



Exposition of Social Evils in American Society: A Study of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

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Abstract

*This paper looks at how Theodore Dreiser criticised the fabricated objectives of American society that depended on the American dream and revealed the social ills of the day in his novel, *Sister Carrie*. A farm girl enmeshed in the glitz and grime of the city is the subject of this meticulously detailed novel. The public was astounded by Dreiser's depiction of the sinful female characters because of their candour and compassion. The novel tells the tale of a normal American rural girl who relocates to the large metropolis of Chicago only to lose her morality, which is more valuable than wealth, clothing, and fancy homes. She loses her joy as well. The novel is made possible by the struggle for survival in the city, the need to find a place in the sun, the consciousness of one's social elevation, and a strong longing for feminine beauty. The entire fabric of American civilisation, which denied its citizens the opportunity to live a happy and fulfilled life, was torn apart by Dreiser. His tirades centred on presenting truth as it was, without omitting anything.*

Keywords: society, struggle, women, dream, evil

A genuine and realistic depiction of a world more brutal and materialistic than orderly, elegant, or civilised had earned Theodore Dreiser a unique place in American literature as an exceptional representative of naturalism. He puts his protagonists against the mysterious forces of nature that constantly throw them, push them to extremes, and subject them to pressures they cannot comprehend or control in the concrete jungles of the cities that serve as the backdrop for most of his works. The desire for freedom from restraint, the whims of youth, the presence or absence of a vital force, the concept of beauty and ugliness, questions about moral and

ethical values among people, the evils of bohemians, the hypocrisy of financiers and the snobbishness of the petit-bourgeois, the conflict between the rich and the poor, and the dream of success and failure are just a few of the social and moral issues that he focused on and discussed in his novels.

Dreiser's preoccupation in *Sister Carrie* was the tension between the pressures of society for material achievement and human needs. It shows a young, impressionable girl who succeeds financially in the city but falls short in her morals. The story of a young working girl's ascent to success and gradual collapse is compelling. Dreiser informs the readers



that one of the two things can occur when a young lady leaves her family, based on his personal experience travelling to Chicago at the age of 18. The girl will either be rescued and improve, or she will succumb to the cosmopolitan ideals and deteriorate. Novel heroine Caroline Meeber, also referred to as Carrie, is “a half-equipped little knight” who is exploring the universe. As Dreiser writes in the beginning of the novel:

She was eighteen years of age, bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth ... a pathetic sigh as the familiar green environs of the village passed in review, and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken. (1)¹

¹Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Bantam Books, 1982, p.1

Dreiser demonstrates right away how Carrie severs her connections with her family and the little village where she was born. Most Dreiser's experiences, as well as those of his siblings, are transformed into his own characters. The novel is based on his sister, Emma Dreiser. He was expressing his wish to portray a tale of personal failure and triumph in a major city by using this title. Its handling of the “fallen woman” topic was, in fact, bold.

The novel is about materialism. Carrie makes use of the resources available. She does take advantage of the one thing she has: her physique and youth. Like everyone else, she aspires to be successful. The question of whether she utilised moral or amoral methods to succeed is a matter of perspective in a secular, uncaring cosmos ruled by enigmatic forces. The incompatibility of wealth and happiness is demonstrated in the novel. However, one can lag if they lacked financial resources or social connections. Carrie ponders at one point, “Ah, money, money, money! What a possession it was. How many of them would solve all these problems” (54)¹. This novel offers an intriguing description of the challenges of starting a business in a large metropolis without any prior experience or references.

Carrie walks the streets of Chicago in the hopes that someone will come to her aid and find her a job. She is astounded by the subpar working conditions of the labourers when she first arrives at the factories. With only \$4.50 for laborious and sluggish work, her first job offers little financial security. Hoping for a good life, she travels to Chicago. She thinks it is harsh and cruel instead. It is even unsightly. Crooks, wastrels, and loafers abound on the streets at night. Money is the point of contention at the Chicago home of the Hansons. For Carrie and everyone else in the city, money is a symbol of potential. She wants to advance as quickly as possible. If she pays the rent, the Hansons will retain her. Because it costs money, they will not let her go to the theatre. They lack the happiness Carrie is seeking and are dismal and boring.

