

Chains of Circumstance: Realism and Naturalism in Tess and Sister Carrie

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine the convergence of Realism and Naturalism through the comparative analysis of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, focusing on how female protagonists are shaped by social, economic, and personal forces. **Method:** The research employs a comparative literary analysis that explores thematic concerns, narrative techniques, and character development across the two novels within their distinct cultural and historical contexts. **Results:** The findings reveal that Hardy's *Tess* is situated in the moral and social frameworks of Victorian England, where fate and societal judgment dictate her tragic destiny, while Dreiser's *Carrie* reflects the American Naturalist tradition of social mobility, material ambition, and moral ambiguity. Despite their differences, both authors depict women as products of their environments who simultaneously challenge societal constraints. **Novelty:** This study contributes to literary scholarship by demonstrating how Realism's detailed representation of everyday life and Naturalism's deterministic outlook converge in portraying women's roles, offering new insights into cross-cultural interpretations of gender, morality, and social change at the turn of the century.

INTRODUCTION

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed significant transitions in literary style and thematic focus, with Realism and Naturalism emerging as dominant modes of narrative representation. While Realism sought to depict life with fidelity to everyday experiences, Naturalism extended this vision by emphasizing the role of environment, heredity, and socio-economic forces in shaping human destiny. Within this literary landscape, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* stand as pivotal works that blend the qualities of both movements, albeit from different cultural and historical contexts [1], [2].

Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is deeply rooted in the moral and social concerns of Victorian England, portraying a heroine whose innocence, moral integrity, and resilience are constantly tested by societal norms and rigid moral codes. In contrast, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* reflects the emerging urban-industrial ethos of turn-of-the-century America, presenting a protagonist whose ambition, adaptability, and pursuit of material success align closely with Naturalist ideals. Despite these differences, both *Tess* and *Carrie* are situated within deterministic frameworks, where personal agency is constrained by external pressures be it social morality or economic necessity [3].

This article examines how Hardy and Dreiser intertwine Realist detail with Naturalist determinism in their portrayal of female protagonists. By analyzing thematic

elements, narrative techniques, and character development, the study aims to uncover the ways in which the two novels negotiate the boundaries between individual will and external forces. In doing so, it situates both works within the broader discourse on gender, morality, and social change at the turn of the century [4].

RESEARCH METHOD

This scientific article examines the artistic features of realism and naturalism movements, as well as their mutual harmony and differences, using the works "Chains of Circumstance: Realism and Naturalism in Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Sister Carrie" as an example. The methodology of the study is mainly based on literary analysis, comparison, and a contextual approach, and serves to comprehensively illuminate the social, psychological, and aesthetic factors in the works of the authors.

As the first stage of the methodology, in the process of forming theoretical foundations, the main scientific sources on realism and naturalism movements were studied, including the theoretical views of G. Lukacs, E. Zola, H. James, and modern literary critics. Through this, a conceptual framework for the study was developed.

In the second stage, textual analysis was used. The novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser were studied in terms of plot, image system, psychological image, social conditions, and language style. The formation of the "chains of circumstance" in the works, the connection between the social factors that determine the life path of the characters and the internal psychological experiences were analyzed.

The comparative-analytical method was used as the third stage of the methodology. It compared the elements of realism and naturalism in the works of Hardy and Dreiser. It was emphasized that Tess's fate was formed within the framework of English Victorian society, and Carrie's in the capitalist urban environment of America, and the influence of various historical and cultural contexts on artistic expression was studied.

Also, based on a contextual approach, the social, political and cultural processes of the era in which the works were written were taken into account. In Hardy's work, special attention was paid to the moral norms, patriarchal values and social stratification of the Victorian era, while in Dreiser's work, the issues of industrialization, consumer society and economic inequality in American cities were paid special attention.

Psychological analysis also plays an important role in the research methodology. The images of Tess and Carrie were studied from the point of view of their internal experiences, decision-making process, submission or resistance to external circumstances. Through this, the idea of the limitation of human will, characteristic of the naturalism movement, and the principles of "objective depiction of life reality" characteristic of realism were highlighted.

