

Documentary Style and Symbolic Imagery in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*

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Abstract

The influence of Theodore Dreiser on American naturalism is widely recognized, despite his prose often being criticized for excessive detail and stylistic awkwardness. This study argues that these features can be understood not simply as flaws but as part of a deliberate strategy that reinforces the novel's naturalistic portrayal of human behavior as shaped by social, environmental, and psychological forces. Close reading of *An American Tragedy* shows that Dreiser's style is inseparable from his deterministic vision. Patterns such as mirrored events, parallel character trajectories, recurring symbolic objects, and color imagery work together to represent Clyde Griffiths' fragmented consciousness and the tension between external pressures and internal conflict. The analysis also examines the novel's documentary-like narrative form, highlighting the integration of legal, inner, moral, and journalistic discourses. Natural imagery, material objects, and recurring color motifs are treated as part of a broader symbolic pattern that develops across the narrative. These elements collectively suggest a structured pattern of organization through which Clyde's aspirations, hopes, fears, and social constraints are expressed. In light of these findings, the article shows that stylistic features in the novel function as formal elements that contribute to the representation of naturalistic determinism at the linguistic, structural, and symbolic levels.

Keywords: American literary naturalism, style, determinism, symbolic imagery,
An American Tragedy

Theodore Dreiser undoubtedly "fulfills the conventional definition of American naturalist" (Pizer, 1988, p. 347). As an author, he devoted himself to portraying life objectively, meticulously documenting the physical details of his time and striving for a presentation as close to reality as possible. He wrote about "the emotional complexities of man's deepest nature" (Pizer, 1993, p. 76) and the challenges arising from living in a rapidly industrializing America. By courageously addressing themes often avoided as taboo, he gained a significant level of recognition among his naturalist contemporaries. A profound and honest evaluation of Dreiser's contribution to American naturalistic literature can be found in Sinclair Lewis's speech (1930) upon receiving his Nobel Prize:

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. Without his pioneering, I doubt if any of us could, unless we liked to be sent to jail, seek to express life, beauty, and terror.

This paper analyzes Theodore Dreiser's style in his novel *An American Tragedy* (1925), which is regarded as one of his best works (Yardley, 2003). Dreiser's work has been studied mainly within the framework of American literary naturalism, with particular focus on thematic determinism and evaluations of his stylistic "roughness." However, these approaches have treated style either as a secondary tool for naturalist ideas or as a technical limitation. The role of recurring stylistic patterns, such as structural mirroring, narrative repetition, and symbolic imagery, as a relatively coherent set of formal patterns within the novel itself, has received comparatively little attention. This study contributes to this area by suggesting that these patterns are not incidental features but function together to organize the representation of determinism across linguistic, structural, and symbolic levels. From this perspective, elements often described as stylistic weaknesses in Dreiser's prose can be more productively read as part of a deliberate narrative strategy that integrates form with thematic content.

Critical Overview: Debates on Dreiser's Style and Its Documentary Aesthetic

Theodore Dreiser stands among the American literary figures whose work provoked highly polarized debate over writing style and personality. Critics' opinions on his prose have long been divided into two opposing camps. On one side stand critics such as Lionel Trilling (1950, pp. 8–10), who find Dreiser's style clumsy, describing it as dull and at times ungrammatical. Arnold Bennett's well-known review of *An American Tragedy* describes reading the novel as an experience that "squeezes the life out of you" (Swanberg, 1965, as cited in Streissguth, 2007, p. 164). This remark reinforces Dreiser's reputation for producing prose perceived as overwhelming and exhausting rather than elegant and polished. On the other side are critics who praise Dreiser for his ability to challenge American literary prejudices and clear the path for later literary achievements (Kern, 1965, p. 161). As Sherwood Anderson observes, writers no longer "have to face the road through the wilderness, the road that Dreiser faced" (1916, p. 5). Figures such as Michael Lydon and H. L. Mencken view the simplicity and directness of Dreiser's writing as strengths rather than weaknesses. Mencken (1971, p. 80) argues that Dreiser's works should be judged not by the moral themes they explore but by their power to reflect the reality of industrial urban growth and its impact on the American middle class. Responding to critics who label Dreiser's style as crude, Lydon (1993) concisely captures Dreiser's significance as a writer, stating:

An awkward sentence here and there, perhaps [...] his goal was not that we see his words but that we see through the words to the world he was writing to create [...] Dreiser is an immortal, a giant that stands with Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and James among Americans [...] None tells all that Dreiser tells. (p. 100)

Critical attitudes toward Theodore Dreiser are rarely black and white, as he is simultaneously admired and criticized. For example, Arnold Bennett notes the clumsiness of Dreiser's style but concludes that the novel itself is "prodigious" (Swanberg, 1965, as cited in Streissguth, 2007, p. 164). Similarly, John T. Flanagan (1965) points out Dreiser's stylistic flaws, including verbal inaccuracies, archaisms, awkward syntax, and inconsistent grammar, while still acknowledging the vividness of his social vision and the lasting impact of his characters. Joseph Epstein (2001) describes Dreiser's unique style as characterized by a lack of elegance and humor yet emphasizes his ability to capture the randomness and impersonality of urban life. For Epstein, Dreiser's fiction survives not because of stylistic polish but because of its capacity to provoke thought and resonate with readers beyond its time. Such critical ambivalence points to a central paradox of Dreiser's style; although it resists refinement, it retains considerable narrative force.

