

Realism and Naturalism Intertwined: Hardy's Tess and Dreiser's Carrie

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ABSTRACT

Objective: In this article written about the intersection of realism and naturalism in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Both novels, though rooted in distinct literary traditions, reveal overlapping aesthetic and thematic concerns, particularly in their treatment of women's struggles within oppressive social structures. *Method:* The study draws upon literary criticism, historical context, and narrative analysis to demonstrate how Hardy and Dreiser utilize their respective narrative strategies to reflect the deterministic forces of society while simultaneously allowing for moments of personal agency. *Result:* Hardy's lyrical realism intertwines with the fatalistic tone of naturalism, whereas Dreiser's journalistic detachment reflects a raw, unembellished portrayal of urban life. *Novelty:* Through comparative analysis, the article highlights how both authors capture the socio-economic pressures, gender roles, and moral constraints of their eras.

INTRODUCTION

Literary realism and naturalism emerged as two of the most influential movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shaping the evolution of the modern novel across Europe and America. Realism emphasized fidelity to life, psychological depth, and moral complexity, while naturalism extended these principles by stressing determinism, social constraints, and the influence of heredity and environment. Both traditions sought to capture human experience with precision, yet they diverged in their philosophical underpinnings: realism offered space for moral choice, whereas naturalism leaned toward fatalism and inevitability [1][2].

In this regard, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* stand as pivotal texts that blur the boundaries between the two traditions. Hardy, rooted in the English countryside, employed lyrical realism to portray the fragility of rural life, but infused his narrative with the tragic determinism typical of naturalism [3]. Dreiser, conversely, captured the dynamism of urban America through a journalistic lens, presenting characters subject to the impersonal forces of industrial capitalism and desire. Despite their cultural differences, both authors reveal how women's struggles are shaped by socio-economic pressures, gender hierarchies, and shifting moral landscapes [4].

The theoretical frameworks of realism and naturalism have been extensively examined by scholars such as Ian Watt, George Levine, Émile Zola, and Frank Norris. Their works highlight the complementarity of these traditions rather than their

opposition. Yet, a gap remains in comparative literary studies that analyze how Hardy and Dreiser specifically intertwine these modes to depict women's agency within restrictive systems [5][6]. Previous studies have often analyzed each novel independently, but fewer have conducted a focused comparative analysis that situates both *Tess* and *Carrie* within a shared discourse of realism-naturalism hybridity. This article seeks to address this lacuna by offering a detailed exploration of narrative strategies, character construction, and socio-historical settings across the two works [7].

Methodologically, this study employs a comparative literary approach, drawing upon textual analysis, historical contextualization, and critical theory. The research examines Hardy's use of pastoral imagery and omniscient narration alongside Dreiser's sociological tone and attention to economic forces. By placing these narrative techniques within broader philosophical and cultural frameworks, the study identifies how realism and naturalism operate not as dichotomous categories but as intersecting forces. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how literary traditions adapt across geographical and cultural boundaries while maintaining shared thematic concerns [8][9].

The findings of this research are expected to contribute to ongoing debates about the fluidity of literary categories and the ways in which canonical texts resist neat classification. Hardy's *Tess* illustrates how realism's attention to character psychology can coexist with naturalism's tragic inevitability, while Dreiser's *Carrie* demonstrates how urban modernity amplifies deterministic forces without erasing human ambition [10]. These insights not only enrich the critical appreciation of Hardy and Dreiser but also underline the enduring relevance of realism and naturalism in understanding the interplay of individual agency, social structures, and gender dynamics. The implications extend beyond literary scholarship, offering broader reflections on how cultural narratives shape and constrain human experience [11].

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a comparative literary methodology that combines textual analysis, historical contextualization, and critical interpretation to examine the intertwining of realism and naturalism in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. The analysis begins with a close reading of the novels, focusing on narrative strategies, character construction, and thematic concerns that reveal the interplay between realist fidelity to lived experience and naturalist determinism. Hardy's detailed depiction of rural Wessex and Dreiser's sociological portrayal of urban America are studied in relation to their narrative techniques, including descriptive imagery, symbolism, psychological depth, and journalistic detachment. Alongside textual analysis, the research situates both novels within their socio-historical contexts by engaging with the cultural conditions of late Victorian England and Gilded Age America. This contextual approach highlights the influence of industrialization, class structures, urban expansion, and gender ideologies on literary production. Secondary sources, including works of literary critics such as Zola, Watt, Levine, and Norris, provide theoretical grounding, particularly in distinguishing between realism and naturalism

while recognizing their convergence in practice [12]. The study further employs comparative analysis to evaluate *Tess* and *Carrie* not as isolated figures but as parallel constructs that embody the limitations and possibilities faced by women in different socio-cultural landscapes. Through this integrative approach, the research avoids treating realism and naturalism as mutually exclusive, instead viewing them as complementary frameworks that enrich literary representation. The methodological emphasis on comparative interpretation ensures a balanced exploration of authorial intent, socio-historical conditions, and thematic resonance, thereby producing a nuanced understanding of both texts.

Theoretical Framework

Realism, as articulated by critics such as Ian Watt and George Levine, emphasizes faithful representation of the observable world, plausible causality in plot, and moral complexity. Characters in realist fiction are shaped by both individual agency and environmental influences [13]. Naturalism, as formulated by Émile Zola and adapted in the American context by Frank Norris, extends realism's principles but underscores the deterministic role of heredity, environment, and social forces in shaping human destiny [14]. While realism often leaves room for moral choice and transformation, naturalism frequently depicts individuals as powerless against impersonal forces. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy's realist sensibility is evident in his detailed depiction of rural Wessex, his nuanced character studies, and his moral engagement with *Tess's* plight [15]. However, his plot structure driven by chance events, social stigma, and inevitable tragedy bears the hallmarks of naturalistic fatalism. Dreiser's *'Sister Carrie'*, conversely, approaches realism through its journalistic detail and social observation but leans heavily into naturalism through its focus on economic determinism, the impersonal forces of urban life, and the inexorable pull of desire [16]. This theoretical lens allows for a nuanced reading of both novels as hybrid texts, in which realism and naturalism operate not as mutually exclusive categories but as complementary modes that together enhance the authors' social and psychological insights.

