

Desire Under the Gaslights – Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*

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Abstract

Theodore Dreiser's novel **Sister Carrie**, a naturalistic novel depicts the conditions prevalent in nineteenth century America. As a journalist-turned-writer, he wished to represent the struggle for existence which prevailed in a new world. The urge to represent reality can be traced to the journalistic background and faith in the principles of naturalism. Carrie, the protagonist of the novel is seen traversing the landscape of Chicago and New York. While depicting the rise of the heroine he avoids passing judgement on her since the novelist is tracing the phenomenon of upward mobility in the new world of the rising city. She is the essential American character, with all her flaws, always in quest, pursuing the American dream. She represents the dreams of the common man struggling to fulfil them under the gaslights of the rising city. However despite all her flaws Dreiser sympathizes with her. In his depiction of a woman protagonist he remains generous by contemporary standards. He can be seen as ushering in a liberal approach towards his protagonist. This avoidance of moralistic judgement can be seen as a precursor of the modernist approach to characterization. This paper examines Dreiser’s approach to naturalism and the naturalistic concept of the hero. It places the novelist in the unorthodox liberal tradition that refuses to judge the trans-Atlantic hero/ heroine.

Keywords: *Naturalism, struggle for existence, free will, determinism, the American dream*

Introduction

Sister Carrie, written in 1900, was rejected by Harper Brothers and finally published on 8 November, 1900 by Doubleday Page and Co. In its own time the novel evoked varied responses as William Dean Howells’ remark, “You know I don’t like *Sister Carrie*” and at the other end received applause from Frank Norris, who was a reader for Doubleday and Page. Norris found it a masterpiece and said “It was the best novel I had read”. Dreiser himself said that “It was not

intended as a piece of literary craftsmanship , but as a picture of conditions done as simply and effectively as the English language will permit”(F.O.Matthiessen,59-60).

But this “picture of conditions” was not generally well received in America and faced suppression on grounds that it revealed a too grim picture of society and portrayed the promiscuity of Sister Carrie without any overt moral condemnation. The genteel tradition could not bear to much reality and saw in this work a fallen woman who did not accept their morality. Dreiser who believed in his own kind of realism refused to make any more emendations except for the bowdlerization of forty thousand words. At one stage he agreed to call it *The Flesh and the Spirit* to please Doubleday and Page who wished it to appear like an allegorical novel in order to save face.

Journalistic approach of the Naturalistic novelist

Dreiser’s quest for truth and reality can be traced back to his profession. Dreiser was a journalist-turned- writer like Mark Twain , Stephen Crane, W.D.Howells etc . and was from the outset of his career a seeker of observed realities . Significantly, Dickens the realist that England produced and Zola, the naturalist from France too had been journalists. Dreiser later wrote to his friend and advocate H.L.Mencken in a letter dated May 13, 1916, that it was his profession as a journalist that had brought him into “real contact with life –murders, arson, rape , sodomy, bribery, corruption, trickery and false witness , in every conceivable form”(*Donald Pizer*, 70). His desire to be a realist, therefore may be seen as arising from his profession rather than from the influence of Zola whom he had not read.

Dreiser takes as his setting the rising industrial cities of Chicago and New York , which are an appropriate setting to show “the struggle for existence” that Darwin said inevitably follows from the high geometrical ratio of increase which is common to all organic beings .“ Chicago is the vast sea, where everyone is struggling to make it to the top. Sister Carrie or Caroline Meeber comes from Columbia City to Chicago, “the giant magnet , drawing to itself from all quarters” whose spreading network of railroad corporations and the sound of hammers make it the “pioneer of the populous ways to be”(*Sister Carrie*, 12). Chicago therefore offers the possibility of a fierce contention between the haves and have-nots of society. Its constantly enlarging railroads are symbolic of man’s desire for more and his pursuit of happiness. Chicago, therefore, becomes a representative of America of the 1890s which was a progressive economy encouraging free-competition.

Determinism and the Naturalistic characters

In this city Carrie becomes a “waif amid forces” which are mostly beyond her control. Her desire for material success take flight in her “transplantation” from the countryside to the city where she comes like a dreamer with the Horatio Alger rags-to- riches myth of success. Dreiser seems to be interested in finding out how the other half lives with its dream of success in life like Jacob Riis who studied the inequality of wealth in American society. In *Newspaper Days*, Dreiser’s autobiography, he observed it is astonishing “some men could rise and soar about the heavens like eagles while others, drab sparrows all, could only pick among the offal of the hot ways below. What were these things called Democracy and equality about which men prated? Had they any basis in fact?”(*Fishkin*,101). Carrie is like the sparrow, stranded in the city, which is denied help by the Hansons on losing her job at the factory. Drouet, the masquerade the rogue who is a salesman takes the opportunity to help her. With her consent to live with him she snaps ties with many others. She too, tries to climb into the walled city. In the urban locale each individual is trying to attain more. They seem to be governed by the Calvinistic doctrine of the elect and the damned. Each individual has the American dream, not only the Jeffersonian ideals of liberty and equality but also “happiness” which means desiring more and more. Carrie’s desire for better human conditions is expressed in her longing for clothes which seduce and solicit her attention.

