


<p>The Female Experience of the American Dream in Theodore Dreiser’s <i>Sister Carrie</i> (1900)</p>		<p>Literature</p> <p>Keywords: Woman, the U.S.A., Progressive Era, Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, Materialism, Modernity, American Dream.</p>
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>The aim of the present article is to study American woman’s experience of the American Dream in the turn of the twentieth century (the period known as the Progressive Era), through the analysis of the dreams of the main female character Carrie Meeber in Theodore Dreiser’s <i>Sister Carrie</i> (1900). Dreiser, known as the author of woman, explores in this novel the issue of woman within the urban environment, by presenting her as being modern, with materialistic dreams, which determined her faith and actions, and detached her from her morals and traditions in favor of money and fame.</p>		

Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* is about the dreams of a young woman in the turn of the twentieth century. It narrates the story of a young, beautiful, smart and ambitious girl, who lives in poverty in her parent’s home in the countryside. Being an educated girl full of talents, she decides to leave her parents’ home to join her sister in New York and to make her dream of success and wealth come true. During her voyage to New York, Carrie is described as being full of ambition and dreaming happy dreams about her future in this marvelous city. But, once there, she is confronted with a new reality, which is different from the one she dreamed of, and she begins to have a feeling of disillusionment about her personal dream in particular and the American Dream in general.

The aim of the present article is to analyze the female aspect of the American Dream in the turn of the twentieth century, through the analysis of the dreams of the main character of Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. The analysis deals with the dream that drives this female character from countryside to city, and her experience of the American Dream in the urban environment. It foregrounds the real image of city life and the American Dream in this age of materialism and artificial values of life. It shows also the shift of the American woman from a traditional way of life to a modern one, being determined by the materialistic atmosphere of the era. This shift gives ambitious women, as Carrie Meeber, the chance to rise to the high ranks of society and to live their lives independently from men. It, also, permits them to reverse the gender roles in society, and to compete with men in the domain of work and business.

Dreiser’s novel gives a vivid image about the American woman of the turn of the twentieth century through the character of Carrie Meeber, who is presented as being modern, free and ambitious. She is also very courageous, when she leaves the countryside and moves from one city to another to make her American Dream come true. Her behavior in each city is determined by the conditions she lives there. At the beginning, she heads the train to reach Chicago, seeking a better life. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser describes the city to which Carrie seeks entrance to reach her desires of perfect happiness. He says:

The city is just like a gambling house in which a few people succeed by accident, while many are always struggling at the bottom of society. In addition, the beauty of the city is an illusion and a trip which like music too often relax, weakens, then perverts the simple human perceptions (p.2).

At her first glance, then, Carrie discovers two faces concerning city life, and then she starts to fantasize things. She is fascinated and impressed by the gigantic city and attracted by the economic boom that she sees around her but she cannot reach. The city is full of enticing objects, which creates in her ambition and desire for luxury.

Being attracted by everything she sees around her all the time, Carrie's ambition to be wealthy became greater than before, and when she discovers the two faces of city life, her dream starts to be a materialistic one. It is, then, the city itself that shapes her deeds and makes of her a materialistic modern woman rather than a traditional religious girl. Dreiser argues that in the Progressive Era, the human deeds were guided by money, capital and desire for material wealth instead of principles and values. This desire, according to him, is biological and genetic; he notes:

A man's fortune or material progress is very much the same as his bodily growth. Either he is growing stronger, healthier, wiser, as the youth approaching manhood, or he is growing weaker, older, and less incisive mentally, as the man approaching old age. There are no other states (p. 259).

It is this kind of need that changes the personality of Carrie and urges her to move from one city to another. Her view about money is: "Money, something everybody else has and I (Carrie) must get." (p.77). Because of this desire, her relation with the other characters of the novel is materialized. At first, her relation with her sister's family is materialized as they are always anxious over a share of the rent by Carrie. This leads to the loose of the feeling of intimacy and sympathy among them. Later, Carrie's relation with Drouet and Hurstwood is of a material kind too. She uses them as means to satisfy her desires of luxury and material things, and she enjoys the comfort and predictability of her relationship with Drouet, but she desires a more exciting affair with Hurstwood. (Rong Jin., 2007).