At the center of this debate is Dreiser's lifelong involvement in journalism, which significantly shaped both his narrative methods and his style (Riggio, 2004; West, 2004, p. 20). Unlike many of his contemporaries, his experience as a reporter and editor oriented him toward philosophical and existential concerns rather than toward ornate language or experimental narrative techniques (Riggio, 2004, p. 35). His "journalistic habits" equipped him with the ability to record reality with honesty, relying on "common expressions, flatnesses, forms of thought, the very effect of popular literature itself" (Bellow, 1955, pp. 146–147). Dreiser was more concerned with "the plain representation of documentary truth" (Giles, 2004, p. 60) than with stylized mediation between competing versions of reality. While writers such as Henry James created new worlds through stylistic mediation, Dreiser remained committed to recording the world as it was rather than reshaping it through aesthetic refinement (Poirier, 1966, pp. 238–240).

Some scholars have sought to explain the rawness of his sociological focus and deterministic style as central to the development of American naturalism (Den Tandt, 2009) and to later interpretations of psychological fiction (Tursinbaeva, 2024). Others explain the roughness in Dreiser's style as a structural feature of naturalist writing. Irene Gammel (1992, 1994) argues that Dreiser's unpolished prose serves the ideological core of naturalism by foregrounding internal impulses, social hierarchy, and material forces that control human behavior, while Ellen Moers (1971, p. 167) suggests that it reflects his commitment to portraying uneducated characters whose lives resist polished expression. These views imply that stylistic irregularities in Dreiser's prose are not incidental but functionally tied to the representation of complex, often conflicting forces. Building on these observations, this paper argues that Dreiser's stylistic roughness can be seen as closely connected to

his philosophical stance. His reliance on repetition, accumulation, syntactic complexity, and limited stylistic variation mirrors the social, economic, and psychological forces that constrain his characters' choices.

Seen in this light, Dreiser's much-criticized accumulation of detail can be viewed as a central and potentially deliberate feature of his writing rather than a flaw. The density of detail in his narration allows for the emergence of a symbolic system in which material objects and recurring imagery embody social desires, hopes, illusions, and constraints. Excessive detail generates patterns of recurrence through which objects, settings, and even colors acquire symbolic significance over time. Clyde Griffiths is overwhelmed by forces beyond his control, and readers are similarly absorbed by Dreiser's dense accumulation of descriptive detail. Like the protagonist, they are led to confront the world as it is, not through the illusion of polished artifice but through the persistent flow of documentary narration.

For that reason, analyses of Dreiser's stylistic shortcomings do not obscure his expressive power, which is "as distinctive as a signature" (Cassutto & Eby, 2004, p. 2). Dreiser's style deserves recognition not despite its awkwardness but because of it. He remains one of the most influential writers in American naturalism, valued not for stylistic polish but for his uncompromising honesty and courage in exploring taboo themes. To read Dreiser is to experience determinism not only thematically but also at the level of language itself.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative stylistic approach that treats style as a patterned organization of language, narrative structure, repetition, and symbolic elements rather than as a set of isolated micro-linguistic features (Leech & Short, 2007). The analysis is grounded in close reading and supported by narratological, structuralist, formalist, and semiotic perspectives, which are used as complementary tools within a unified analytical framework.

The analysis identified recurring patterns, including motifs, narrative structures, and symbolic elements, through repeated close readings. These patterns were systematically compared across different sections of the texts to determine whether they reappeared in similar narrative contexts or clustered around key plot developments. Patterns were considered analytically significant when they demonstrated consistent recurrence and contributed to the representation of determinism across more than one level of the text.

Units of analysis were selected based on three criteria: their frequency across different narrative contexts, their clustering around pivotal moments in the plot, and their consistent contribution to the representation of determinism. These elements were then grouped into three interrelated domains: narrative techniques, structural patterns, and symbolic motifs.

Narrative analysis focused on devices such as free indirect discourse, shifts in narrative voice, and the use of documentary forms. Structural analysis examined mirrored events, parallel character trajectories, and cyclical plot sequences. From a formalist perspective, objects and natural imagery were treated as symbolic categories whose meaning developed not in isolation but through repetition and variation across the text. The discussion of color imagery followed a semiotic approach, emphasizing how colors acquired meaning through their interaction with the narrative context and emotional tone rather than through fixed symbolic meanings.

