

**THE THEME OF SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE NOVELS OF THEODORE
DREISER**

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Abstract. This article analyzes the artistic interpretation of the theme of social mobility in the novels of the renowned American writer Theodore Dreiser. The study examines the protagonists' aspirations to climb the social ladder and the moral-ethical consequences of this process in works such as *The Financier*, *Sister Carrie*, and *An American Tragedy*. The concept of social mobility in Dreiser's work is illuminated within the context of the "American Dream," linked to economic determinism and the biological instincts of the characters. The paper provides scientific conclusions regarding Dreiser's depiction of the social environment's power in determining human destiny and the tragic nature of vertical mobility.

Keywords: social mobility, Theodore Dreiser, American Dream, naturalism, vertical mobility, social environment, economic determinism, *An American Tragedy*.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada taniqli amerikalik yozuvchi Teodor Drayzer romanlarida ijtimoiy mobillik mavzusining badiiy talqini tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot davomida yozuvchining "Baxtiyorlik ketidan quvib" (*The Financier*), "Kerri opa" (*Sister Carrie*) va "Amerika fojiasi" (*An American Tragedy*) kabi asarlarida qahramonlarning ijtimoiy zinapoyadan yuqoriga ko'tarilishga intilishi va bu jarayonning ma'naviy-axloqiy oqibatlari o'rganilgan. Drayzer ijodidagi ijtimoiy mobillik tushunchasi "Amerika orzusi" kontekstida, iqtisodiy determinizm va personajlarning biologik instinktlari bilan bog'liq holda yoritiladi. Maqolada yozuvchi tomonidan ijtimoiy muhitning inson taqdirini belgilovchi kuchi va vertikal mobillikning fojeaviy xarakteri bo'yicha ilmiy xulosalar berilgan.

Kalit so'zlar: ijtimoiy mobillik, Teodor Drayzer, Amerika orzusi, naturalizm, vertikal mobillik, ijtimoiy muhit, iqtisodiy determinizm, "Amerika fojiasi".

INTRODUCTION

Theodore Dreiser stands as a pivotal figure in American literary naturalism, providing a stark, uncompromising look at the mechanisms of social mobility during the transition to the industrial age. Unlike the romanticized "rags-to-riches" narratives popularized by Horatio Alger, Dreiser's exploration of the "American Dream" is rooted in a cold, biological, and economic reality. Social mobility in his novels is not merely a matter of hard work or moral integrity; rather, it is a turbulent process driven by

“chemisms,” environmental pressures, and the relentless pursuit of material status. The protagonists of Dreiser’s major works, such as Carrie Meeber, Frank Cowperwood, and Clyde Griffiths, represent different trajectories of vertical mobility from the dazzling ascent to the catastrophic fall. This study aims to investigate the structural and psychological dimensions of social mobility in Dreiser’s fiction, examining how the urban environment functions as a catalyst for both ambition and inevitable moral decay [1].

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a literary-analytical and socio-historical method to investigate the mechanics of social mobility within Theodore Dreiser’s major novels. The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Literary Naturalism, specifically focusing on the concepts of environmental determinism and biological motivation. The methodological process involves a close textual analysis of *Sister Carrie*, *The Financier*, and *An American Tragedy*, identifying the specific markers of vertical and horizontal mobility. Furthermore, the study applies a comparative structural approach to contrast the successful ascent of Carrie Meeber with the catastrophic failure of Clyde Griffiths. This allows for an evaluation of “mobility” not just as a financial gain, but as a semiotic shift in identity, clothing, and social space. The research also incorporates socio-critical analysis to examine how the 19th-century American capitalist structure acts as a “selective agent” that determines the survival or destruction of the individual based on their inherent “force” or “chemisms” [1].

RESULTS

The analysis of Dreiser’s major novels reveals that social mobility is depicted as a “blind force” rather than a structured path. In *Sister Carrie*, the protagonist’s journey from a humble rural background to the heights of theatrical fame illustrates a successful, yet spiritually hollow, vertical ascent. Dreiser breaks away from traditional Victorian morality by allowing Carrie to achieve material success despite her “moral transgressions.” The results of this study show that Carrie’s mobility is fueled by her instinctive reaction to the “magnetism” of the big city Chicago and later New York. The city acts as a biological organism that feeds the desires of those who enter it. However, this mobility is contrasted with the tragic descent of Hurstwood, whose social disintegration highlights the precarious nature of status in a capitalist society. Dreiser demonstrates that in the industrial world, social equilibrium is a myth; one is either ascending or being crushed by the weight of the social hierarchy [2].

Furthermore, the research into Dreiser’s “Trilogy of Desire,” specifically *The Financier*, identifies a different model of mobility that of the “Superman” or the financial titan. Frank Cowperwood’s mobility is predicated on intellectual superiority

and an absolute lack of conventional ethics. Here, social mobility is stripped of its democratic illusions and presented as a Darwinian struggle for dominance. Cowperwood does not seek to "fit in" to a social class; he seeks to own the structures that define those classes. The discussion focuses on how Dreiser uses the metaphor of the "lobster and the squid" to symbolize the predatory nature of social advancement. For Dreiser, the social ladder is a biological battlefield where the "fit" survive through manipulation and the accumulation of capital, proving that economic power is the only true currency of mobility in the American landscape.