The materialized world, in which Carrie is put, creates in her a self complexness towards herself, as she doesn't accept herself as she is. She enjoys herself only when she buys new and luxurious things, even though she knows that she is attractive even without all these things: "She goes to Carson Pirie's and buys a skirt, a shirt waist and some cosmetics until she looks quite another maiden and in her apartment, the mirror assures her that she is pretty." (p. 82). She believes that to be successful is to have enough money to build an appearance to get the appreciation of others, because for her and for Dreiser, the Progressive Era is no longer the age of values, but the age of appearance. Carrie thinks that shopping without self control is an indication of elegance. The Professor of English and women's studies Wald Priscilla asserts that "Carrie consciously emulates the traits that will please those whom she believes she needs to please." (Priscilla, 1991: 189). We understand from this that Carrie accepts to commercialize herself to get an important social position.

It is noticeable from the novel that Carrie has not developed any feeling of love towards her two lovers; they are just means used by her to reach her dream of being wealthy. In fact, when she enters the world of art as an actress, she gets rid of Drouet, who helped her to be so, and she decides to go with Hurstwood, whom she finds as another means to obtain more money and fame. She leaves one man (Drouet) when she feels attracted by a stronger and wealthier man (Hurstwood), and at the same time, she leaves one city (Chicago) when she feels that she has the possibility to enter a larger and more important one (New York). When Hurstwood introduces her to this city of wealth and fame, she gets rid of him too as she feels that she reached the degree of fame and wealth she is looking for.

Dreiser, then, presents Carrie, the prototype of the American woman during the Progressive Era, as the one who is different especially from the European one. He presents her as an active element in society, who has the ability to manipulate men and to use them as means to reach her ambition. He presents her also as a modern woman, who rebels against morals and traditions, and who succeeds to use her talents in an intelligent way to obtain a social status that permits her to live her life abundantly without need to man's support. Under the philosophy of Determinism, he succeeds to portray the reversal of male and female roles within the American society at that time, and give an image of an American woman, who can succeed in any domain outside home.

In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie Meeber succeeds to rise from a poor country girl to a successful theatre actress to show that in an American city, opportunities are always open for those who have talents in a specific domain. For Dreiser, education in America is not only limited to the study of classical Greek and Roman scholarship, but is open to new and modern fields; such as art and music. Indeed, he relies on melodrama as a narrative function of his story. The novel narrates how Carrie Meeber, who left Columbia to reach Chicago and then she left Chicago to reach New York, looking for low-class jobs, succeeds to get a full education as an artist and to fulfill her dreams of wealth and art. When she leaves her parent's home, her dream is not of art but just of material success; she is not even aware that she is endowed with such artistic talents. But, once in the city, opportunity is opened to her to discover her artistic talents and to be trained as a successful artist; making thus her dreams greater and her ambition and pleasure more powerful.

...yet she was interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things. A half-equipped little knight she was, venturing to reconnoiter the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of vague, far-off supremacy which should make it prey and subject, the proper penitent, groveling at a woman's slipper (p.4).

Indeed, Carrie's life in the novel is covered from her struggle with poverty to her rise as an acclaimed actress who is financially independent.

Acting is adopted by Carrie as a means to overcome her status as a low paid wage earner, and also to play the role of an attracting woman in society. She learns how to imitate the superior modes of behavior that she sees around her through her experience with Drouet. This is beneficial

for her as she is treated with greater respect. Acting, then, rewards her twice; as an actress on the stage and as a respected woman in society. The factor which helps Carrie to succeed in this domain is, perhaps, her contact with people who are not from her social class and environment. The first person who introduces Carrie to this field is Drouet, who is introduced by Dreiser as Carrie's first friend and lover. The support that Drouet offers to Carrie provides her with self-esteem and courage, thus she decides to carry on in this domain to reach stardom and fame. At this point, she relies on another man, Hurstwood, from an upper class, to support her and introduce her to the world of fame and money in New York. Here, we notice Carrie's complete detachment from her biological family and her original environment.

Through Carrie's relation with these two men, Dreiser gives an image of the American city of the Progressive Era, which is characterized by the diversity of its citizens and the flexibility of their relations with strangers. Barbara Hochman, in her essay "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Actress: The Rewards of Representation in *Sister Carrie*", argues that

The entire Under the Gas Light sequence is informed by Carrie's need for encouragement, support, praise, feedback—now from Drouet, now from Hurstwood. Both men contribute significantly to Carrie's success. Her triumph is a result of a genuinely collaborative effort of the three (Hochman, in Pizer, 1991: 50).