These analytical domains were not treated as separate levels but as interconnected aspects of textual organization. The aim was to show how patterns of recurrence across linguistic, structural, and symbolic dimensions function together to express naturalistic determinism in formal terms.

Analysis of *An American Tragedy*

Determinism, Style, and Cyclical Structures

Theodore Dreiser's naturalistic determinism portrays his characters as victims of environmental, social, and psychological forces rather than of individual moral choice. In *An American Tragedy*, Clyde's fate is framed by heredity, class position, and institutional structures (Pizer, 2015, p. 126), while his actions are governed by desire, instability, passion, and impulses (Commager, 1959, p. 113). To present the drama of characters who are aware of their condition, struggle against it, yet remain trapped by forces larger than themselves (Pizer, 2017, p. 201), Dreiser's style can be understood as functioning on two planes: socially, it records external constraints through documentary-like narration, and psychologically, it renders internal conflict through patterns of repetition and accumulative narrative techniques.

This dual performance of Dreiser's style can be clarified through Mikhail Bakhtin's (1994) concept of heteroglossia, used here as a way of reading the interaction of distinct social languages in the novel. The analysis identifies a recurring shift between three types of discourse: the narrator's commentary, Clyde's interior perspective, and documentary forms such as journalistic and courtroom language. At key moments, the narrator moves beyond neutral description and frames Clyde's condition in more general terms, emphasizing both the instability of his temperament and his inability to act decisively: "So much for the effect of wealth, beauty...on a temperament that was as fluid and unstable as water."; "...without the power to drive the same forth or himself to decamp, and yet also without the courage to act upon anything..." (Dreiser, 1953, pp. 338, 501). The narrator not only reports what happens but also interprets the events, positioning Clyde within a broader pattern of cause and effect. In Bakhtinian terms, this movement reflects a shift from neutral narration toward a more authoritative discourse that seeks to stabilize meaning, despite the presence of other voices in the text that continue to unsettle it.

This pattern is further developed through passages where third-person narration blends with Clyde's own thoughts, a trend in twentieth-century prose that allows readers to feel the psychological burdens weighing on characters (Pizer, 1991, pp. 208–209). Through free indirect discourse, the text reproduces a mind caught in hesitation and repetition: "But still—still—was not life sweet? Oh, if he could only get out! Oh, if he could only go away from here" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 846). The repetition of "still" and the exclamatory phrasing do not signal confusion in expression but pressure within Clyde's internal thoughts. His thoughts do not develop logically but circle around the same desire for escape, mirroring his inability to move forward. This blending of narrative and interior discourse is an example of heteroglossia at the level of consciousness. It shows how the character's voice is shaped by the narrator's perspective without becoming fully distinct from it.

The pressure becomes more visible in passages after Roberta's death, where narration repeatedly slips into Clyde's interior discourse. These sections are characterized by cumulative and fragmented syntax, repetitive clauses, modal uncertainty, and hesitation, which interrupt linear progression and produce a circular movement of thought. In the passage: "For as he now recalled, ... that soon now, and in the face of all Lyncurgus had to offer him — Sondra — the coming spring and summer — the love and romance, gayety, position, power — he was going to give all that up ... Oh, how horrible! ... Oh, why had he ever been so foolish Oh, why, why couldn't he have waited ... If only he could have waited!" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 464), Dreiser combines cumulative syntax with fragmented exclamations to reflect Clyde's inner turmoil. The long sentence structure mirrors the overwhelming possibilities before him, while the abrupt fragment "oh, how horrible!" conveys his panic. The repetition "why, why" and the conditional phrasing "if only" emphasize his hesitation and obsessive regret. A similar effect appears in the accumulation of modals of uncertainty such as "might," "could," and "perhaps," which reflect Clyde's uncertainty and his constant weighing of possibilities that remain beyond his reach. Therefore, Dreiser's stylistic irregularities can be interpreted as a formal strategy through which he presents psychological determinism at the level of sentence structure.

A different form of pressure emerges in the trial scenes (Book III), where the narrative shifts toward institutional discourse. Mason's speech, in particular, combines rhetorical questions, declarative assertions, cumulative syntax, and lexical repetition. Questions such as "Doesn't the evidence itself show that he did kill this girl?" do not invite response but direct interpretation, while statements like "I have all the evidence necessary to convict this young criminal now" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 661) present judgment as already formed. The repeated use of legal vocabulary, such as "charges," "witnesses," "convict," and "evidence," combined with cumulative syntax, produces a language of procedural certainty. From a Bakhtinian perspective, Mason's courtroom speech, which relies on binary oppositions such as "silence or confession," "intent

or accident,” and “truth or lie,” functions as a highly authoritative language that reduces possible interpretation to fixed alternatives.

