and causing hardships for his family to steadily climb the social and financial ladder. Starting with modest gains at an auction, Cowperwood eventually emerged as a prominent figure in commerce and finance, gaining control over a significant portion of Chicago’s mass transit. His primary objective is to hoard wealth and establish an appearance of virtue and dignity, even if it’s just an aspect. This is achieved through force and sharp intellect, embodying the unyielding pursuit of success in the dynamic landscape of the time. And he had these. ‘I satisfy myself,’ was his motto; and it might well have been emblazoned upon any coat of arms which he could have contrived to set forth his claim to intellectual and social nobility. (Theodore Dreiser – “The Financier”, 1912, Ch. 19)

In Theodore Dreiser’s novel “An American Tragedy,” the protagonist, Clyde Griffith, earnestly chases the American dream, only to find it turn into a terrible experience that robs him of identity and leads to his downfall. The novel reveals the influence of Clyde’s unsuccessful father, Asa, and the contrasting strength of his mother, Elvira, in shaping his character. Dreiser highlights the impact of religious fanaticism in the Griffiths family, portraying it as an imperfect framework that fails to provide proper guidance.

The pursuit of the American dream in the novel becomes an extreme religion for Clyde, replacing the sense of security derived from his parents’ religious beliefs. Dreiser employs religious terminology to depict Clyde’s fervour for material success, emphasizing the irony of his aspirations. The novel explores Clyde’s sexual initiation and development in a society where sexuality is commercialized, leading to a sense of guilt associated with pleasure. His social alienation plays a crucial role in his downfall, aligning with Dreiser’s engagement with social issues. The narrative describes Clyde’s adoption of various personae dictated by different social spheres, emphasizing the superficial nature of these identities. The novel investigates Clyde’s relationships with women, particularly Roberta and Sondra, revealing societal disparities and the struggle for social identity.

“An American Tragedy” by Theodore Dreiser intricately explores the interplay of religion, societal expectations, and the consequences of social alienation in the pursuit of the American dream. The novel uncovers back the layers of Clyde Griffith’s character, unveiling the transformative impact of his environment on his quest for success, love, and his tragic demise.

The paper effectively captures the essence of Dreiser’s exploration of the elusive and often destructive nature of the American dream portrayed in his works. Dreiser’s characters, particularly represented by Cowperwood in “The Trilogy of Desire” and Clyde Griffiths in “An American Tragedy”, demonstrate significant spiritual strength and intellectual prowess. Their unwavering belief in themselves and their potential for success transforms them into the novels. Cowperwood, driven by an irresistible goal for leadership, embodies these qualities, drawing strength and inspiration where others may hesitate. He seeks perfection in his career, relationships with women, and surroundings, yet his pursuit of the American Dream proves fleeting.

Despite the psychological distinctions between characters, “An American Tragedy” shares a thematic association with “The Trilogy of Desire.” The ideals of the ‘American Dream’ undergo an emotional transformation into “An American Tragedy.” Based on a real crime case, the novel bluntly exposes American life’s harsh realities and the dream’s darker sides. It narrates the rise and fall of Clyde Griffiths, portraying an internal struggle between desires and reality. Like other Dreiser novels, the protagonist dreams of wealth and fame, desperately seeking an entry point to a better life.

“An American Tragedy” distinguishes itself through its profound and comprehensive exploration of the American life phenomenon. Dreiser, an American naturalist, aimed to uncover the multifaceted aspects of life around the twentieth century. His works extend beyond fashionable descriptions of Hollywood and technological advancements, probing into the negative dimensions of American life. Dreiser’s opinion was that beneath the seemingly original surface, American reality harbours tragedy and drama. He fearlessly tackled the portrayal of men and women within the American naturalistic movement, depicting their desires and passions. His characters are portrayed as individuals blinded by the magnetism of money, fame, and the innumerable opportunities life presents. In essence, Dreiser’s works realistically capture the true reality and his profound understanding of American life during the twentieth century. ‘He was the most ‘American’ of novelists. His hungry curiosity probed

the nooks and crannies of the national life, as he sought to perform what he saw as his mission — understanding a large, youthful, dynamic country that had no deep roots in the past and was in a perpetual state of change and becoming. He retained a deep compassion for the voiceless mass of individuals in this land; their tawdry dreams and desires had for him the beauty of prayers.’(Richard Lingeman –“Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey”, 1990)

LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper, written by Xiang Mi and Shi Penghai in 2022, discusses American naturalism and determinism. It examines the society of early twentieth-century America and how debased values and the American Dream impacted it. Using literature analysis, the paper explores the characteristics of American naturalism in Theodore Dreiser's novel “Sister Carrie”.