This collaboration culminated in Carrie's success as an artist. This illustrates, according to Hochman, Dreiser's belief that the artist, as any other learner, is always in need of his audience to confirm his success or failure. *Under the Gas Light* is the most important sequence in Carrie's career as an artist. While playing the role of Laura on the stage, she feels her importance as a person and as an artist. She is very satisfied and proud of herself, the thing which creates in her hope and delight as well as emotional intensity. The reason is not that Carrie can never perform again as how she does in it, but is that it is the first time she gives up her life as a buyer and seller, and she detaches herself from the world of exploiter-exploited. Carrie's performance in *Under the Gas Light* constitutes a moment of reproduction in Carrie's life. She leaves behind her all the signs of her past as a person, and reproduces herself as an actress, as Laura. It is "the outworking of desire to reproduce life" (p.117). Theatre, then, in Dreiser's work, emerges as a means of reproduction and bridge between the performer and the audience (Hochman in Pizer, 1991: 52).

The education in which Carrie was involved was more difficult and complicated than the classical form of education. In the latter, the learner has just to get a knowledge in the discipline that impresses him as an individual to be satisfied, yet in the former the learner has to be provided with a knowledge that can satisfy himself as an individual and can satisfy the spectators to reach the complete satisfaction. The learner in art should be a representative not only of himself but of all his community. When an actor performs his role on a stage, each individual from the audience must feel that he/she is talking to him or about him.

The power of stating others' cases creates reciprocity and intimacy between the actor and the spectator, the thing which leads to his/her fame. This is what happens with Carrie, when she

plays the role of Laura; she plays her role successfully to the point that every individual in the audience “could almost feel that she was talking to him” (P. 137). As Dreiser himself puts it, reciprocity creates and sustains interaction with others, thus it is necessary in the act of representation, either in narrative, in the theatre or in some other form (Dreiser in Pizer, 1991: 56). We understand from this that he himself as a writer endeavors to represent the whole American society in the Progressive Era through his *Sister Carrie*, and through the character of Carrie Meeber, he represents the American woman and art in the city during that period.

Guided by this idea of representation, Dreiser makes his character Carrie moving from one city to a larger one to represent as large numbers of people as possible. Indeed, although Carrie’s career in theatre starts in Chicago, her fame and success are reached in New York. In Chicago, she discovers her talents as an actress, and in New York she attains her dream of money, respect, celebrity and comfort. Dreiser argues that “the doors of fine places seemed to open quite without the asking. These palatial chambers-how marvelously they came to her. The elegant apartments of Mrs. Vance in the Chelsea- these were hers. Men sent flowers, love notes, offers of fortune.” (P. 456).

Carrie’s success in New York, then, is also representative. Being the largest and the most overcrowded city at that time, it represents the American city life in general. Moreover, Carrie’s success as an artist in this city indicates the fact that the turn of the twentieth century was the age of flourishing of art in the U.S.A. Dreiser portrays this period as the beginning of cultural modernity, when American people were opened to diverse fields of education, which were specific to them. The city he portrays is the one, where ambitious and talented people are free to choose the education in which they are interested.

Dreiser’s portrayal of Carrie as an actress seems to be a revolution against the European education at that time, which was still guided by the old standards of classical education. The modern way of education he portrays is flexible and open to all the people who are endowed with artistic talents, regardless of their origins or class. Art, of course, is just an example taken by Dreiser to show that American people, at that time were open to a modern way of education that did not require any material support at its beginning. And it is this modern way of education that can lead a person to the classical one, if the latter was desired. This is the case of Carrie Meeber, who is involved in literature at the end of the novel.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser presents city life and the personality of people in the United States as being influenced and guided by internal and external factors. The latter consist of economy, society and personal instincts. He sees that life in the city was shaped by the economic changes of the period. The American economy that moved from agriculture to industry and business made of the American people selfish and pragmatic individuals; seeking to get money and capital by all means possible; legal or illegal, moral or immoral. They were influenced by the philosophy of social Darwinism, and they were climbing from one social class to another.

Under these conditions, the American people put their moral and religious principles aside, and concentrated only on the ways that could lead them to success. It is in this way that Dreiser

presented his characters; especially the main character Carrie Meeber, who uses all what she finds possible to reach success and wealth. Dreiser's neglecting of religion, then, is not the invention of his imagination, but it is the portrayal of the real American city life. Donald Pizer argues that Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is written in a naturalist style and through a naturalist point of view; explaining how environmental factors influenced his hero (Hurstwood) and heroine's (Carrie) fates. He contends that the story is used "to express an abstract truth, one concerning the nature of life in great American cities in which individuals of varying makeups have their nature clarified and their fates shaped by the raw forces of life." (Pizer, 1991: 6). That is to say that Americans' lives were shaped by outside forces, which guided their actions, emotions and destiny.