The movement among these three types of discourse creates a patterned structure that reflects a heteroglossic interaction among competing discourse registers. These discursive modes do not form a single, unified narrative voice; instead, they remain in tension, which is central to the novel’s representation of psychological and social constraints from different perspectives. This pattern reflects what Bakhtin describes as the coexistence of competing social languages that resist consolidation into a single authoritative discourse. Consequently, Clyde’s experience is alternately narrated, interpreted, and judged within competing discourse registers.

Dreiser reinforces determinism not only through syntax and voice but also through larger structural patterns. This study identifies mirrored events, parallel characters, and recurring narrative sequences as units of analysis across the novel. The patterns identified suggest that character trajectories develop within recognizable structures. The Kansas City automobile accident in Book I and the fatal accident at Big Bittern Lake in Book II are both organized around a similar pattern of desire for social advancement, the presence of a female figure, a moment of crisis, and an attempt to avoid responsibility. This pattern suggests that character trajectories are strongly conditioned by recurring constraints rather than individual choices.

The same logic can be observed in the treatment of the characters. Esta’s tragic story mirrors the experience of Roberta Alden and many young women in Dreiser’s time, who, by idealizing romance, remained vulnerable to exploitation (Lehan, 1963, p. 189). This aligns with Pizer’s claim (2015, p. 125) that recurring themes of betrayal and misfortune can be seen as a reflection of tensions in 1920s America. Instead of standing as isolated events, these narratives form a repeated pattern of gender vulnerability. Within Dreiser’s naturalistic logic, women who seek independence and self-expression, challenging societal norms, often experience tragic outcomes.

Furthermore, Hortense Briggs in Book I and Sondra Finchley in Book II operate as parallel figures within the pattern of desire and social ambition. Both are portrayed as spoiled and manipulative, particularly in their relationships with men. They are acutely aware of how to exploit men’s desires to their advantage and receive everything they want while giving little in return. Hortense repeatedly pressures Clyde to purchase her expensive gifts that he cannot afford and turns away from him whenever he fails to meet her demands: “...no doubt he had all the money he said and would spend it on her” (Dreiser, 1953, p. 77). Similarly, Sondra remains interested in Clyde as long as he is connected to elite social circles but rejects him once his social and economic status collapses: “Never a word from Sondra, of course”; “And no glimpse of Sondra anywhere, of course” (Dreiser, 1953, pp. 662, 673). Through these women, Dreiser presents female desire as a reflection of consumerist and class-driven values. They can be read not as fully independent characters but as

symbolic figures of social forces that expose Clyde's psychological vulnerability. He continuously misinterprets conditional attention for love and willingly sacrifices himself to meet their expectations.

Finally, the novel's opening and closing episodes serve as an important unit of analysis in exposing determinism across time. In Book I, Clyde is introduced as a twelve-year-old boy ashamed of being forced to sing religious hymns in the streets. By the end of Book III, this role is taken by Russell, Esta's illegitimate son. The return of the narrative to its starting point through a different character can be interpreted as an intentional stylistic choice rather than an accident. Even though twenty years have passed since Clyde's execution, little has changed for the poor Griffiths family. It continues to endure the same hardships as their fate is controlled by environmental and hereditary forces, religious beliefs, and internal struggles with guilt and societal judgment (Lehan, 1963, p. 189). However, Russell's final act, where he does not enter "the yellow, unprepossessing door" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 874) as the rest of the Griffiths family, can be understood as a deviation rather than an escape. It suggests how rare such breaks are within deterministic systems.

This cyclical structure is reinforced by the repetition of the descriptive pattern at the beginning and the end of the novel (Book I and Book III—the Souvenir section): "Dusk—of a summer night. And the walls of the commercial heart of an American city..." (Dreiser, 1953, p. 2); "Dusk—of a summer night. And the tall walls of the commercial heart of the city of San Francisco..." (Dreiser, 1953, p. 871). This passage serves as a parallel textual unit that highlights determinism through a powerful image, rich in stylistic devices. The noun "dusk" gains significance through its repetition across structurally equivalent positions, signaling not only the close of a day but a state that never moves away from a cyclical design. The repetition of the phrase "Dusk—of a summer night" in combination with the alliterative repetition of the consonant sound /l/ in "walls", "tall", and "commercial" creates a heavy and inevitable rhythm that emphasizes characters' inability to escape their fate. The "walls" that surround the city appear to be more than architecture. They function as a metaphor for the external forces that confine and determine human destiny (Lehan, 1963, p. 189). In this context, the environment, like the social and economic conditions defining the Griffiths' family life, remains unchanged. The return of the narrative to the almost identical scene suggests that, despite the narrative progression, individual lives remain conditioned by systems that resist change.

