

ISSN : 2454-3365

THE LITERARY HERALD

AN INTERNATIONAL REFEREED ENGLISH E-JOURNAL

A Quarterly Indexed Open-access Online JOURNAL

Vol.1, No.1 (June 2015)

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Siddhartha Sharma

Managing Editor: Dr. Sadhana Sharma

www.TLHjournal.com

sharmasiddhartha67@gmail.com

The Gendered Urban Space: *Sister Carrie* as the New Woman

DR. SWATI MUKERJI

Associate Professor of English,
Gurudas College, Kolkata.
University of Calcutta (Guest
Faculty).

Abstract:

In the American society of the twentieth century, the 'virtuous woman' was seen as a popular cultural symbol. Acute female subordination resulted from the fact that the power-base was essentially patriarchal. Writers like Theodore Dreiser expressed their skepticism and challenged the established gender concepts. To prove his point, he created Carrie—the 'unattached' individual who conformed to the type of the 'New Woman' in his novel *Sister Carrie*. The career opportunities of the feminine workforce, was something society was learning to accept. Carrie is an illustration of an adventuress who is unrepentant for her style of living, having chosen the stage as her professional arena. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* stressed on the 'economic rights' of women giving us new perspectives about the potentialities of the feminine gender at the turn of the century.

Key Words: Gender, subordination, 'New Woman', adventuress, economic rights.

The Gendered Urban Space: *Sister Carrie* as the New Woman

DR. SWATI MUKERJI

Associate Professor of English,
Gurudas College, Kolkata.
University of Calcutta (Guest
Faculty).

In the 20th century American society, the trope of the virtuous woman was a popular cultural symbol. As the power-base was essentially patriarchal, it relegated women to the status of social victims, thus ensuring their socio-political docility. However, this kind of female subordination was slowly being erased from the urban society of America and these changes were reflected in the fiction of writers like Theodore Dreiser. Like his contemporaries Frank Norris and Stephen Crane, Dreiser was also the product of his culture's interpretations of the past, yet he constantly re-examined the capacities of his characters for effective action. Through women like Carrie (*Sister Carrie*) and Aileen Butler (*The Financier*), the author expressed his skepticism about society's established assumptions regarding gender. Through them, the author challenged and deflated the 'virtuous wife' concept, (explicitly stated in the Bible) that a woman can never be allowed to have authority over a man: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission, and do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence" (*Timothy 2: 11-12*).

At the turn of the century, Theodore Dreiser created Carrie, who was a far cry from this biblical notion of submissive women. She is the ‘unattached woman’—a newly articulated type who is similar to an emerging figure of that age—the New Woman. In the American context, the New Woman was middle-class, distinctive because of her refusal of marriage and conventional gender-roles, in which a woman’s job was to be an ideal wife and mother. The role of women now shifts from being dominated by domestic responsibilities to pursuing individual interests, such as education or joining the workforce. The financial independence of these women is the new characteristic that society has to come to terms with. The career opportunities of the feminine workforce symbolize the worldly aspirations that go beyond the ordinary expectations of the previous gender roles.

Another interesting fact is that a substantial number of the female population joining the workforce, caused concern among the moralists of that society. One of the excuses given by these self-appointed guardians is that these women had no options. They probably came from unfortunate financial circumstances, as their fathers could not support them. It would be appropriate to quote from Frederick Allen’s book *The Big Change: America Transforms Itself, 1900-1950* (2003). He refers to America as a

“country in which 20.4% of the female population were engaged in working for a living. This unhappy fact of life caused the moralists of the day deep concern. If there was a steadily increasing number of women working in offices, it was understood that they were victims of unfortunate circumstance; their fathers, poor fellows, were unable to support them properly—and it was hoped that their inevitable contacts with rude men of business would not sully their purity” (69).

Yet Carrie is conceptualized in a different light, she was the symbol of the ‘unattached woman’, maybe insufficiently supervised, but confident enough to follow her heart impulsively. In fact she could be an illustration of the upwardly mobile social-climber, almost a kind of adventuress. The very remarkable fact is that in spite of being promiscuous, she not only survives, but actually prospers. She has no repentance for her relationships—and is not punished by the author for taking her own decisions, neither is she marginalized by society. She moved from poverty to comfort, when she assumed the fictitious role of the wife of Charles Drouet, who was a travelling salesman. Then she eloped to New York City with George Hurstwood, manager of a prominent restaurant. She eventually left Hurstwood for a successful stage career—which was in fact an unconventional career choice in those days.

Regarding the choice of careers among young women of that period, who needed to work for a living, Frederick Allen says:

If unhappy circumstances forced a young woman to work for a living, a career as schoolteacher, or music teacher or trained nurse was considered acceptable for her. If she had the appropriate gift, she might become a writer or artist or singer. Some went on the stage, but at the grave risk of declassing themselves, for actresses were known to be mostly ‘fast’. By common consent, the best and safest thing for a girl to do was to sit at home—and wait for the *right man* (Allen 123).

