

Exploring 20th Century American Society through the Works of Theodore Dreiser and Joyce Carol Oates

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Abstract. This article examines the portrayal of American society in the 20th century through the literary works of Theodore Dreiser and Joyce Carol Oates. Both authors provide profound insights into the complexities of social, economic, and cultural dynamics during this transformative period. Dreiser's naturalistic approach reveals the struggles of individuals facing the harsh realities of urban life and the elusive American Dream, as seen in novels like *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. In contrast, Oates's diverse narratives, such as *We Were the Mulvaneys* and *Blonde*, explore themes of identity, gender, and societal expectations, often highlighting the psychological impact of societal pressures on her characters. By comparing their depictions, this article illustrates how both authors capture the intricacies of American life, reflecting broader themes of ambition, disillusionment, and resilience. Ultimately, their works serve as critical commentaries on the American experience, offering valuable perspectives on the enduring struggles and aspirations of individuals within a changing society.

Key words: American society, 20th century literature, naturalism, urban life, American Dream, literary analysis, family relationship, father daughter relationship, mother daughter relationship, mother son relationship.

American literature in the 20th century is marked by a diverse range of movements and styles that reflect the complexities of modern life¹. Throughout the century, themes of identity, race, gender, and social justice became increasingly prominent, reflecting the changing landscape of American society. This period produced a wealth of influential works that continue to shape literary discourse today. It is stated that American literature encompasses the body of written or literary works produced in the United States and its preceding colonies. It reflects a diverse range of voices, cultures, and themes, influenced by the nation's history, social dynamics, and geography. Key movements include colonial literature, Romanticism, Realism, Modernism, and Postmodernism, featuring notable authors like Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, Toni Morrison, Margaret Mitchel, Theodore Dreiser, as well as Joyce Carol Oates. Themes often explore identity, race, class, and the American experience, making it a rich field for examining the complexities of life in America².

It is derived from systematic investigation that there is a link between American outstanding writers as Theodore Dreiser and Joyce Carol Oates. Theodore Dreiser is admitted as an American novelist and journalist known for his naturalistic and often grim portrayals of life³. His works, such as "Sister Carrie" and "An American Tragedy," explore themes of social determinism, ambition, and the struggles of individuals against societal forces. Dreiser's writing is characterized by its realism and psychological depth, making him a significant figure in early 20th-century American literature.

¹ <https://www.callaghan-finepaintings.com/works-of-art/modern-british.html>

² <https://www.khagrijancollege.co.in/online/attendance/classnotes/files/1696447369.pdf>

³ www.amazon.com

Whereas Joyce Carol Oates is known as a prolific American author known for her diverse body of work, including novels, short stories, poetry, and essays. Her writing often explores themes of identity, violence, and the complexities of human relationships. Oates has received numerous awards, including the National Book Award and the O. Henry Award⁴. Her notable works include "Them," "We Were the Mulvaneys," and "Blonde," showcasing her keen psychological insight and powerful narrative style.

It is obvious that while separated by time and style, both novelists share several common features in their novel writing. "One notable example is psychological depth which authors delve deeply into the inner lives of their characters, exploring their motivations, desires, and struggles. Next, Dreiser is recognized for his naturalistic style, representing characters molded by their atmosphere and societal circumstances⁵. Oates also incorporates elements of naturalism, examining how societal factors influence her characters' lives. After, both writers' critique social norms and injustices. Dreiser often highlights the struggles of the working class and the corrupting influence of capitalism, while Oates addresses issues like gender inequality, violence, and the complexities of American life. This richness makes them relatable and compelling. Furthermore, ambition plays a significant role in both authors' works. Dreiser's characters often pursue the American Dream, only to confront harsh realities, while Oates explores the darker side of ambition and its consequences. As well as both authors employ detailed descriptions and a realistic narrative style, grounding their stories in the everyday experiences of their characters. Another common feature is the themes of identity and self-discovery are prominent in both writers' works, examining how personal and societal factors shape who individuals become. These shared features contribute to their long-lasting impact on American literature, as they provide insights into the human condition through richly developed narratives.

Many people consider that the family serves as the foundational unit of society by providing socialization, emotional support, and economic stability. It transmits culture, values, and traditions, shaping individual identities and community norms. Families also define roles and responsibilities, contribute to social cohesion, and adapt to social changes, influencing broader societal dynamics. Ultimately, families help build and maintain the social fabric that connects individuals within a community.

