

GENDER INEQUALITY ANALYSIS IN THEODORE DREISER'S SISTER CARRIE

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze gender inequality in Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900), focusing on the intersection of social structure and economic inequality. Using a qualitative research method, as outlined by Creswell (2013), this study examines the ways in which gender roles and social class disparities shape the lives and experiences of the novel's central characters. The theoretical framework draws upon Fakih's (2013) perspective on gender inequality, which highlights the systemic nature of gender-based oppression within social and economic structures. Through a close reading of Sister Carrie, the research explores how Carrie Meeber's social mobility and relationships are impacted by her gender, as well as how economic systems reinforce her position as a marginalized woman. The analysis reveals the intricate ways in which gender inequality is intertwined with class structures and economic forces, influencing the choices and agency of female characters in a capitalist society. This study contributes to understanding the role of gender and economic inequality in early 20th-century American literature, shedding light on the enduring relevance of these issues in contemporary society.

Keyword: Novel, Gender Inequality, Social Structure

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis ketidaksetaraan gender dalam Sister Carrie (1900) karya Theodore Dreiser, dengan fokus pada persinggungan antara struktur sosial dan ketidaksetaraan ekonomi. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif, sebagaimana diuraikan oleh Creswell (2013), penelitian ini meneliti cara-cara di mana peran gender dan kesenjangan kelas sosial membentuk kehidupan dan pengalaman tokoh-tokoh utama dalam novel tersebut. Kerangka teoritis mengacu pada perspektif Fakih (2013) tentang ketidaksetaraan gender, yang menyoroti sifat sistemik penindasan berbasis gender dalam struktur sosial dan ekonomi. Melalui pembacaan yang cermat terhadap Sister Carrie, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana mobilitas sosial dan hubungan Carrie Meeber dipengaruhi oleh gendernya, serta bagaimana sistem ekonomi memperkuat posisinya sebagai perempuan yang terpinggirkan. Analisis ini mengungkap cara-cara rumit di mana ketidaksetaraan gender terkait erat dengan struktur kelas dan kekuatan ekonomi, yang memengaruhi pilihan dan agensi tokoh perempuan dalam masyarakat kapitalis. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi untuk memahami peran gender dan ketidaksetaraan ekonomi dalam sastra Amerika awal abad ke-20, mengungkap relevansi abadi isu-isu ini dalam masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata kunci : Novel, Ketidaksetaraan Gender, Struktur Sosial

1. INTRODUCTION

Human language is a complex and constantly evolving system of communication. Wardhaugh (2019) defines language as "a system of arbitrary vocal sounds used for communication among humans," emphasizing its symbolic nature and its role in interpersonal interaction. Language involves four core skills—speaking, writing, reading, and listening—with writing being particularly significant for conveying clear and effective ideas across contexts (Cameron, 2001). Due to its complexity and ongoing research, language cannot be fully captured in a single study, reflecting its dynamic and multifaceted nature.

Literature, derived from the Sanskrit words “su” (good or beautiful) and “literature” (book or writing), is understood as “beautiful writing” or artistic expression. Scholars like Evan Gottlieb (2022) describe “capital L literature” as texts of enduring artistic or cultural value that offer unique perspectives. Sugihastuti (2007) adds that literature serves as a medium for authors to communicate their ideas and experiences, while Al- Ma’ruf (2009) emphasizes the creative reflection of life phenomena in literary works. Thus, literature combines imagination and meaningful language to engage readers aesthetically and intellectually. Literature plays a vital role in understanding the human condition. As Fananie (2000) states, it serves as a mirror of society, depicting social, political, and cultural dynamics. Beyond entertainment, literature functions as a critique of social structures and values, encouraging readers to reflect critically on their world. It delves into complex themes like love, identity, and justice, providing readers with opportunities for introspection and empathy. Fananie (2001) also highlights literature’s transformative power. Through beauty in language and theme, literature can challenge norms and provoke meaningful dialogue. It portrays diverse perspectives and fosters broader understanding, encouraging readers to question assumptions and imagine alternatives. As a cultural artifact, literature transcends time and geography, connecting generations and communities through shared narratives and universal experiences.

Literary works are creative expressions that convey ideas, emotions, and societal critiques through written or spoken language. They are primarily intended for reading and are protected under copyright law. According to Al-Ma’ruf (2009), literature emerges from contemplation and life experiences within society, offering not only aesthetic pleasure but also intellectual and emotional depth. Sumardjo & Saini (1997) emphasize that literature reflects human thoughts and emotions vividly through language, enabling readers to connect with personal and social realities.

