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URBAN POETICS AND SPATIAL REPRESENTATION IN 20TH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract. This extended thesis examines the poetics of urban space in 20th-century American literature through an interdisciplinary framework that integrates spatial theory, literary modernism, racial studies, and postmodern cultural analysis. The study argues that urban space in American fiction functions not merely as a physical backdrop but as a structural, symbolic, ideological, and psychological system shaping narrative form and subjectivity. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Edward Soja, and Walter Benjamin, the research analyzes representations of the American metropolis in works by John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, and others. The thesis demonstrates that 20th-century American literature transforms the city into a dynamic narrative architecture reflecting capitalism, race, gender, alienation, and media saturation. The American city evolves from modernist fragmentation to postmodern simulation, becoming a laboratory of modern consciousness.

Keywords: urban poetics, American literature, spatial theory, modernism, postmodernism, racialized space, city narrative.

Introduction

The 20th century radically transformed the spatial imagination of American literature. Industrialization, rapid urbanization, immigration, racial segregation, suburbanization, and media expansion reshaped American cities into complex symbolic landscapes. Literature did not merely reflect these changes but actively reconstructed urban space as a poetic and structural device.

This thesis explores how American writers conceptualized the city as a generative narrative form. The city becomes text, ideology, spectacle, archive, and battlefield. Urban space mediates identity formation, racial politics, gender dynamics, capitalist desire, and existential anxiety.

The central claim of this research is that urban space in 20th-century American literature operates as a multi-dimensional poetic system composed of:

1. Material architecture
2. Symbolic meaning
3. Narrative structure
4. Ideological encoding
5. Psychological interiorization

Theoretical Framework

The study draws upon Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space, which argues that space is socially constructed rather than neutral. In literary contexts, this translates into a tension between conceived urban planning and lived experience.

Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia explains how certain urban zones function as counter-spaces—simultaneously real and symbolic. Harlem, the speakeasy, the underground basement, and suburban enclaves operate as heterotopic sites in American fiction.

Edward Soja's "Thirdspace" provides a hybrid model where physical and imagined spaces intersect. American urban narratives often inhabit this liminal zone between realism and symbolic abstraction.

Walter Benjamin's theory of the flâneur and urban spectacle clarifies modernist techniques of fragmentation, montage, and perceptual overload.

Together, these theories allow us to define urban poetics as the interaction between spatial organization and narrative form.

Modernist Urban Fragmentation

Early 20th-century modernist literature represents the metropolis as fragmented and dynamic. John Dos Passos's *U.S.A. Trilogy* employs montage techniques that mimic the spatial disorientation of New York. Newspaper headlines, documentary fragments, and shifting perspectives replicate the sensory overload of modern urban life.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* constructs New York as a vertical capitalist fantasy. Skyscrapers symbolize ambition and illusion, while the Valley of Ashes represents industrial decay. Urban stratification becomes moral stratification.

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* portrays Chicago as a marketplace of desire and mobility. The city produces identity through commodification.

Modernist urban poetics is characterized by:

- Fragmented narrative
- Multiplicity of voices
- Architectural symbolism
- Spectacle and surface

Harlem Renaissance and Racialized Space

The Great Migration transformed American urban space into a site of racial negotiation. Harlem became both geographical neighborhood and symbolic capital of Black modernity.

Langston Hughes mapped Harlem through rhythm, music, and collective memory. Urban space became a site of cultural assertion.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* reveals how urban invisibility encodes racial marginalization. The underground basement symbolizes both exile and epistemological resistance.

James Baldwin exposed the moral geography of segregation. Urban space is structured by power relations that define visibility, mobility, and belonging.

Urban poetics here becomes deeply political. The city embodies structural inequality while also enabling artistic resistance.

Postwar Alienation and Cold War Anxiety

After World War II, urban representation shifted toward psychological interiorization. Saul Bellow's protagonists wander through Chicago and New York in search of coherence amid urban chaos.

The Cold War introduced surveillance and spatial paranoia. Cities became regulated and disciplined environments. Suburbanization restructured American spatial imagination.

Urban poetics now reflects:

- Existential anxiety
- Intellectual fragmentation

- Moral uncertainty

Postmodern Simulation

By the late 20th century, American urban fiction enters postmodern territory. Thomas Pynchon dismantles spatial coherence through conspiracy networks and informational labyrinths.

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* portrays suburban life dominated by media saturation. The city becomes hyperreal, shaped by television and advertising.

Los Angeles emerges as cinematic urbanity—horizontal, decentralized, fragmented. Nathanael West's portrayal of Hollywood exposes illusion as urban principle.

Postmodern urban poetics is characterized by:

- Simulation
- Hyperreality
- Media saturation
- Informational space

Gendered and Marginal Urbanities

Urban space also encodes gender. Traditional flânerie privileges male mobility. Female and racialized bodies navigate restricted geographies.

Toni Morrison's *Jazz* presents Harlem as historical archive and emotional landscape. The city remembers trauma.

Urban poetics integrates race, gender, and memory into spatial narrative.

Conceptual Synthesis

Across the century, American urban representation evolves through stages:

1. Modernist fragmentation
2. Racialized assertion
3. Postwar alienation
4. Postmodern simulation
5. Suburban dispersal

The American city becomes a narrative architecture where space shapes form.

Urban poetics thus functions as:

- Structural blueprint
- Ideological critique
- Psychological mirror
- Cultural archive

Conclusion

The poetics of urban space in 20th-century American literature demonstrates that the city is not merely a setting but a generative narrative force. Spatial form influences literary form. Race, capitalism, gender, and media reshape urban representation.

From Dos Passos's montage metropolis to DeLillo's hyperreal suburb, American writers consistently transformed the city into a laboratory of modern consciousness.

Urban poetics reveals the dialectical relationship between material space and imaginative construction. The 20th-century American city becomes text, spectacle, archive, and contested terrain.

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