To illustrate this idea, Dreiser opens his novel by describing the city into which Carrie wants entrance by saying that "the beauty of the city is an illusion and a trip which like music too often relax, weakens, then perverts the simple human perceptions." (P. 2). This is to mean that the city can change the human nature negatively by its false beauty. Its hotels, glittering theatres and sumptuous restaurants together with the wealthy apparel there can influence the individuals personalities. Practically that is happened to all Dreiser's characters.

Starting with Carrie Meeber, she is described by Dreiser as if she has never heard about religion or morals. Being unsatisfied by her life in the countryside, her initial goal in life is to enter the city that she considers the "elf-land", "dream land" or "the kingdom of greatness" (P. 25). To reach this goal, she takes the brave decision of leaving her parents in the countryside to reach Chicago, in order to get a better social status and pursuit her American Dream. Yet, once in the city, she is disappointed, when she finds that life there is not what she dreams of. In fact, she discovers two faces concerning city life; the night face of liberty and desire and the day face of work and gloomy reality. Carrie at her arrival has only the chance to live the day face of the city, but she is still attracted and lured by its night face, no matter if she is able to buy it or not (Amy, 1988: 2).

When she has no money and looks for a job at a department store, she is mesmerized by "the dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, hair combs, purses" (P. 23). At each time she discovers a new thing, she gets it at all costs. She can feel the "claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personality." (Ibid.). Through her behavior, Carrie manifests her ambition and running behind material wealth and good looking appearances. Her view of money is "money, something everybody else has and I (Carrie) must get." (P. 77). This obsession led her to lose her family and friends at the beginning and herself later. She starts by losing her parents in the countryside, and then her sister's family in the city to offer herself to Drouet, who gives her the chance to enter the world she looked for. Later, she leaves Drouet for Hurstwood, who offers her more wealth and luxury than the former. At the end, when she gets all what she is looking for, she leaves even Hurstwood; losing thus all her friends who offered her their help and losing even herself since she cannot find peace of mind despite her success and wealth.

When Carrie is losing her family and friends one after another, she does not feel any regret. This is indicative of the fact that she is emotionally and morally cold and empty; her mind is occupied only by materialism. Her state of mind, in fact, is not innate in her, but is acquired in the urban environment of the city. In the novel, the reader is told that “the metropolis is a cold place socially” (P. 462). Indeed, reading the novel, one can notice that all the discourses between characters are colored by materialistic notions, even between members of family. For instance, Carrie’s relation with her sister’s family is materialized, as they are always anxious over a share of the rent by Carrie, and there is no feeling of sympathy and intimacy among them. While working in the factory shoe, she suffers from bad conditions at work, and when she becomes ill, she loses her job, and the factory owner does not show any feeling of sympathy towards her.

Under these conditions, Carrie, determined by the philosophy of social Darwinism, finds that the only solution for her case is to follow the materialistic aspect of the city or to leave it. As a result, she seizes the first opportunity offered to her by Drouet to enter with him in a love affair in return of comfort and predictability. Here, we notice that even Drouet’s intentions are materialistic in their basis. Indeed, when he feels a certain material prosperity, he starts to buy pleasure by his money, by getting sex with a beautiful girl (Carrie). As a result, the latter reacts in the same way, when he introduces her to a man who is wealthier than him (Hurstwood). Indeed, she leaves the former without regret and she follows the latter, who opens her the doors of great fame and wealth by their travel to New York.

Hurstwood’s relation with Carrie is also illicit and materialistic. Indeed, being a married man with a family, he wants both the social conveniences of a marriage and the pleasures of an extra-marital love affair. Carrie finds this affaire more exciting than that of Drouet, and she engages in it with hypocrisy, pretending that she loves him. Her hypocrisy becomes greater, when she uses her artistic talents to play a double role of being Hurstwood’s wife and homemaker, hiding the reality that she is, in fact, an independent woman and breadwinner of their relationship. The double role she plays symbolizes her success as an actress at the end of the novel. When this success is reached, she leaves Hurstwood too, and becomes really independent.