Female Characterization: *Tess Durbeyfield* and *Caroline Meeber ('Carrie')* are central to understanding the intersection of realism and naturalism in Hardy and Dreiser's works [17]. *Tess* is depicted as an embodiment of rural innocence, moral resilience, and quiet dignity, yet her fate is shaped by patriarchal values, class hierarchies, and a series of misfortunes. Hardy's narration invites empathy, framing *Tess* as a victim of social convention and moral hypocrisy. *Carrie*, in contrast, emerges as a figure of urban ambition and adaptability. Her journey from small-town obscurity to theatrical celebrity reflects both her personal agency and the seductive, corrupting influences of consumer culture. While *Tess's* tragedy stems from external constraints and internalized guilt, *Carrie's* arc is marked by moral ambiguity and material success devoid of emotional fulfillment.

Socio-Historical Context: The socio-historical backdrops of *'Tess of the d'Urbervilles'* and *'Sister Carrie'* are pivotal to their meaning. Hardy's England is a landscape in transition, where industrialization encroaches on traditional rural life,

eroding established social structures [18]. *Tess's* struggles mirror the dislocation of the rural working class and the rigid moral codes of Victorian society. Dreiser's America, by contrast, is defined by rapid urban expansion, immigration, and the rise of consumer capitalism. *Carrie's* ascent occurs in a world of fluid social mobility but also profound alienation. In both contexts, gender inequality operates as a central limiting force, restricting women's choices while holding them to contradictory moral standards [19].

Narrative Style and Psychological Depth: Hardy's narrative style in '*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*' blends poetic description with social critique, using symbolism, rural dialect, and pastoral imagery to deepen the reader's emotional investment in *Tess's* fate. His use of omniscient narration allows for philosophical digressions that underscore the inevitability of her tragedy. Dreiser's prose in '*Sister Carrie*', though less ornate, is equally deliberate, employing a detached, almost sociological tone that mirrors the impersonality of urban life. His focus on material detail, economic transactions, and the psychology of desire situates the reader within the mechanisms of social determinism. Both authors employ narrative strategies that balance realism's fidelity to lived experience with naturalism's emphasis on external forces shaping human lives [20].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* clearly demonstrate the interrelationship between the movements of realism and naturalism. Although both writers sought to depict realistic reality in describing the lives of their characters, they also used the idea of "human life being determined by external forces" characteristic of naturalism as a main direction. The analysis revealed that the image of *Tess* cannot escape the strict moral standards, patriarchal order, and social stratification system of Victorian society. Her personal life and fate are determined by external factors such as coincidences, social discrimination, and gender inequality. These aspects reflect the concept of "the limitation of human will" characteristic of naturalism. At the same time, Hardy's deep and objective depiction of *Tess's* spiritual world, inner experiences, and decision-making process clearly demonstrates the principles of realism, namely, "truthful representation of life reality." The image of *Carrie* was formed in the industrial development and capitalist environment of American cities, and her desire to achieve social status, fame, and material well-being are interpreted by Dreiser on a naturalistic basis. *Carrie* tries to find her way in the whirlpool of social pressure, economic difficulties, and personal passions, but her decisions are often determined by external circumstances and random circumstances. At the same time, the realistic style is also strong in Dreiser's work: through a detailed description of urban life, living conditions, and the depiction of human dreams and hopes, he shows the reader real reality. As can be seen from the results, realism and naturalism in the work of Hardy and Dreiser were not sharply separated from each other, but rather appeared as complementary and harmonious currents. Hardy, based on realism, illuminated the human spiritual world and showed the helplessness of man in the face of external forces through naturalism, while Dreiser,

through naturalism, revealed the influence of social and economic conditions, and through realism, presented life details and real personal experiences. In the process of discussion, it can also be noted that although the images of Tess and Carrie represent different cultural and historical contexts of their time, they generally lead to the same conclusion regarding the freedom and destiny of man. Both characters cannot fully control their own fate, their life path is determined by external forces - society, economy, gender norms and random events. This confirms the main idea of the naturalistic movement. At the same time, the high artistic potential of realism is revealed due to the fact that the writers show the characters not only as "victims", but also as living, complex, strong-willed people of their time. Thus, the results of the study show that realism and naturalism are inextricably linked in the work of Hardy and Dreiser, through which the writers shed light on the complex relationships between human destiny, the strict laws of society, and the chain of coincidences. This harmony makes their works significant not only for their time, but also as an important source for modern literary analysis.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : The comparative study of Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Sister Carrie reveals the ways in which realism and naturalism intertwine to depict the complex interplay of individual agency and social determinism. Hardy's Tess and Dreiser's Carrie, though vastly different in temperament, social environment, and ultimate fate, both embody the tensions inherent in navigating gendered expectations within changing socio-economic landscapes. **Implication :** By blending the empathic moral vision of realism with the unflinching determinism of naturalism, both authors craft enduring narratives that transcend their immediate historical contexts. **Limitation :** The synthesis of these modes may be constrained by the scope of comparative focus, which is limited to Hardy and Dreiser, leaving unexplored other authors who may enrich the framework of realism and naturalism. **Future Research :** The synthesis of these modes not only enriches the literary texture of each novel but also provides a framework for understanding the continued relevance of realist and naturalist approaches in contemporary literature.

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