George Hurstwood, the middle – aged, middle –class manager of the saloon, Fitzgerald and Moy’s , is a better substitute for her. Like Carrie, Hurstwood is a victim of desire which can be seen as the desire of age for youth and sex. As Alfred Kazin has pointed out, Carrie represents “the force of sex, the challenge to the established mores that can make even a wistful and ignorant young girl irresistible to men”(*Kazin*,243). In Hurstwood, too as in Carrie, the desire is for the unattainable. The devotion to an object afar is their chief object. In Hurstwood’s case it is the romantic love for Carrie who seemed to him unattainable partly because of Drouet but mainly due to his own situation as a married, respectable man in society. And this endless quest of desire is described by Dreiser beautifully:

Every hour the kaleidoscope of human affairs threw a new luster upon something , and there-with it became ... the all . Another Shift of the box and some other had become the beautiful, the perfect. (*Sister Carrie*,116).

The novel can thus be seen as an expression of Dreiser’s philosophy that man is subject to compulsive desires which are primarily the desires for success and sex. The graph of Carrie’s success rises while Hurstwood’s declines when he leaves his family to possess Carrie. This graph is also seen by Donald Pizer as the index of the “lure of the beautiful” in Carrie and the “power of sex”(*Pizer*,74):

Life, therefore for Dreiser is governed not only by the “superhuman” and the “unknowable”(as Herbert Spencer calls it) but also by forces within man such as desire for power, money and for sex. Dreiser had once said: “there is a certain magnetism about success or fame or wealth or

publicity that tends to draw often fatally and hopelessly , those who are fascinated by these” (*Riggio*,18).

Therefore, the determinants of man’s actions are both within and without. Despite being subject to fate man is also capable of certain amount of volition. A character like Ames shows how although a part of the moment and the milieu, he is able to judge better than others and see through the façade that constitutes the happiness of a Carrie or of America. He can see that conspicuous consumption is not the way to attain happiness. His presence in the novel shows how different Dreiser is from a naturalist like Zola who believed that character is bound to its moment and milieu.

Determinism versus free-will

A certain amount of volition is present in other characters too. Carrie’s sudden illness and losing the job; Drouet’s discovery of Carrie’s affairs with Hurstwood ; the discovery of the affair of Hurstwood and Carrie by Mrs. Hurstwood ; the clicking of the safe lock while Hurstwood has the 10,000 dollars in hand, can be seen as manifestation of forces working upon man . But Dreiser gives his characters a certain amount of freewill which Stephen Crane and Frank Norris do not.

Carrie’s staying on with Drouet without looking for a job and Hurstwood’s getting drunk before he steals the money , show that these characters have a certain amount of free-will . Carrie later becomes an actress because she is hardworking- she practices her roles well, and when in New York she tries her best to get a job.

Dreiser, therefore, does not see his characters as driven like the beast-man in *McTeague*. He says of mankind: “Our civilization is still in a middle- stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human in that it is not wholly guided by reason... We have the consolation that evolution is every in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail”(*Sister Carrie* , 61).

Therefore, his evolutionary concept of man is more hopeful and seems to have been derived from Spencer and Thomas Huxley whom he had read. In his universe man is not condemned to bestiality, though Dreiser uses beast images to describe characters (for eg. Mrs.Hurstwood is compared to a pythoness and Carrie to an unthinking sheep. These animal images can be seen as the influence of Spencer who was using Darwin’s concept of evolution of man from lower species. However, Dreiser sees the precedence of instinct over free-will when he shows us a Hurstwood caught between duty and desire. And he says, “men are still led by instinct before they are regulated by knowledge (*Sister Carrie*, 208).

Dreiser, therefore differs from Zola and besides his novel is not just a dispassionate case history of characters. In the story of Carrie and Hurstwood Dreiser was in fact transmitting something as personal as the elopement of his sister Emma with a married man and his own experiences in Chicago. He also differs from the Zolaesque novelist. When he began the novel, he wrote down the first few lines without premeditation. The scientific laws do apply to Dreiser's characters and he refers to the "Chemisms" that govern man. In Chapter XXIII, Hurstwood in his decline in New York is seen as a victim of the "Katastates" working on his psyche. In Chapter XXX, the city is seen as a "chemical reagent" working havoc on the desires of the have-nots. Therefore, through Dreiser touches the pseudo-scientism of Zola's School, he does not follow it and this is why Lilian Furst calls this American movement the "new realism" and not naturalism.