Under closer examination, shifts in discourse, mirrored events, and character trajectories suggest that Dreiser's style is organized through structures of recurrence and variation that allow the novel to explore its deterministic vision.

Symbolism

A formalist approach treats meaning as something that emerges from the text itself, through its patterns, repetitions, and symbols, rather than from external biographical,

historical, or socio-cultural contexts (Tyson, 2006). Within this view, a symbol functions as a bridge between the literal surface of the narrative and its deeper thematic structures. A close reading of Dreiser's imagery and recurring motifs, such as jewels, the Green-Davidson Hotel, the camera, and Aladdin's lamp, indicates that these elements function symbolically in ways that contribute to the shaping of Clyde's fate.

Through these symbols, Dreiser explores the complexity of human nature and its metamorphosis in the pursuit of power, wealth, sex, life, and death. Although they are limited in number, the carefully selected symbols enhance and intensify the aesthetic function of formal elements in constructing meaning in the novel. To present the symbolic meaning of fantasies of social climbing, Dreiser uses objects such as the hotel, Aladdin's lamp, and jewels; to counterbalance them, he relies on darker symbols such as cameras, crows, and winter, which foreshadow Clyde's downfall.

Dreiser's persistent focus on material objects, especially the recurring imagery of jewels, can be read as part of a broader ethic of consumption, where luxury items signal social ambition rather than serving as mere decorative detail (Spindler, 1978, p. 70). This pattern becomes visible in many scenes related to Sondra Finchley and Hortense Briggs. When Clyde meets Sondra for the first time, her world is described in terms of luxury objects—jewels, motors, lingerie, leather goods—which define a society based on consumption rather than personal connection. Later, she becomes “the central or crowning jewel...” (Dreiser, 1953, p. 461), a metaphor that transforms her into the object of desire within this material system. Similarly, Clyde's first attraction to Hortense is through her insistence on fashionable, expensive clothing and accessories: “to say nothing of gold earrings, or a wrist watch, all of which she was constantly and enviously eyeing in the different shop windows” “...smartly dressed in a black velvet jacket, with a reddish brown collar and cuffs ... with a red leather buckle...” (Dreiser, 1953, p. 94, 116).

These examples show a consistent pattern in which material goods signify status and relationships. Within the novel, they function as visible markers of social distinction that promise belonging without guaranteeing genuine social mobility (Bourdieu, 1984). Dreiser's continuous return to images of jewels and material brilliance reflects a logic of social determinism where characters are drawn into cycles of ambition governed by the power of wealth rather than by their independent choices.

The Green-Davidson Hotel symbolizes the American dream, the illusion that Clyde chases until the end of his life. Dreiser's accumulation of detail—the marble, the uniforms, the blaze of light—constructs the hotel's atmosphere of luxury, glamour, comforts, and pleasure: “...Green-Davidson...with colored ‘lights...a show of luxury...” (Dreiser, 1953, p. 58). The hotel becomes Clyde's imagined paradise, where he earns a regular income for the first time and is exposed to drinking and flirtation. Dreiser often repeats words such as “luxury,” “grandeur,” and “wonderful” to present the

hotel as the site where desire is born, limiting Clyde's capacity to understand a world beyond materialism: "His work at the Green Davidson had already caused him to think differently of how one should live" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 57). Its brightness and abundance transform the hotel into a space of temptation and false promise, where pleasure replaces responsibility. Dreiser consistently emphasizes Clyde's closeness to wealth rather than the possession of it. This emphasis reinforces the novel's portrayal of the American Dream as a structure of desire that remains out of reach.

Like the hotel, Aladdin's lamp symbolizes the instant and effortless realization of Clyde's dreams: "He could scarcely believe it. It seemed fantastic, Aladdinish" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 58). *The Arabian Nights* "provides the symbolic structure of *An American Tragedy*" where Clyde resembles the "lazy, imaginative, and talkative" rather than "the successful Aladdin" (Philips, 1963, pp. 580-581). That is why Clyde's illusion dissolves quickly, and his refusal to face reality leads to a harsh and painful awakening. No matter how magical his fantasies may seem, they cannot protect him from inevitable devastation. This "Aladdinish" imagery, together with the Green-Davidson Hotel, forms a pattern where spaces and fantasies of transformation repeatedly promise more than they deliver. These symbols act collectively as a pattern that suggests immediate transformation and the illusory promise of mobility.