¹Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Bantam Books, 1982, p.54

The small soldiers of fortune who are looking for a place in the city are held and drawn to the weird energies and enormous interests that Carrie finds fascinating as she travels aimlessly. Clothing and finances are essential to her. Dreiser writes, “One day, a woman should write the entire philosophy of clothes” (4)¹. It is one of the things she fully understands, regardless of how young she is. Carrie receives money from Charles Drouet to purchase new shoes and a jacket for the winter. Dreiser criticises a culture that values appearance over inner value and that primarily decides a person's standing based on what they wear.

At the age of eighteen, Carrie departs from home and travels to Chicago via train. Drouet strikes up a conversation with her on the train. His elegant attire and demeanour quickly pique Carrie's interest. She gives him her address before bidding him farewell when she gets to Chicago. Carrie moved into one of the rooms in her sister Minnie Hanson's flat after meeting her. Mr. Hanson comes home that evening, but he does not give her much attention. Carrie quickly learns that the Hansons count on her to get a job and cover their rent. She is considered extra income in their eyes. After the weekend, she moves into the city's business district and begins seeking for



work. Due to her innate shyness, Carrie is afraid to approach factories and stores and request a job; as a result, she is not hired that day. She finds work in a shoe factory after days of looking for a job.

Carrie puts a lot of effort into her career, but she finds that her compensation is insufficient to support her rent and winter clothing. The cold quickly makes her sick, and it takes her days to get better. She goes back to the streets in the hopes of finding a new work if she loses her new one, but she gets disappointed when there are no jobs available. Carrie meets Drouet on the street by chance just as she is about to leave for home. He brings her to a fancy restaurant and graciously offers her a lunch. He presses \$20 into her palm and, after

¹Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Bantam Books, 1982, p.4 considerable persuasion, gets her to meet him again the next day. Carrie chooses to return the money to Drouet rather than spend it because she is reluctant to take it and fears that Minnie will discover where she obtained it. When she sees him again the next day, he takes her shopping and purchases a whole wardrobe for her. The way he treats her makes Carrie so happy that she lets him rent her an apartment. Leaving only a little message behind, she stealthily leaves Minnie's house with her belongings and departs. For a while, Drouet is doing well.

Carrie is then introduced to George Hurstwood, the manager of one of the city's best bars, by Drouet. Hurstwood is an example of a typical bourgeois person. Hurstwood, according to Dreiser, is a handsome man who earned his managerial position. Hurstwood quickly approaches Carrie and Drouet to play cards since he is much more sophisticated and graceful than Drouet. Then he offers to treat them to a movie. Hurstwood starts to visit the flat when Drouet is a way to win Carrie over, and eventually he gets her to kiss him while riding on a buggy. He begins to consider convincing her to flee with him after becoming deeply in love with her. Unaware of the situation involving Carrie and Hurstwood, Drouet spends a few weeks back in Chicago. He asks Carrie whether she would be interested in performing in his Mason's Lodge play when he is requested to find a girl.

Hurstwood gathers all the city's elite to see her perform once she agrees. Because Drouet supports Carrie, she puts on a spectacular performance, but when Hurstwood sees them together, he becomes crazily envious. Hurstwood has been ignoring his wife, Julia, to see Carrie, which causes his family life to fall apart quickly. When she finally understands what is happening, she wants money from him. Carrie has been spending a lot more time with Hurstwood than Drouet had imagined, he has also learnt. Hurstwood naively quarrels with his wife, unaware that she owns the entire property, while Drouet storms out on Carrie. After that, she locks him out of the house, hires a detective, and files for divorce.