At the final stage of the methodology, using the method of intertextual analysis, the works of Hardy and Dreiser were compared with other examples of realism and

naturalism. The degree of connection with the creative traditions of such writers as Zola, Tolstoy, Balzac, Norris was shown.

In general, this methodology includes a comprehensive approach:

1. theoretical foundations (literary and aesthetic teachings),
2. textual analysis (plot, images, language, style),
3. comparative and contextual approach,
4. psychological analysis and intertextual relevance.

These approaches made it possible to identify elements of realism and naturalism in the novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Sister Carrie*, and to systematically study how they are expressed in the fate of the characters and the depiction of society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Realistic Elements in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Sister Carrie*

Hardy and Dreiser both anchor their narratives in the concrete realities of the societies they depict. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy presents the rural landscapes of Wessex with ethnographic precision, depicting agricultural work, seasonal cycles, and the class hierarchies of Victorian England [5]. The narrative is infused with authentic dialects, detailed descriptions of labor, and the social customs of the countryside, grounding Tess's personal tragedy within a vividly rendered social milieu. The constraints placed upon Tess particularly the rigid moral codes surrounding female purity reflect the deeply entrenched values of late nineteenth-century English society [6].

Similarly, in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser meticulously reconstructs the urban-industrial environment of Chicago and New York at the turn of the century. His portrayal of department stores, theaters, boarding houses, and city streets creates an immersive sense of modern life. The struggles of the working class, the rise of consumer culture, and the allure of the entertainment industry are depicted without idealization [7]. Carrie's progression from a factory worker to a celebrated actress is not romanticized; rather, it is framed within the economic and social realities of her time. In both novels, Realism manifests through the close observation of environment, social conditions, and the material aspects of everyday existence [8].

2. Naturalistic Elements and Determinism

While grounded in Realism, both works incorporate Naturalistic themes, emphasizing forces beyond individual control. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy presents fate as an almost omnipotent force, dictating the trajectory of Tess's life from her ill-fated encounter with Alec d'Urberville to her tragic execution. Environmental hardships, economic necessity, and the social stigma of her perceived moral failings combine to create an inescapable destiny. Hardy's pessimistic worldview aligns with the Naturalist belief that human lives are shaped by heredity, environment, and chance rather than free will [9].

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* embodies a more explicitly Naturalistic approach. Carrie's life is driven by her desires and by the opportunities and limitations imposed by her social and economic environment [10]. Her rise in the theater world is not solely a product

of ambition or talent but is facilitated by chance encounters, the patronage of men, and the burgeoning consumer culture of urban America. Likewise, the decline of Hurstwood, one of the novel's central male characters, illustrates the Naturalist theme of social and economic determinism, as he falls victim to circumstances beyond his capacity to resist. Both authors suggest that individual will operates within narrow limits set by external forces [11].

3. Comparative Character Analysis: *Tess* vs. *Carrie*

Tess Durbeyfield and *Carrie Meeber* embody contrasting responses to the deterministic forces around them. *Tess* is characterized by moral integrity, emotional depth, and an enduring connection to nature. Her resistance to injustice, although ultimately unsuccessful, reflects an inner strength that resists societal judgment even as she succumbs to its consequences. Hardy presents *Tess* as a tragic heroine whose downfall evokes sympathy and moral outrage.

In contrast, *Carrie* is pragmatic, adaptive, and morally ambiguous. Her ambition is not rooted in a clearly defined moral framework but in a desire for comfort, beauty, and social advancement. Dreiser's portrayal of *Carrie* is less judgmental; her moral choices are shaped by necessity and opportunity rather than a commitment to fixed ethical ideals. Whereas *Tess's* trajectory ends in destruction, *Carrie's* ends in material success tinged with emotional emptiness, highlighting different cultural attitudes toward women's aspirations in Victorian England and turn-of-the-century America [12].