The camera that Clyde carries during the trip to Big Bitten Lake symbolizes wealth and allure while ironically becoming an object that later contributes to the evidence against him. Before the lake episode, the camera appears alongside other markers of status and is tied to Clyde's ambition to enter the world of privilege: "the tripod of a recently purchased camera together with his tennis racquet..." (Dreiser, 1953, p. 496). However, during the tragic event, the same object is used in the physical struggle that leads to Roberta's death: "Yet, (the camera still unconsciously held tight) pushing at her with so much vehemence as not to strike her lips and nose and chin with it, but to throw her back..." (Dreiser, 1953, p. 516). Although the camera is not the direct cause of her death: "Yet no trace of blood upon the camera itself" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 606), it reappears in the investigative phase as material evidence used against Clyde: "Also, how easy to take from the head of Roberta two or three hairs and thread them between the sides of the camera" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 606). This progression suggests that material objects in the novel become significant through their repeated involvement in salient incidents. The camera can be interpreted as part of the external circumstances that determine Clyde's fate.

A more localized expression of symbolic imagery appears in Dreiser's use of crows. Crows are often associated with death and omens in literature (Dunaway, 2023), and critics such as Lehan interpret them as signs of inevitable, tragic events (1963, p. 190). Although this image appears briefly in *An American Tragedy* and does not develop into a sustained motif, it can be read in relation to Dreiser's use of bird imagery. The crows' movement toward the distant wood before the Kansas City's accident: "...a flock of crows rose and winged direct toward a distant wood..."

(Dreiser, 1953, p. 142) and “the sharp metallic cry” of a blue jay, together with the “ghostly tap-tap-tap” of a solitary woodpecker (Dreiser, 1953, p. 426) before Roberta’s death can be understood as part of a wider descriptive pattern where landscape participates in the novel’s deterministic structure. These natural elements reflect the psychological and situational pressure surrounding Clyde, rather than serving as fixed symbols.

Finally, Dreiser reinforces moments of crisis and transition through the recurring motif of winter. This pattern is reflected in the way turning points in Clyde’s life coincide with winter settings. The car accident in Kansas City occurs in winter, a scene marked by coldness, isolation, and disorientation: “...painfully bundled out into the snow...in the gray of a winter morning” (Dreiser, 1953, p. 180). Similarly, Clyde’s execution takes place in winter: “It was so faint—so weak—so gray as yet—this late winter day—and so like himself now. Dead!” (Dreiser, 1953, p. 870). This recurrence gives winter symbolic weight, associating it with conditions beyond individual control. It serves as a formal element that illustrates the novel’s emphasis on the coldness and hostility of a society that imposes its will on individuals.

Color Symbolism

Qian Zhao and Amalia Qistina Castaneda Abdullah (2024) argue that colors in literature function as semiotic carriers of emotional, thematic, and psychological meaning. According to their research, colors’ metaphorical associations are influenced by frequency of use, contextual development, and their interaction with cultural and narrative frameworks. A key point of their analysis is the differentiation between high- and low-frequency colors. They observed that colors appearing often tend to acquire more complex meanings, whereas less frequent colors maintain more stable and limited associations. Furthermore, they highlight the impact of cultural traditions, historical contexts, and belief systems on color symbolism and suggest that literature itself actively modifies and expands these symbolic meanings over time.

In *An American Tragedy*, color symbolism is treated not as an isolated descriptive detail but as a recurring stylistic pattern that contributes to the novel’s symbolic structure. This study adapts Zhao and Castaneda Abdullah’s comparative semiotic framework on color symbolism to Dreiser’s novel, while shifting the analytical focus from frequency toward narrative function as the primary interpretive criterion. Consequently, frequency is regarded as a supporting indicator rather than a determining factor of symbolic meaning. Color occurrences are systematically identified in both descriptive contexts (e.g., physical appearance or environment) and metaphorically important contexts, while their significance is evaluated through contextual clustering around critical moments, particularly scenes of desire, passion, crisis, and judgment. From this perspective, less frequent colors such as black and red emerge as symbolically more dominant in the novel due to their consistent association with psychological tension and conflict. In contrast, more frequent colors such as

white, blue, green, and brown are mostly used to construct the social and atmospheric background against which the dominant pair gains power.

White is conventionally understood as a signifier of truth, death, moral ideals, and innocence (Zhao & Castaneda Abdullah, 2024). In Dreiser's novel, it is repeatedly linked to beauty, femininity, and idealized female figures: "...one pretty girl in a white suit and cap..."; "...the sight of her now in her white satin and crystal evening gown..."; "She wore a white dress and a pink hat ..." (Dreiser, 1953, pp. 57, 397, 285). As Zhao and Castaneda Abdullah (2024) observe, white often carries spiritual connotations of purity and transcendence. In the novel, this association is adapted into a metaphor for moral aspiration. White becomes not only a marker of characters' striving toward inner light but also a reminder of their imperfection: "I know I am not wholly white" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 852). At the same time, white conveys emotional coldness, emptiness, detachment, and illusion (Zhao & Castaneda Abdullah, 2024), particularly when it appears in places characterized by order and refinement: "black and white marble floors", "black and white staircase," and "white-painted walls." As the most frequent color in the novel, white reflects the fragility of hope in a deterministic world where ideals are repeatedly eroded by material and psychological constraints.