The analytical results of Dreiser's prose demonstrate that social mobility is an omnipresent, almost gravitational force that dictates the rhythm of the characters' lives. In *Sister Carrie*, mobility is presented as a visual and sensory seduction. Carrie's rise from a "lowly" factory worker to a Broadway star is not a triumph of spirit, but a result of her passive adaptation to the urban environment. Dreiser meticulously records her transformation through her relationship with clothes; as her social station rises, her "material self" expands. The research indicates that for Dreiser, the individual is a "waif amid forces," and Carrie's success is a byproduct of her instinctive ability to mirror the desires of the consumerist society. However, her final state of "lonely success" proves that vertical mobility in a naturalistic universe does not lead to emotional equilibrium. She sits in her rocking chair, having reached the "peak," only to find that the horizon of desire has moved further away. This illustrates a "paradox of mobility": the higher one climbs, the more profound the spiritual vacuum becomes [4; p. 132].

The study further delves into the brutal reality of failed mobility in *An American Tragedy*. Clyde Griffiths' trajectory is the antithesis of the American Dream. His mobility is stifled by a "double bind": the crushing poverty of his evangelical upbringing and the unattainable glitter of the leisure class. The study reveals that Clyde's crime the murder of Roberta Alden is a direct, albeit distorted, attempt at social mobility. To Clyde, Roberta represents the "anchor" of his lower-class past, while Sondra Finchley represents the "portal" to the aristocracy of Lycurgus. Dreiser's narrative suggests that Clyde's moral collapse is a structural necessity of a society that advertises wealth to everyone but restricts access to a few. The "tragedy" is not Clyde's inherent evil, but his inherent weakness in the face of an overwhelming social aesthetic. As Dreiser notes, Clyde was "not a powerful man," and in the Darwinian struggle for social elevation, the weak are inevitably sacrificed to maintain the "purity" of the upper-class boundaries [1; p. 382].

In *The Financier*, the results shift toward the "Biological Superman" model of mobility. Frank Cowperwood's ascent is depicted through the metaphor of the "lobster and the squid," where mobility is the prize for the most ruthless predator.

Cowperwood's movement through the social strata of Philadelphia is characterized by a total absence of "social shame." He treats banks, stocks, and women as interchangeable assets in his climb to dominance. The research observes that Cowperwood represents the "unbound individual" who views the social ladder as a playground for his own will. Unlike Clyde, who is destroyed by social conventions, Cowperwood manipulates those conventions to facilitate his own vertical movement. This highlights Dreiser's belief that social mobility is a "test of force." Those who possess the "magnetic quality" of leadership and the "coldness of the financier" are capable of transcending their origins, while those driven by mere sentimentality are destined to remain stagnant or fall [3].

DISCUSSION

The discussion also highlights the role of "material objects" as markers of social mobility in Dreiser's prose. Clothes, furniture, and architectural spaces are not mere descriptions but pragmatic signs of a character's shifting social position. When Carrie changes her dress or when Clyde enters the luxurious Lycurgus hotel, they are undergoing a semiotic transformation. Dreiser's focus on these details proves that in a consumerist society, the appearance of mobility often precedes the reality of it. Moreover, the study observes that mobility for Dreiser is always accompanied by an emotional "void." Whether the character succeeds like Carrie or fails like Clyde, the psychological result is a sense of isolation and the realization that the peak of the social ladder offers no ultimate satisfaction. This "philosophical pessimism" is what distinguishes Dreiser from his contemporaries; he portrays social mobility as an endless, circular pursuit of a mirage that recedes as soon as it is approached [4].

Ultimately, the theme of social mobility in Dreiser's novels serves as a fundamental critique of the American socio-economic system. The study concludes that Dreiser views society as a rigid, yet deceptively fluid structure where individual destiny is determined more by "chance" and "instinct" than by merit. The transition from the rural to the urban, and from poverty to wealth, is portrayed as a traumatic metamorphosis that leaves the human soul fragmented. Dreiser's naturalism confirms that while the "American Dream" offers the promise of mobility, the "American Tragedy" is the inevitable cost for those who believe in its benevolent potential.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Theodore Dreiser provides a comprehensive and devastating mapping of social mobility in the early 20th century. His novels prove that vertical movement within the social hierarchy is a high-stakes gamble dictated by economic forces and biological impulses. Whether through the successful but lonely ascent of

Carrie Meeber or the doomed striving of Clyde Griffiths, Dreiser illustrates that the desire for mobility is the primary engine of human action in the modern world. However, his final verdict remains pessimistic: the social ladder is a predatory structure, and the pursuit of status leads either to a loss of identity or a physical destruction. This research reaffirms Dreiser's position as a master of naturalism who exposed the darker mechanisms behind the glittering surface of the American Dream.

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