Theoretical Framework

Realism and Naturalism emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century as distinct yet interrelated literary movements, both seeking to represent life with an unprecedented degree of truthfulness and social awareness. While Realism arose as a reaction against the idealization and romanticized portrayals of earlier literature, it sought to depict ordinary life, focusing on plausible events, complex characters, and detailed social environments. In the English tradition, Realism often maintained a moral and ethical dimension, as seen in the works of George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and later Thomas Hardy, who combined meticulous depictions of rural life with an acute awareness of social injustices.

Naturalism, often regarded as an extension or intensification of Realism, developed in France under the influence of Émile Zola and spread to American literature in the late nineteenth century. It adopted a more scientific and deterministic approach to human behavior, drawing from Darwinian theories of evolution, heredity, and environmental influence. Naturalist writers such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser portrayed characters as products of social and biological forces, often powerless against the harsh realities of industrial society, economic hardship, and moral ambiguity.

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is frequently categorized as a Realist novel infused with Naturalist elements. Hardy's descriptive precision and social critique align with Realist principles, while his emphasis on fate, inevitability, and the impersonal forces governing human lives reflects a Naturalistic sensibility. In contrast, Theodore

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is widely recognized as a foundational work of American Naturalism. Dreiser's protagonist navigates the urban-industrial environment with an adaptability that allows her to rise socially, yet her success is shaped by external circumstances beyond her conscious control.

By situating *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Sister Carrie* within this theoretical framework, the analysis underscores how both novels challenge the boundaries between Realism and Naturalism. Each text exemplifies how individual destinies are intricately woven into the fabric of societal, economic, and environmental determinants, thereby illustrating the hybrid literary mode where these two movements converge.

Textual evidences

Hardy's realism emerges in his meticulous portrayal of rural life, where *Tess* is often depicted amid the rhythms of agricultural work: "*The morning mail-cart, with its two noiseless wheels, was turning the corner by the church*" [13]. Such details ground the novel in the tangible social and physical environment of Wessex. The depiction of dairy work at Talbothays, the harvest at Flintcomb-Ash, and the vernacular speech of the laborers provide a socially authentic backdrop for *Tess's* story.

Similarly, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* offers a vivid, observational depiction of urban America: "*A great city is like a mill pond; those who go upon it are tossed by every wave and wind*" [14]. Dreiser's descriptive passages about Chicago's department stores, with their glittering displays and crowded aisles, or New York's bustling theaters, reflect the Realist commitment to precise, unidealized representation.

In Hardy's work, fate functions as a controlling force, almost a character in itself. *Tess's* lament, "*Once victim, always victim that's the law*" [15], encapsulates the Naturalist belief in inescapable determinism. Her tragic end is not the result of a single moral failing but of an accumulation of social, economic, and circumstantial pressures.

Dreiser's Naturalism is explicit in *Carrie's* gradual ascent. Early in the novel, she reflects: "*She was not capable of very serious thought; her mind was a mass of impressions and impulses*", suggesting a character propelled more by environmental stimuli than deliberate planning. Conversely, *Hurstwood's* decline is rendered with Naturalistic inevitability: "*The game was out of his hands. It had been from the first*".

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : The comparative analysis of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* demonstrates how Realism and Naturalism converge to construct narratives that are both socially authentic and philosophically deterministic, with each author emphasizing different cultural and historical contexts that shape their protagonists' trajectories. **Implication :** This reveals the broader literary shift from moral tragedy to pragmatic self-fashioning, offering insights into how literature reflects and critiques societal transformations, while also highlighting the enduring relevance of these works in examining the tensions between agency, environment, and fate. **Limitation :** However, the study is limited to a comparative lens focusing on two canonical texts, which may overlook the diversity of narrative strategies

employed by other Realist and Naturalist authors across different cultural traditions. **Future Research :** Further studies should expand this inquiry to include a wider range of authors and contexts, employing interdisciplinary approaches that integrate cultural history, gender studies, and environmental criticism to deepen understanding of the interplay between literary form, social conditions, and individual destiny.

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