Hurstwood travels to his place of employment and stays at a nearby hotel. He finds the safe unlocked one evening as he is shutting up the tavern. He takes out more than \$10,000 in cash, but before he can replace it, he unintentionally locks the safe. He quickly heads to Carrie's flat after stealing the money. He informs her that they must go to the hospital since Drouet had an accident. He uses that falsehood to get her aboard a train that is going to Detroit and then to Montreal. Despite being angry and upset with him, Carrie does nothing to stop him. Hurstwood rents them an apartment in New York City once they travel there from Montreal. To escape punishment, he has returned most of the money he stole while in Montreal, saving only \$1,300, so that he might start his own company. Soon after, he locates a pub seeking a business partner and pays \$1,000 for a one-third stake. Everything is good until the bar's landowner chooses to evict him and construct an office complex. Hurstwood struggles to locate new work and has access to just \$700.

Soon, Carrie and Hurstwood are compelled to relocate to a smaller flat. He gradually descends into idleness after failing to find employment. He starts gambling and loses more than \$100 in a single night. Carrie begins to think about her other options after losing interest in him as a person. Hurstwood's situation worsens till he no longer evens leaves the flat and would rather sit around in his old clothing. Carrie realises she will need to acquire a job to help



Hurstwood when they are nearly broke. A few days later, she gets a place in a Broadway show's chorus line. Hurstwood makes ends meet, but her pay is insufficient to sustain them. She quickly advances to head the chorus line and then to a dancing role that pays even more. Carrie wants the extra cash to buy things for herself, so she will not inform Hurstwood about her achievement.

When the tram car workers go on strike, Hurstwood takes one final job. He is hired as a scab - a man who works when everyone else is on strike - after applying for a job. But a vengeful mob quickly stops his vehicle, and after being fired at, he gives up and goes home. After being fortunate enough to be awarded a speaking role one day, Carrie makes the decision to leave Hurstwood and move in with a friend who is an actress. He is going for a walk when she leaves. Her ascent and his decline are followed throughout the rest of the novel. After losing the flat, he is left homeless and forced to live in budget hotels in the Bowery area of the city. Carrie, on the other hand, is assigned a silent part, but she does it so brilliantly that she instantly becomes famous and signs a contract that pays her \$150 per week - a ridiculous amount for her.

By traditional norms, Carrie should not be taken into consideration. She is criticised for transgressing the moral code. She disobeys the current moral taboos. She moves in with a man but does not become his wife. A stranger offers her money. Later, though, she decides to give Drouet back the two ten-dollar bills. It demonstrates her lack of materialistic tendencies. Despite her dire need for money, she does not desire it. She needs stability and protection from a cold and self-centred world full of hungry and lustful men more than she needs money. She would have been forced to become a whore or turned if she had not been careful. Carrie, however, is not like that. First by Drouet and later by Hurstwood, Fitzgerald and Moy's saloon manager, she is transformed into "a kept woman."

In his writings, Dreiser described his observations and knowledge of America around the turn of the century. But both the publishers and the readers were taken aback by the manner he expressed

himself. In *Sister Carrie*, a village girl first achieves pecuniary prosperity as the mistress of Drouet, a wealthy travelling salesman. On the train headed for Chicago, she encounters him. After a brief period of living with him, she starts dating Hurstwood, a friend of Drouet's. Hurstwood's married life is not fulfilling. After falling in love with Carrie, he kidnaps her and brings her to New York. He starts over there, but his business fails and he loses all his savings and investments. Due to circumstances, he gradually starts to shift and adjust to less fortunate situations. His enthusiasm for Carrie starts to wane. Because of his infatuation with Carrie and the loss of his once-prestigious position, the tavern manager falls from prominence while Carrie succeeds as a theatrical actress.

