

The concept of “American Dream” in Th. Dreiser’s novels

The authenticated image of the American reality of the 19th- 20th centuries was particularly described by the well-known American writer Theodore Dreiser. He was among the first writers to describe the false nature of the “American Dream”, its rise and fall, a collision of dreams and reality, a transformation of the “American Dream” into the “American Tragedy”. His novels also touch on new social problems that have been developed in the industrializing USA. These problems are mostly reflected in the novels such as “Sister Carrie”, “Jennie Gerhardt”, “The Financier”, and “An American Tragedy”.

In Dreiser’s novels all his major characters are attracted by a better life and its opportunities. His books reflect on different critical interpretations attempting to show how dreiserian heroes embody the essence of the American career model and illustrate the effects of this mesmerizing myth [1]. They aspire to fortune and it seems to be the one and only source of happiness for them. Nevertheless, Dreiser doesn’t judge them – he understands them.

Few novelists respond to human beings as sensitively as he does. He admires or pities all kinds of men – the forceful money-makers; the weak ones who are born to fail and suffer; the brilliant women who walk in and conquer; the respectable men and the disreputable ones; the masters and the slaves; the happy ones and the victims of meaningless forces who are condemned to live a life of pain, frustration and denial. [3]

Sinclair Lewis, the first American writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, in his Nobel Lecture praised Theodore Dreiser: “Dreiser more than any other man, marching alone, usually unappreciated, often hated, has cleared the trail from Victorian and Howellsian timidity and gentility in American fiction to honesty and boldness and passion of life. Dreiser’s great first novel, *Sister Carrie*, which came to housebound and airless America like a great free Western wind, and to our stuffy domesticity gave us the first fresh air since Mark Twain and Whitman.” [5]

In the novels Dreiser uses an absolutely new way of the describing the “American Dream”. Instead of praising it he includes the dream in the authenticated life of the USA of the 19th-20th centuries’ context and shows its real fate, not fictional one.

In the “Trilogy of Desire” (“The Financier” (1912), “The Titan” (1914), and “The Stoic” (1947)) Dreiser describes a realistic development of capitalism of the second part of the 19th century.

The protagonist of the trilogy - Frank Cowperwood – confesses the religion of success.

He does not regard moral principles and bring misfortune to his relatives in order to slowly but surely climb the ladder of success: he makes his first money passing by an auction sale and ends up as a giant of commerce and money who possesses most of Chicago’s mass transit.

The thing for him to do was to get rich and hold his own—to build up a seeming of virtue and dignity which would pass muster for the genuine thing. Force would do that. Quickness of wit. And he had these. “I satisfy myself,” was his motto; and it might well have been emblazoned upon any coat of arms which he could have contrived to set forth his claim to intellectual and social nobility. [4]

The Dreiser’s character possesses great spiritual strength and intellect, he believes in himself and his ability to succeed. Cowperwood’s aspiration to be the leader has made him truly Titan and Stoic: he draws strength and finds inspiration where others give up. The whole life Cowperwood is looking for the perfection: in job, in women, in surrounding, but his “American Dreams” appears to be inconceivable.

Despite the psychological difference of the characters’ image, “An American Tragedy” touches on the same issue as “The Trilogy of Desire”. The “American Dream” here transforms into the “American Tragedy”. Based on an actual crime case, “An American Tragedy” is an unvarnished truth about the tough realities of American life and of the dark side of the “American Dream”. This is the rise and fall of a man and his dreams. This is the inner battle between desires and reality.

The main character - Clyde Griffiths - as in other Dreiser's novels craves for a fortune and fame; he is desperately looking for a door he can pass through to a better life.

“An American Tragedy” stands out among other Dreiser's fiction by the depth and comprehensive coverage of the American life phenomenon. Dreiser believed that the American reality – even though it seems to be immaculate – is full of tragedy and drama; his aim as an American naturalist was to describe all the aspects of the American life around the 20th century: not only the Hollywood life, the creation of corporations, the new advances in auto technology, but also the negative aspects of the American life.

Theodore Dreiser's works certainly display the true reality and deep understanding of the American life. Dreiser – as long as he belonged to the American naturalistic movement - was not afraid to picture the lives of men and women, their desires and passion; all his characters are portrayed as those who are blinded by the force of money and fame, the opportunities of life and the ways of its achievement.

“He was the most “American” of novelists. His hungry curiosity probed the nooks and crannies of the national life, as he sought to perform what he saw as his mission — understanding a large, youthful, dynamic country that had no deep roots in the past and that was in a perpetual state of change and becoming. He retained a deep compassion for the voiceless mass of individuals in this land; their tawdry dreams and desires had for him the beauty of prayers.” [2]

References

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2. Richard Lingeman - Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey, 1990.
3. Sacvan Bercovitch - “The Myth of America”, 2003.
4. Theodore Dreiser - The Financier, 1912. - Ch. 19.
5. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1930/lewis-lecture.html