The novel also part of literary work, originating from the Italian “novella” meaning “new,” is a

fictional prose narrative that explores human experiences through characters and their conflicts. Nurgiyantoro (2010) and Tarigan (2000) explain that novels are complex fictional works featuring intrinsic and extrinsic elements, and their emergence marked a new literary form compared to poetry and drama. Within this broad field, the novel stands out as a specific literary form. As described by Nurgiyantoro (2015), a novel is a long prose narrative that explores characters, plots, and themes in a comprehensive manner. Unlike other literary forms, novels often address conflicts holistically and carry educational, cultural, or moral values. While all novels are literary works, not all literary works are novels—each genre contributes uniquely to the richness of literary expression and human understanding. Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* exemplifies this, telling the story of Carrie Meeber's rise from poverty to success in Chicago. Dreiser's naturalist approach captures the social realities of industrial America, including gender and economic inequalities faced by women. Applying Fakhri's (2013) theory of gender inequality, *Sister Carrie* reveals how patriarchal systems dominate social structures, limiting women's rights, control, and opportunities. Dreiser portrays Carrie's dependence on men for economic security amid a society that restricts women's roles to domesticity and marriage. The novel critiques the ideal of the American Dream by showing that Carrie's success involves moral compromises and reliance on male figures. Through this lens, *Sister Carrie* provides a powerful social commentary on the intersection of gender, power, and economic inequality during a period of rapid industrial and social change.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach based on Creswell (2013), emphasizing interpretative analysis through close reading. The primary data source is Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, with secondary sources including feminist literary criticism, gender theory, and socio-economic studies. The analysis is guided by Fakhri's gender inequality framework, focusing on indicators such as economic dependency and social inequality.

The study methodologically examines scenes where Carrie negotiates social and economic mobility through relationships, work, and performance, highlighting how gender structures mediate her experience.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study examines how *Sister Carrie* portrays social structure and economic inequality, while also analyzing the key manifestations of gender inequality as experienced by the protagonist, Carrie.

a. Social Structure in *Sister Carrie*

The social structure in *Sister Carrie* is shaped by rigid gender roles and class divisions that restrict individuals' freedom and opportunities, particularly women and the working class.

The following aspects highlight how social structures are represented in the novel:

Gender Roles:

Novel Content:

Carrie starts as a passive young woman entering the city with few resources, reflecting traditional female roles of dependence and domesticity. She initially relies on men like Drouet and Hurstwood for financial support and social positioning.

Quote:

“A woman should some day ride in her carriage. She would have it if she could.”

Explanation:

This line shows Carrie's internalization of societal gender expectations—that a woman's success and status are tied to a man's wealth. Throughout the novel, Carrie's role is shaped by the men around her, illustrating restrictive gender roles in a patriarchal society.

Class Structure: Novel Content:

The novel clearly differentiates between the working class and the upper class. Carrie begins in a factory, working long hours for meager pay, while characters like Drouet and Hurstwood offer glimpses into middle-class and upper-class life.

Quote:

“The weariness of the thing was the thing that made her sick. It was like a drug to her.”

Explanation:

The harsh conditions of factory work emphasize Carrie's lower-class status and the social immobility it entails. Her transition from laborer to actress parallels the American dream but also reveals how class divisions are rigid and punishing, especially for women.

Social Mobility and Opportunities:

Novel Content:

Carrie ultimately becomes a successful actress, seemingly achieving upward mobility. However, her path is atypical and laced with dependency on men and performance of femininity.

Quote:

“Amid the tinsel and shine she dreamed dreams.” Explanation:

Carrie's rise is tied more to appearance and opportunity than merit or equality. Her success challenges the rigid social system but doesn't fully escape it; she remains isolated and emotionally unfulfilled, suggesting limited opportunities for genuine empowerment.

b. Economic Inequality in Sister Carrie

Economic inequality is a key theme in *Sister Carrie*, as Dreiser critiques the way wealth is

distributed and the disparities that exist between the rich and the poor. The following aspects highlight the economic inequalities present in the novel:

Materialism and the Pursuit of Wealth:

Quote (Chapter IV):

"She saw the beauties of the life these dollars could buy—the fine clothes, the leisure, the things she could not afford."

Explanation :

Carrie becomes aware of the material wealth available in the city , but also how far she is from it. This drives her internal desire for comfort, luxury, and social approval , which is not motivated purely by greed but by survival and identity in a capitalist society.

Quote (Chapter VIII):

"She had no conception of the meaning of money, yet she loved the comfort it brought—the fine clothes, the admiration, the ease."

Explanation :

This quote shows how materialism becomes tied to self-worth and social acceptance , especially for women like Carrie who have limited paths to power or independence.