Certainly, fathers play a crucial role in family formation by providing emotional support, guidance, and stability. They contribute to a child's development by modeling behavior, instilling values, and encouraging independence. Fathers often participate in caregiving and household responsibilities, promoting teamwork within the family. Their involvement can foster strong relationships and a sense of security, positively influencing children's social and emotional well-being. In "Jennie Gerhardt" by Theodore Dreiser, the father figure, Mr. Gerhardt, has several notable characteristics including working-class struggles, traditional values, protectiveness and emotional complexity. A case in point is that Mr. Gerhardt represents the working-class struggles of the time. He faces financial difficulties and embodies the challenges of providing for a family, reflecting the socioeconomic realities of the late 19th century; Next, he upholds traditional family values and expectations, emphasizing the importance of hard work and moral integrity. His worldview often conflicts with Jennie's more ambitious aspirations; And then, as a father, he demonstrates a protective instinct toward his family, wanting to shield them from hardship. However, his inability to improve their situation leads to frustration and helplessness; Besides, Mr. Gerhardt is portrayed as a complex character who experiences emotional turmoil. His struggles with disappointment and societal pressures contribute to the overall tension within the family; Also, his character significantly influences Jennie's development and choices. The weight of his expectations and struggles shapes her own views on love, sacrifice, and ambition.

Overall, Mr. Gerhardt embodies the challenges of fatherhood in a difficult economic landscape, representing the broader themes of class and aspiration in Dreiser's work.

⁴ <https://rephrasely.com/guides/room-study-guide>

⁵ <https://library.fiveable.me/key-terms/literature-of-the-restoration-and-early-eighteenth-century/emotional-depth>

In comparison, “Sister Carrie” from Theodore Dreiser’s novel and Norma Jeane (Marilyn Monroe) from Joyce Carol Oates’s “Blonde”⁶ share several common features that highlight their experiences and struggles as women in society. For example, both characters are driven by a desire for a better life. Carrie seeks to escape her mundane existence and pursue her dreams, while Norma Jeane yearns for fame and recognition in Hollywood; furthermore, both heroines face significant societal pressures and constraints. Carrie navigates the limitations placed on women in the late 19th century, while Norma Jeane confronts the harsh realities of the entertainment industry and the expectations of beauty and femininity; Also, their relationships with men are pivotal to their stories. Both characters experience love, manipulation, and betrayal, highlighting the complexities of gender dynamics and power imbalances in romantic and professional relationships; another feature is that both Carrie and Norma Jeane grapple with their identities throughout their journeys. They are shaped by their ambitions, societal roles, and the expectations placed upon them, leading to moments of crisis and self-discovery; Additionally, their stories are marked by tragedy and disillusionment. Carrie’s pursuit of happiness leads to moral compromises and societal judgment, while Norma Jeane’s quest for fame ultimately contributes to her personal struggles and tragic fate; Apart from this, despite the challenges they face, both heroines demonstrate resilience. They navigate their difficult circumstances with determination, reflecting the complexities of women’s lives in their respective eras.

Above all the family members, the role of a mother in the family is fundamental and multifaceted. She often serves as the primary caregiver, providing emotional support and nurturing, which fosters a sense of security and well-being in children. Mothers are typically key figures in socialization, teaching values, cultural traditions, and life skills. That is the reason for writers to emphasize mothers in their works.

In contrast mother heroines of both writers, Theodore Dreiser’s portrayal of mother heroines reflects complex, multifaceted characters who often navigate the challenges of society, family, and personal ambition. This can be seen in the following novels as “Sister Carrie”⁷, Carrie Meeber’s mother, while not a central figure, embodies the traditional expectations of motherhood. The contrast between Carrie’s ambitions and her mother’s limited life serves to highlight the societal constraints placed on women. Carrie’s eventual choices reflect a struggle between familial loyalty and personal desire; In “Jennie Gerhardt”⁸, Jennie’s mother, while more supportive than many of Dreiser’s maternal figures, represents the sacrifices women often make. Jennie herself embodies the role of a nurturing figure as she navigates her tumultuous relationships, showcasing the complexities of love, sacrifice, and societal judgment; In “An American Tragedy”, the mother figure, Mrs. Clyde, plays a significant role in shaping the protagonist, Clyde Griffiths. Mrs. Clyde represents the traditional, moral expectations of motherhood. She embodies the values of her religious upbringing and seeks to instill these in Clyde, which contrasts sharply with his eventual choices and ambitions. Throughout the novel, Mrs. Clyde endures hardships, including financial struggles and the challenges of raising a family in a strict, religious household. Her sacrifices highlight the burdens many mothers face, and her hopes for Clyde reflect her desire for him to achieve a better life. While she tries to guide Clyde towards a moral path, her attempts ultimately conflict with his ambitions. Her limited worldview and expectations contribute to Clyde’s internal struggle as he seeks to escape his impoverished background. Mrs. Clyde’s relationship with Clyde is marked by tension. Her moral stance and aspirations for him clash with his desire for wealth and social status, showcasing the generational and ideological conflicts that can arise within families.