Blue is often related to beauty and calmness; however, in Western cultural contexts, it signals melancholy (Zhao & Castaneda Abdullah, 2024). Dreiser exploits this ambiguity by repeatedly linking it to Clyde's emotional state, particularly his loneliness and despair: "I'm so blue and tired and lonely"; "I said I wouldn't be blue or gloomy..." (Dreiser, 1953, p. 472). Expressions of being "blue" recur during moments of emotional vulnerability, while darker shades such as "blue-black" anticipate danger and moral uncertainty: "...was paddling about in a dark blue canoe along the south bank of the lake..." (Dreiser, 1953, p. 281). Dreiser further mixes the melancholy of blue with the symbolic weight of black to contribute to the novel's emotional atmosphere of unfulfilled yearning and quiet despair.

Brown is frequently tied to humility and poverty (Zhao & Castaneda Abdullah, 2024). In the novel, it functions as a marker of class and material limitations. Clothing, physical features, and personal belongings of working-class characters are often described as brown: "...he encountered his mother...draped in the old brown coat..."; "...Roberta has returned...her hat was brown, trimmed with brown leather..." (Dreiser, 1953, pp. 197, 316). Brown thus serves as a reminder of Clyde's social origin and the economic limits he cannot escape. Although it carries less symbolic weight than white or blue, its steady presence reinforces the novel's emphasis on material conditions and inherited circumstances.

Green is traditionally read as a signifier of youth, vitality, and hope (Zhao & Castaneda Abdullah, 2024), but in *An American Tragedy*, it is closely related to consumer desire and illusion. Green is the color of the money Clyde so desperately

lacks. The green light in the Green-Davidson Hotel is to him a beacon of hope: "...so imposing an institution as the Green-Davidson...felt himself tremble the least bit with excitement...went direct to a green-marbled doorway...It was ah so lavish" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 41). Yet the promise proves empty, since the light is artificial rather than natural. In this regard, green points to a false hope that emphasizes the seductive but ultimately unreachable nature of the American Dream.

While the secondary colors symbolically mediate themes of illusion, social constraint, and emotional ambiguity, the primary colors—black and red—emerge as the dominant symbolic forces of the narrative. Red tempts Clyde with the illusion of desire and social advancement, while black pulls him in the opposite direction, toward fear, guilt, and fatalism. The striking palette of black and red plays a significant role in shaping not only Clyde's emotional life but also the movement of the narrative itself. Their meaning develops through context and repetition rather than through predetermined interpretive models.

Black consistently conveys anxiety, repression, fear, and psychological entrapment, reinforcing its role as a marker of despair and moral darkness (Zhao & Castaneda Abdullah, 2024). It appears more than fifty times in the novel and gradually becomes bound to both Clyde's mental state and the external pressures surrounding him. Its recurrence across the novel creates a pattern where black emerges whenever Clyde feels anxious, experiences psychological paralysis, or is unable to escape his downfall. Black gains symbolic weight through repetition, linking Clyde's psychological turmoil to the social forces that appear to restrict his choices.

This pattern becomes more evident in the imagery of black interiors, clothing, and above all, the dark waters of Big Bittern Lake. The "still dark water" that seems to "grip" him absorbs and reflects Clyde's subconscious fear. This is intensified in the description of the lake as "black...like a tar" (Dreiser, 1953, p. 518), where the image suggests a dense force that mirrors Clyde's sense of entrapment. In addition, "the black shadow" of the trees and the enclosing landscapes transforms nature into a symbolic extension of Clyde's mental state (Dreiser, 1953, pp. 527, 480, 603). The lake is more than a natural setting as it mirrors Clyde's growing awareness of his own entrapment and the consequences of his desires. In this context, black connects inner tension with external conditions. It suggests that Clyde's actions are limited by forces he cannot fully control.

Red signifies the characters' unfiltered emotions and desires, especially in relation to sexuality and social ambition. It is closely tied to Clyde's intense pursuit of beauty that drives his actions and draws him into unstable romantic relationships. Red also carries a sense of attraction and seduction, especially in connection with female figures, whose presence both ignites and complicates his desire. For example, Sondra's bright red riding coat and Roberta's red silk garters provoke Clyde's mixed emotions of longing for intimacy and shame (Dreiser, 1953, pp. 362, 563). In these

cases, red moves beyond the simple description of clothing—dresses, shawls, coats, or lingerie—to express Clyde’s persistent vulnerability to temptation.