Another paper, written by Ndah N. in 2017, focuses on Dreiser’s “Cowperwood Trilogy”. The paper critiques the excesses of modern capitalism and suggests ways to moralize this ideology. According to the study, capitalism can be reformed through spiritual revivalism, strengthening family ties, and rethinking the American Dream. The paper emphasizes Dreiser’s belief that spiritual enlightenment is necessary for the moralization of capitalism. Additionally, it delves into the dynamics of the financial world during the Civil War.

In his paper, author Jingang B. discusses how Dreiser’s novel “Sister Carrie” presents a realistic portrait of the American dream in the late nineteenth century. The protagonist of the story, Carrie, is a poor girl who moves from her country home to Chicago in search of a better life. She is modern in her approach and has relationships with different men. Through his novel, Dreiser portrays the futility of life, where Carrie gains status and money while Hurstwood loses his financial gains and position. Most of Dreiser’s characters are inspired by actual incidents and individuals in his life, reflecting his failures, frustrations, and needs. Carrie’s rise and Hurstwood’s fall are the results of their instincts and chance. Dreiser’s main idea was to present the ups and downs of individuals in his life to give a realistic picture of society and life. He tries to convey to his readers through the experiences of his characters that a person's fate is unpredictable and controlled by social forces.

The paper written by Aurangzeb S. and his colleagues focuses on the references made in Theodore Dreiser’s novel, “The Trilogy of Desire”. The novel follows the story of the protagonist, Frank Cowperwood, who struggles to achieve his desires and objectives but ultimately ends up isolated. This study suggests that readers tend to be more observant when

reading historical novels, as they present a reconstruction of historical events with varying versions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It will analyze Dreiser's novels combined with those of his contemporaries to identify common themes and will also look at books on these philosophies to gain a broader perspective. Additionally, the writer will review research papers to understand how others have interpreted these philosophies in Dreiser's works. By using various methods and sources, the writer aims to provide valuable insights into Dreiser's philosophical influences.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Theodore Dreiser stands as a literary pioneer who expertly analyzed the complexities of the American Dream during the transformative periods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through great works like "Sister Carrie," "Jennie Gerhardt," "The Financier" and "An American Tragedy", Dreiser offered a profound examination of characters struggling with the pursuit of success and prosperity. Rather than idealizing the American Dream, he skillfully made it into the socio-historical fabric, exposing its harsh realities. Dreiser's empathetic portrayal of characters' aspirations, paired with his avoidance of simplistic judgments, sets him apart. Sinclair Lewis, in his Nobel Lecture, hailed Dreiser for breaking free from literary timidity and paving the way for a new era of storytelling marked by honesty and boldness. In the "Trilogy of Desire," Dreiser probed into the evolution of capitalism, depicting the relentless pursuit of success embodied by characters like Frank Cowperwood. Dreiser's literary contributions stand as a testament to his adept exploration of the intricate facets of human aspirations, particularly exemplified in his discerning portrayal of the American Dream within the dynamic socio-cultural landscapes of his era. Through his narrative oeuvre, Dreiser evidenced a keen comprehension of the nuanced contours of this quintessentially American ethos, offering nuanced insights into its complexities and challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Theodore Dreiser, known for his truthful portrayal of the American Dream in his novels, avoided idealism in favour of portraying its challenges and intricacies. His revolutionary approach paved the way for more frank and bold narratives, which remain relevant today. Future scholars could probe deeper into Dreiser's themes and characters to collect a clear

understanding of the American Dream and its societal complications. They might discover how his writing reflects the historical and cultural milieu of his era, shedding light on its persistent significance and resonance with contemporary readers. By examining Dreiser's oeuvre through various lenses, researchers could find valuable insights into the complex nature of the American Dream, enlightening our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

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