Class Disparities:

Quote (Chapter II):

"The poor girl's dreams were of something better than this. Her humble clothing was not to be compared to that of the well-dressed woman she saw." Explanation :

Carrie's first impressions of city life reveal the visible gap between the wealthy and the poor . This difference in clothing, lifestyle, and opportunity exposes the harsh divide between social classes .

Quote (Chapter III):

"The working people looked at her as one of their own. The managers saw her as just another face."

Explanation :

This highlights how class affects identity and treatment . Carrie is viewed by others based on her visible class status—no name, no individuality. In this society, class determines recognition and value . Economic

Instability:

Quote (Chapter XLVII):

"He had now no place. He had lost his position. He could no longer pay rent. Life had

suddenly narrowed down to the question of food and shelter." (referring to Hurstwood)

Explanation :

This is a clear depiction of economic downfall and instability . Hurstwood, once a successful manager, was reduced to poverty. It shows how economic status can change drastically , especially in a system that lacks support structures for failure.

Quote (Final Chapter):

“Amid the tinsel and shine of her state walked Carrie, unhappy.”

Explanation :

Even after achieving fame and financial success, Carrie feels emotionally and spiritually unfulfilled . This shows that material wealth doesn't guarantee security or happiness , revealing the limits of economic success in solving deeper inequalities.

c. Key Ideas of Gender Inequality Sister Carrie Experienced.

Carrie Meeber's experiences in Sister Carrie align closely with several of the key ideas in Fakih's framework. Fakih's theory focuses on patriarchy, social structures, economic inequality, and the reproduction of gender roles. These key ideas are experienced by Carrie in the novel:

1. Patriarchy and Control:

Novel Content:

Carrie depends on men like Drouet and Hurstwood for survival, and both exert influence over her decisions.

Quote:

"You're a fine girl, Carrie," he said, slipping his arm around her. "You oughtn't to be living this way."

Drouet's assumption of control over Carrie's life demonstrates the patriarchal expectation that women need to be "saved" or guided by men, reinforcing male dominance in both relationships and society.

2. Social Structures and Gender Roles:

Novel Content:

Carrie struggles with the expectations of being a woman in a working-class job. Quote:

"The dullness of the place, the labor, the grinding sameness of it all, took her nerve away."

Carrie's fatigue in the factory reflects how industrial jobs offered no real opportunity for women's advancement and were physically and mentally draining. The labor market mirrors social structures that limit women to subordinate roles.

3. Economic Inequality:

Novel Content:

Carrie accepts Drouet's financial support after being unable to support herself through factory work.

Quote:

"A woman should some day ride in her carriage. She would have it if she could."

This line reveals Carrie's dream of financial freedom, but the only viable path presented to her is through relationships with men, underscoring the economic limitations placed on women during the time.

4. The Reproduction of Gender Inequality:

Novel Content:

Even as Carrie becomes successful, her fame is linked to her image rather than personal empowerment.

Quote:

"She was a lovely girl, indeed, and fitted in every way for a good position."

Carrie's success is attributed to her beauty and ability to please the audience traits that reinforce traditional feminine ideals. Her identity remains defined through a male lens, maintaining societal gender norms.

5. Cultural and Ideological Factors:

Novel Content:

Carrie is criticized for cohabiting with men without being married. Quote:

"The world is always getting ready to listen to a new voice."

Though this line might sound empowering, it also reflects the double standard Carrie faces—her "voice" is only accepted once she conforms to cultural ideals. Her morality is constantly judged by the norms of the patriarchal society.

6. Intersectionality:

Novel Content:

Carrie's poverty and gender combine to trap her in dependency. Quote:

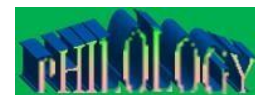
"She was alone. The world was cold. She had no one to whom she could appeal." This poignant moment illustrates the intersection of class and gender. As a poor, single woman in a big city, Carrie lacks support systems, and her vulnerability is multiplied due to both her social and gendered identity.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser critiques the rigid gender roles, class divisions, and economic inequalities of 19th-century America through the journey of Carrie Meeber. The novel highlights how patriarchy and capitalism limit women's freedom and independence, as seen in Carrie's dependence on men and her restricted mobility. Using Fakih's theory, Dreiser exposes how social structures and cultural ideologies reinforce gender inequality. Although the novel doesn't directly address intersectionality, it shows how gender and class intersect to intensify oppression. Overall, *Sister Carrie* offers a powerful reflection on the societal systems that continue to shape women's roles and restrict personal agency.

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