Dreiser’s presentation of Carrie as an actress is symbolic too. He creates the character of Carrie to symbolize the spirit of the period that is characterized by false perceptions about life, hypocrisy and emptiness, left behind by identity dissolution and materialism. Indeed, an actress is a false perception of a real character just as materialism is a false perception of happiness, and consumerism is a false perception of wealth (Ma, Li, 2006: 4-9). Carrie, then, is just a marionette, guided by the conditions of her time. He presents her as a weak and degenerated person at the end of the novel, despite the success she reached:

Now Carrie, Chicago and New York is the world of fashion and the world of the stage is nothing but disenchanting dreams. What she is longing for is not them, but what they represent, but time has proved that their representative is an illusion and false. Carrie has everything, yet she has nothing (P. 431).

Donald Pizer offers a valid interpretation to Carrie's degeneration from a religious point of view; he says: "Carrie, as Eve, 'falls' not because she is weak or because her human tempters, Drouet and Hurstwood, are evil, but because the apple is beyond resistance in its attraction." (Pizer, 1991: 53). Pizer, in this quotation, sees Carrie not as a weak character, but as the one whose actions are shaped by the power and attraction that the city had on her inhabitants, just like Eve who could not resist the apple on Eden. Like, Dreiser, Pizer justifies Carrie's behavior and degeneration.

If Carrie took the road of degeneration to be a two men's love, it is not because she is a bad or weak person, but because many reasons pushed her to do so. Her actions, as well as the actions of all the other characters of the novel, are not chosen by her, but are imposed on her by her environment. This is why Dreiser does not show any punishment for her, except her feeling of loneliness and dissatisfaction at the end of the novel, and even this feeling is not presented as a punishment, but just a way to show that the materialistic values that shaped the period were not the ones that can lead a person to satisfaction and peace of mind.

Hurstwood's fall at the end of the novel is not a curse from God too, but is just a way to show that people's states in the city are in constant change; raising sometimes to the high ranks of society and falling in some other times to the lower classes, according to the conditions that surround them. Hurstwood's fall is due to the fact that New York is not the city of his business, and he would do better if he stayed in Chicago. People's rise or fall, according to Dreiser, are shaped by natural conditions of life on which they have no power or influence; they have just the power of moving from one place to another and from one city to another until they find the one that fits their cases, just like what Carrie has done, when she moved from countryside to city, and from that city to another that fits best her case.

The novel shows that Carrie's lack of moral education is not only determined by her life conditions in the city, but also by her past. The poverty in which her parents lived in Wisconsin prevented them from supplying their daughter with any type of education. The only thing they could give her were the basic elements of life which were shelter and food. In fact, despite the fact that Dreiser does not provide us with a full information about Carrie's past, one can deduce from her behavior and thoughts that she lives in bad conditions in her parents' home. Indeed, Dreiser informs us that she left Wisconsin, because she was "dissatisfied at home" (P.15). He informs us also that her father worked in a flour mill, and that they were relatively new comers to Columbia (America); "Carrie is two generations removed from emigrant" (P.4). They were, thus, not well settled economically (Riggiou in Pizer, 1980: 30).

In addition to all this, Dreiser informs us that Carrie is not provided by guidance from a "counselor... to whisper cautious interpretations" (P. 4). "The guiding voice of the family –the counselor, traditionally the fathers voice –is conspicuously absent in Carrie's life." (Ibid). He argues that Carrie has easily fallen in Drouet's seductive advances, because she "had no excellent home principles fixed upon her. If she had, she would have been more consciously distressed" (P. 78). He adds: "If any habits had ever had time to fix upon her, they would have operated here." (P.

77). For Dreiser, then, Carrie's fall in moral education is partially due to the lack of guidance in her childhood (Ibid., P. 31).

It is noticeable that Dreiser all along the novel, justifies Carrie's immoral behavior through the philosophy of determinism. Her deeds are determined, on the one hand, by the philosophy of social Darwinism and the spirit of Liberalism as well as the conspicuous consumption and emulation that characterized city life at that time, and on the other hand, by the lack of religious and moral education in Carrie's life with her parents, from which she remembered only signs of poverty. She is, then, determined by her past and present.

From Carrie's experience with the American Dream in the turn of the twentieth century, we notice that the success that Carrie Meeber looks for is not realized through hard work as she imagined it to be, but came from her illegal relationships with men. Indeed, she moves from one place to another, and from one man to another in order to save herself from the evils of the urban society and to be a wealthy and well known woman. However, despite her fame and wealth at the end, her state is dominated by the feelings of sadness and loneliness and moral instability. Thus, she experiences the failure of the American Dream at that time.

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