The dichotomy between grandeur and sorrow is exemplified by *Sister Carrie*. In the Chicago of the 1890s, a poor working girl with minimal intelligence takes a normal path. She is filled with emotion and ambition. After leaving her hometown, she relocates to Chicago, where she finds herself powerlessly caught up in the chaos of the city's attempts to overthrow the nation. She aspires to follow her intuition and achieve success, advancement, luxury, and finery. And she only uses a route of sin to communicate her emotions rather than reason. Dreiser, however, makes it abundantly evident that traditional morality is fabricated and that intentionally acting morally has nothing to do with happiness or financial success.

The protagonists in Dreiser's writings are either depicted as titans who control the masses and manipulate them to fit their desires or as pawns in the "hands of fate" (38)¹. They take charge at times and lose their position, authority, and power at other times. Carrie occasionally achieves success, but only at a great cost: rejection by a refined society that betrays them and keeps them from achieving their aspirations of pleasure and prosperity, as well as a loss of honour and respect. In this regard, his works, such as *Sister Carrie*, are "an allegory of life, in which the struggle to survive is carried on blindly, uncritically, and in which strength rather than notions



of good and evil determines one's fate" (Robert H. Elias' *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature*, 22)².

Through his portrayals of characters and the development of plots, Dreiser demonstrated his own views on human drama. He depicted characters that were unable to

¹Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Bantam Books, 1982, p.38

²Elias, Robert H. *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature*. Cornell University Press, 1948.

Control their behaviour, maintaining that men's behaviours were "chemical compulsions" (88)¹. These individuals are incapable of using their free will. Hurstwood, the saloon manager in *Sister Carrie*, is portrayed by Dreiser as a defenceless victim of deterministic forces. These individuals are victims of an environment and society that are at odds with the human condition. They are essentially evil, uncaring, and pointless.

Dreiser illustrates the forces that destroy the protagonists because their opponents are more formidable and vicious, upholding the idea that the race is to the swift and the battle to the strong. Men and women are motivated by strong physical and biological urges and desires, businessmen are cunning, and fate is evil in Dreiser's fiction. H.L. Mencken, in "Theodore Dreiser," avers that, "The tragedy of Carrie and Jennie, in brief, is not that they are degraded, but that they are lifted up, not that they go to the gutter, but that they escape the gutter and glimpse the stars" (111)². Carrie's associations with the two guys do not make her feel bad or unethical.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser depicts New York and Chicago as magnets that draw in the timid and naive. People wander aimlessly in the cities, looking for employment that pay poorly and provide bad working circumstances. For example, they do not have the appropriate attire or equipment to be respected and accepted in social circles. Carrie lives a typical and everyday life in the city, but there are wealthy people who proudly attend social events, drive fancy cars, and live in opulent houses. Hurstwood, Drouet, and Carrie are all looking for a spot in the sun. His men just aimlessly go about their business, travel, make more money, and attempt to

be kind to each other. Drouet, the itinerant salesperson, resembles a butterfly. His flirtation with Carrie demonstrates his inability to be bound by marital ties. The bond that forms between Carrie and Drouet is not founded on genuine love.

¹Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Bantam Books, 1982, p.88

²Mencken, H.L. "Theodore Dreiser." *A Book of Prefaces*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1917, p.111.

Because he helped her in Chicago, Carrie gives in to him. The naive girl thinks Drouet will protect her and eventually wed her.

One of the main reasons *Sister Carrie* was attacked, repressed, and censured was because it rewarded a woman who fell from grace. Carrie's life improves when she moves in with Drouet. Her unlawful romance is used to demonstrate her success in life. The truth is, however, that Dreiser is a strong advocate of realism and feels that literature should not only present an idealised version of reality but also illustrate the actual struggles people faced to survive. Dreiser aggressively challenges and reveals the injustices in American culture. The core of the work is his depictions of factory work, labour upheaval, and New York from the perspective of the poor outcast. The story of Carrie's transformation from a small-town girl to a factory worker to a Broadway actress highlights the risks that young women must take to succeed in a capitalist world.

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