The recurrence of red in similar scenes suggests that Clyde’s desire functions beyond his full control. This is especially evident when the color red, associated with moments of excitement and possibility, reappears in moments where emotional longing and social ambition begin to blur: “One of them a quite pretty brunette in a black and red costume with a band of red ribbon...It was really an amazing and Aladdin-like scene to him” (Dreiser, 1953, p.78). Here, his desire is controlled less by women themselves than by what they represent in his imagination. Red serves as a projection of both his passionate impulses and his inner tension. In line with its conventional symbolic field of passion, violence, and loss of control (Zhao & Castaneda Abdullah, 2024), red functions as a metaphor for both the allure of power and the destructive consequences of unrestrained desire.

Although the distinctions between red and black are often clear, the colors sometimes overlap and blend, reflecting the complexity and contradictions within Clyde’s psyche. The combination of these colors in clothing, interiors, and landscape creates a symbolic hybridity in which attraction and limitation are not opposites but interdependent forces. For example, women dressed in red and black turn into psychological triggers that draw Clyde in while highlighting his unease: “She was smartly dressed in a black velvet jacket with a reddish-brown collar...with a red leather buckle...she had caught a glimpse of the disturbed and jealous and yet fearsome look in Clyde’s eyes”; “She had come garbed in a red and black dress with a very dark red poke bonnet...And Clyde flushed slightly (Dreiser, 1953, pp. 94, 140).

Through this interaction, the novel presents emotional experience as a system in which opposing forces cannot be separated. What attracts Clyde is already tied to what unsettles him. This overlap suggests that desire in the novel emerges within conditions that govern and restrict it from the beginning. Clyde’s experience of attraction is already bound to expectation and fear of loss. The movement from desire to consequences emerges as patterned rather than accidental, suggesting that Clyde’s trajectory is conditioned by forces beyond his own intentions.

The uneven relationship between color frequencies and their symbolic weight (summarized in Table 1) conveys Dreiser’s determinist style. While high-frequency colors depict the social and emotional backdrop of poverty, illusion, consumerist longing, and melancholy, the dominant colors of red and black highlight the novel’s psychological and moral tension. The fusion of colors—where the recurrence of certain shades establishes a world of constraint and others dramatize the passion that destabilizes Clyde’s life—suggests that Dreiser’s palette is carefully crafted rather than accidental. The palette can be read as a visual grammar through which Dreiser articulates social constraints and psychological conflicts that lead Clyde toward a sense of inevitable tragedy.

Table 1

Symbolic Associations of Colors in Dreiser's An American Tragedy

Color	Freq.	Symbolism	Psychological Role	Narrative Function
White	72	Purity, idealism, illusion	Fragile hope, femininity	Ironic contrast to determinism
Blue	68	Melancholy, distance	Emotional heaviness	Atmosphere of unfulfilled yearning
Brown	61	Poverty, modesty	Working-class origins	Reminder of material constraints
Green	57	Youth, consumerism	False mobility promise	American Dream as an illusion
Black	50	Death, repression	Fear, guilt, paralysis	Symbol of fate and entrapment
Red	38	Libido, passion,	Sexual temptation, ambition	Destructive desire

The symbolism in Dreiser's prose creates a universe that reflects his characters' inner worlds through bright colors. Dreiser's color palette serves as a psychological map of external and internal forces that control humans' fates. No single color can fully explain the characters' struggles. All six colors combined illustrate how determinism, psychology, society, and fate converge in *An American Tragedy*.

Conclusion

Unlike previous critical approaches, this study argues that Theodore Dreiser's style cannot be fully reduced to the familiar opposition between technical deficiency and documentary realism. Using a qualitative stylistic approach, it shows that Dreiser's prose can be understood as a structured system in which repetition across various levels of the text functions as a formal expression of naturalist determinism.

Close analysis shows that narrative techniques such as free indirect discourse and shifts in voice produce patterns of hesitation and instability at the level of language. Clyde's interior discourse develops through repetitive and hesitant sentence structures where thought circles around unresolved possibilities instead of moving forward. The same logic organizes the novel as a whole. Its structure is built around recurring patterns—mirrored events, parallel character trajectories, and cyclical plot sequences—closely shaped by class hierarchy and social structure. Material objects, settings, and color imagery gain significance through repetition and contextual variation rather than through fixed symbolic meanings. Together, these elements form a network of motifs that reflects the pressure of social forces and the weight of psychological conflict on individual choices.

Instead of viewing Dreiser's rough prose as merely a reflection of character or a tool for communicating naturalist ideas, this study treats it as a formal strategy that shapes and connects social, psychological, and environmental forces within the text. By showing how repetition at the level of narration, structure, and imagery embodies naturalistic determinism, this study makes two contributions to stylistic studies. First, it shifts attention from isolated linguistic features to larger, cohesive textual patterns. Second, it offers a clear explanation of how naturalist fiction can encode its philosophical concerns at the level of form itself. Dreiser's style, often described as awkward, emerges here as a coherent narrative strategy that allows the novel to present human experience as strongly constrained by forces that are limiting and difficult to escape.

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