The bifocal plot of the novel, which shows Carrie rising and Hurstwood declining, can be seen as a struggle for existence in which Carrie survives, while Hurstwood faces extinction. Drouet too is a victim of desire for sexuality but he survives because he is more pragmatic and does not for his love of Carrie abandons his class on the profession he has acclimatized himself to. Hurstwood, on the other hand, as Donald Pizer puts it abandons his class-assigned role and thereby faces extinction in the Bowery flophouses. His efforts of working in a hotel, as a scab etc. show his faint attempts at survival but he dies in desperation and ends his life saying, "What's the use" (*Sister Carrie*, 398). His dying statement suggests that any attempt on his part is futile in a world where success and failure are arbitrary. The novel's recurrent sea imagery suggests that there is no equilibrium – there are no equals and in the glittering city where we see Carrie and the rich society, we also see the unemployed and the starving Hurstwood and strikers. The city's impersonal indifference and breakdown of relationships is underlined in the last scene where while Hurstwood is dying – Drouet is enjoying in one part of the city. Carrie is surrounded by her comfortable surroundings; Jessica and Mrs. Hurstwood on her travels are having a good time. The disjunction between human beings is also emphasized by the fact that though Drouet is a salesman and thrives on public relations, he is as callous as the heartless city.

Carrie's desire for material success unlike Hurstwood's is fulfilled. Till now, for Carrie "money was something everybody had" and "she must get" (*Sister Carrie*, 51). Her desire for material success and beauty is seen embodied in her desire for clothes such as the beautiful jacket with mother-of-pearl buttons. The luxury that clothes represent is a symbol common to both Dreiser and Balzac. But Dreiser concludes that "it does not take money long to make plain its impotence, providing the desires are in the realm of affection" (*Sister Carrie*, 362). Dreiser's Ames voices his critique of the American dream:

The world is full of desirable situations but unfortunately, we can occupy but one at a time. It doesn't do us any good to wring our hands over the far-off things.

(*Sister Carrie*, 384)

What Ames suggests is that material success can be had but satisfaction and happiness always remain beyond our reach until we control our desires. He tries to help Carrie to transform her desire into the desire of an artist to be expressive.

Carrie as the trans-Atlantic hero

Carrie, therefore becomes the essential American character, always in quest. Dreiser sees her with all her shortcomings and yet he sympathizes with her. He states in the last chapter:

If honest labour be unremunerative and difficult to endure ; if it be a long road which never reaches beauty, but wearies the feet and the heart; if the drag to follow beauty to such that one abandons the admired way, taking rather a despised path leading to her dreams quickly, who shall cast the first stone? (*Sister Carrie* 399)

Carrie, is therefore the embodiment of the trans-Atlantic Napoleonic hero who is forever questing and exploring frontiers of success in a post-affluence society. In the last line in the novel Dreiser addresses Carrie – “in your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel”(*Sister Carrie* , 409). This seems to be a critique of the American dream, but the original, unemended version has as its last words “you may ever feel”, thereby expressing the author’s sympathy for Carrie rather than condemnation. In chapter X he had condemned society and ironically said: “society possesses a conventional standard whereby it judges all things. All men should be good, all women virtuous. Wherefore villain hast thou erred? (*Sister Carrie* , 73).

Dreiser in his sympathy for Carrie proves himself a liberal unlike conventional society which he believes has a very infantile perception of morals. Minnie’s dream, in which she sees Carrie going into the coal-pit, symbolizes society’s conventional judgment on the fallen woman. But Dreiser knows that the coal-pit in which she falls is the industrial city itself, which forces women like Carrie to take various steps for survival.

Conclusion

Dreiser’s Carrie, on the rocking chair by the window is a figure of aspirations and speculations. However, she is confined to her position as a woman, is able to move only to and fro, coming back to her original position. She cannot exercise her sexuality as Hester and Edna Pontellier can. In his depiction of Carrie as a woman Dreiser remains generous by contemporary standards. She is not the fallen woman who in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is punished with pregnancy by nature and the pillory by the New England culture. Dreiser’s friend Edgar Lee Masters rightly commented in 1940: “Forty years ago when you wrote *Sister Carrie* there was one ideology by which to write the novel about a woman. It was to prove that as a matter of Christian sin, not even of cause and consequence ... the woman was punished”(quoted in *F.O.Matthiessen*, 61).

But Dreiser true to his broader sympathies treats Carrie in a humane manner and does not condemn her. In the sympathetic approach meted out to a woman protagonist he laid the foundations of modernist characterization.

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