Mrs. Clyde serves as a critical figure in “An American Tragedy”,⁹ representing the conflicting pressures of familial loyalty, societal expectations, and personal ambition that deeply affect Clyde’s tragic trajectory. In Dreiser’s works, mother heroines often grapple with societal constraints, reflecting broader themes of ambition, sacrifice, and the complexities of motherhood. These

⁶ Blonde, Joyce Carol Oates, Great Britain, Harper Collins publisher, 20

⁷ Sister Carrie, New York 1900, ed. 1917,.

⁸ Jennie Gerhardt, New York, 1911; ed. 1926

⁹ An American Tragedy, New York (2 vols, 1925)

characters embody the struggle between individual desires and familial obligations, offering a nuanced portrayal of women in a changing society.

Joyce Carol Oates explores mother figures in a nuanced and often complex manner. To exemplify some key examples of mother heroines, in the novel "We Were the Mulvaneys" the character of Corrine Mulvaney embodies the ideal of a nurturing mother. However, after a traumatic event disrupts her family, she struggles with her sense of identity and purpose. Her transformation reflects the pressures and challenges of motherhood, especially in the face of societal judgment and family disintegration.

In the story "The Gravedigger's Daughter"¹⁰, the protagonist, Rebecca, becomes a mother figure who confronts her own traumatic past while trying to protect her children. Oates explores themes of survival, sacrifice, and the complexity of maternal love, as Rebecca navigates her responsibilities against the backdrop of a harsh reality. In Joyce Carol Oates's novel "Blonde," the portrayal of the mother figure, particularly through the character of Gladys Baker, exhibits several significant characteristics where Gladys is depicted as a deeply flawed character, struggling with her own insecurities and desires; relationship with her daughter, Norma Jeane (later known as Marilyn Monroe), is marked by both affection and conflict, reflecting the complexity of maternal love; she faces immense personal challenges, including mental health issues and the pressures of single motherhood. Her sacrifices and hardships shape Norma Jeane's early life, highlighting the burdens that often accompany motherhood; Gladys's aspirations and dreams influence her daughter's journey. She projects her own desires for success onto Norma Jeane, which creates tension and contributes to the shaping of Norma Jeane's identity; Oates portrays Gladys as struggling with mental illness, which complicates her ability to be a stable presence in her daughter's life. This instability has a profound impact on Norma Jeane, contributing to her later struggles with identity and self-worth; Despite her flaws, Gladys exhibits a protectiveness over Norma Jeane, driven by her own fears and anxieties. This desire to control aspects of her daughter's life reflects both love and a need to shield her from the harsh realities of the world. She is demonstrated as the symbol of Hollywood's illusions because Gladys serves as a representation of the darker side of fame and the American Dream. Her ambitions and failures reflect the societal pressures surrounding beauty, success, and the often-painful pursuit of recognition. In general, in "Blonde," Oates intricately explores the dynamics of motherhood through Gladys Baker, portraying her as a multifaceted character whose influence profoundly shapes her daughter's life and identity. Precisely, in Oates's mother heroines are often depicted as resilient yet flawed, facing societal challenges and personal traumas. These characters reflect the complexities of motherhood, exploring themes of sacrifice, identity, and the often-tumultuous relationships between mothers and their children.

In exploring the works of Theodore Dreiser and Joyce Carol Oates, we uncover a rich tapestry of 20th-century American society, marked by ambition, struggle, and the complexities of the human experience. Dreiser's raw portrayal of individual aspirations and societal constraints highlights the harsh realities of the American Dream, while Oates' nuanced characters reveal the psychological depth of personal and cultural conflicts. Together, their writings not only reflect the historical and social dynamics of their times but also resonate with enduring themes of identity, resilience, and moral ambiguity. Through their lenses, we gain a deeper understanding of the American landscape—one that continues to shape our contemporary realities and invites ongoing reflection and dialogue.

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