Brushing aside these expectations from herself, Carrie not only takes to the stage, but makes a mark on the theatrical and cultural circuit, by her constant efforts to establish herself financially. She becomes popular and her career is represented by an essentially upward spiral. It constitutes the logical strategy of self-development, instead of self-sacrifice. During this, Carrie’s live-in partner, Hurstwood realizes that she is a much stronger personality than him. This highlights the fact that at the turn of the century, men were learning to deal with women

stronger than themselves, also realizing that marriage was not the only option they had. Writers like Dreiser are able to give visible shape to the feminine power they discerned in the economy of urban industrialism.

Dreiser effectively offsets the line of Carrie's rise against that of her partner's decline. The social complexity in this situation arises from the fact that when Hurstwood has drifted into misfortune, Carrie starts thinking of other sources of livelihood. So before long, the roles are reversed—Carrie has become the bread-winner, whereas Hurstwood is left behind to do the domestic chores. There is a complete paradigm-shift in society because so far the household was taken care of by the 'house-wife'; now we are introduced to the concept of the 'house-husband'. To ensure her freedom, both physically and financially, Carrie finally decides to leave him. Her note to Hurstwood tries to justify her reasons for deserting him: "I'm going away. I'm not coming back anymore. It's no use trying to keep up the flat, I can't do it. I wouldn't mind helping you, if I could, but I can't support us both and pay the rent". She shows us that she has to choose between emotion and survival, and she decides to choose the latter. Dreiser, as a realist, does not apologize to his readers for Carrie's decision—he merely depicts life as he had observed at the turn of the century.

Once Carrie makes a name for herself, she starts earning much more than she had ever dreamt of. She finds her purse bursting with "good green bills of comfortable denominations". This is the financial independence of the New Woman, giving her a sense of 'autonomy' and 'prestige'. With this comes the realization that a woman need not be economically dependent on male partners, even though it is basically a patriarchal social set-up. At this point, it would be appropriate to quote from Kate Millet's work *Sexual Politics*, where she says:

Since women have always worked in patriarchal societies, what is at issue here is not labour, but economic reward. In modern reformed patriarchal societies, women have certain economic rights. In a money economy, where autonomy and prestige depend upon currency, this is a fact of great importance.

Another charge against the New Woman of the 20th century, was that they refused to get married at a young age. Many of them were in a live-in relationship with much older men or they preferred to settle down rather late in life. The moralists felt that such women were an imminent threat to the stability of society, because they embodied a breakdown of established conventions and codes. This required a kind of reorganization of the familiar social relations—giving us a wholly new perspective about the potentialities of the feminine gender. Traditional notions of morality are challenged, along with conventional ideas of womanhood. Replying to the charges of immorality of his heroine, Dreiser says "Personally I see nothing immoral in discussing with a clean purpose, any phase of life. In my novel, all the phases of life touched upon are handled truth fully" (*Letters*).

A central belief of these New Feminists was the freedom to choose work, regardless of one's sex and marital status. Late 19th century feminists like Paulina W. Davis urged women to 'go to work' if they wanted to escape the shackles of poverty. She made them aware of a changing social reality, which was based on economic determinism. She postulates that only if women have financial freedom, they can meet men as equals on the terrains of either political representation or professional expertise. In an article entitled 'Changes in Women's Economic Conditions', she elaborates:

Poverty is essentially slavery, if not legal, yet actual. The women of the time must understand this, that they must go to work. They must press into every avenue, open every door...and themselves withdraw the bolts and bars from those still closed against

them—so that they may enter and take possession. They *must* purchase themselves out of bondage. (Davis 33).

The change in perception at the turn of the century is seen when Dreiser makes Carrie representative of ambitious middle-class women, maybe ‘immoral’ in the conventional sense, having numerous materialistic motives, seeking to advance themselves professionally, so that they could be considered at par with men. At the end of the novel, she is seen on a rocking chair—dissatisfied with her current status—looking forward to more exciting prospects in her career. In a big way, this novel was instrumental in giving confidence to women, so that they could come out of their homes and exercise their innate power, in order to bring positive changes in their private and public worlds.

Works Cited:

- Allen, Frederick. *The Big Change: America Transforms Itself, 1900-1950*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2003.
- Davis, Paulina. ‘Changes in Women’s Economic Conditions’. *Una*, Sept 1853. pp 137-138.
- Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie* (1900). Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: Norton, 1991.
- Dreiser, Theodore. *The Financier* (1912). New York: Signet, 1967.
- May, Martha. *Women’s Roles in Twentieth Century America*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2009.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.