

A Study on the Reasons of Sister Carrie's Change

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Abstract

Sister Carrie is the first novel of Theodore Dreiser. The novel mainly describes the process of how Carrie, a poor country girl, becomes a famous star in Broadway. In the novel, Dreiser describes the living condition and emotional changes of Carrie vividly. Carrie's living condition is not accepted by morality. She is fallen for money and materials, becoming mistress of man. However, Carrie becomes an individual woman and succeeds at last. The economy, society, personality and people around Carrie are main reasons of Carrie's changes.

Keywords

Sister Carrie, Reasons, Change

1. The Introduction of *Sister Carrie*

Sister Carrie mainly introduces the life change of Caroline Meeber. Caroline, known as Carrie, is a young woman from rural Wisconsin. She took train to Chicago with her dream of colorful urban life. At first, Carrie supported herself by her low wages. However, the urban life was very difficult for this rural girl. Later, she was fallen for money and materials. She became the mistress of the salesman, Drouet. When she met Hurstwood, she was attracted by the gentle restaurant manager and became the mistress of Hurstwood. Finally, she became an individual woman and succeeded in acting, becoming a famous star in Broadway.

2. Literature Review

Since Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* published in 1900, it has aroused the interest of both domestic and foreign academic circles. Some people choose to

analyze Sister Carrie from American Dream, naturalism or feminism. Robert H Elias thinks that the childhood and teenager life have an important influence in Dreiser's value of his book, *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (Dreiser, 2011). *Sister Carrie* has aroused controversies for years. Carrie was considered as "a fallen woman" and it was "an unhealthful and unpleasant novel" (Pizer, 2007). Stuart P. Sherman (Sherman, 1915), in his *Barbaric Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser*, argues that Dreiser reduces human existence to the level of animal life a wholly unacceptable stance. "Mr. Dreiser drives home the great truth that man is essentially an animal, impelled by temperament, instinct, physical, chemistry, anything you please that is irrational and uncontrollable (Sherman, 1915)." On the contrary, H. L. Mencken sees Dreiser as the latest and the most accomplished representative of the realistic tradition, a man whose work is to be read and appreciated. Mencken in *The Dreiser Bugaboo* (Mecken, 1955) dismisses Sherman's condemnation as mere "irate flub cub". He insists on that Dreiser's story and language are neither obscene nor profane.

In recent years, there are some periodicals analyzing it from different aspects. *Sister Carrie's Desires and Motivations* (Wang, 2002) makes an attempt to analyze the heroine's various desires and motivations; *Dreams in the Rocking-chair* (Huang & Bai, 2002) analyzes the symbolism of the rocking-chair; Wang Ru believes "From the perspective of feminism, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Darwin's theory of biological evolution, as a matter of fact, Carrie is a new woman who dares to challenge the tradition and is able to rely on herself" (Wang, 2017). Moreover, Guo Ping praises Carrie for her pursuit of self-realization and the beauty of Art (Guo, 2009).

3. Three Stages of Carrie's Image

In different times, Carrie plays different roles. She relied on man for rich life, but she can also support herself when she is single.

1) An Innocent and Independent Girl

At the beginning of the novel, eighteen-year-old Carrie embraced the longing for life in a big city. So she came to Chicago from her hometown, Colombia. As Dreiser described in *Sister Carrie*, she was "a bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth" (Dreiser, 2011: p. 1). Carrie was an innocent and independent girl initially. She embarked on a train to Chicago with a crocodile leather bag and four dollars. On the train, she met the salesman Drouet. Drouet introduced Carrie to the bustling aspects of Chicago. When she came to Chicago to start her dream-seeking journey, her purpose was simple. She wanted to find a job and support herself.

When Carrie just started working, she is not very skilled. "She had no time to look about, and bent anxiously to her task. The girls at her left and right realized her predicament and feelings, and, in a way, tried to aid her, as much they dared, by working slower" (Dreiser, 2011: p. 31). However, she works very hard. The male and female Workers in the factory always bantered indelicately with each

other in leisure time. However, Carrie never participated in their badinage. At that time, she was still an innocent girl. Later, Carrie lost her job because of illness. When she just lost her job, she accepted the good intentions of Drouet. Later, the simple Carrie was deceived by Drouet's rhetoric. She began to accept the kindness of Drouet. That is also the beginning of her fall.

2) An Accessory of Man

With the help of Drouet, Carrie moved into a new apartment. Carrie yearned for urban life. Finally, Carrie quickly fell to the tempting world. Drouet gave Carrie the urban life she wanted. Carrie finally became one of the women she envied. Carrie had beautiful dresses, nice jackets and pretty button shoes, but she also lost herself.

3.1. An Accessory of Drouet

Carrie became the mistress of Drouet. She could live in an enviable apartment, enter the theater and shopping malls proudly finally. However, Carrie had forgotten the original intention of self-reliance. Carrie relied on Drouet instead of going out to find a job. She chose to live in a new apartment which Drouet rented. She enjoyed the comfortably urban life with Drouet. Drouet bought a lot of clothes for Carrie. Moreover, she tried her best to dress like fashionable ladies on the street, and tried to be one of them.

Carrie has lived a prosperous life, but lost a lot of fun. When Drouet went out, she could only take a walk outside, sit by the window, or read books at home. She longed for colorful life. She also wanted to be the wife of Drouet and no longer suffered moral condemnation. However, whenever she asked Drouet the time of their marriage, Drouet would find some reasons to seduce her. Nevertheless, Drouet was a dude. Although he was attracted by Carrie's beauty, he was not willing to give up his single life. Carrie gradually recognized the fact that Drouet would not marry her. This also paved the way for Carrie to choose Hurstwood later.

3.2. An Accessory of Hurstwood

3.2.1. Mistress of Hurstwood

Sociable Drouet had many friends. Hurstwood, the hotel manager was one of them. Hurstwood was in polite society. He was more cultivated than Drouet and behaved more decently. After Carrie played a card with him, she felt that Hurstwood was a very elegant man. Carrie, who was full of yearning for the upper class, wanted to know more about Hurstwood. Hurstwood was also fascinated by Carrie. When Drouet was on business, Hurstwood often dated with Carrie and gradually showed his love to Carrie. When Hurstwood showed his love to Carrie, he described himself as an admirer of Carrie. He even said that he could not leave Carrie. Thus, Carrie accepted elegant Hurstwood's love.

She became the mistress of Hurstwood. However, poor Carrie did not know that Hurstwood was married. When Drouet was on business trip, Carrie often dated with Hurstwood. Before Carrie's performance, Hurstwood tried his best to

broadcast this entertainment. He also invited some friends to watch the entertainment. He even took a box for Carrie's performance. It was also this performance that allowed Carrie to discover her acting talent and interest in acting. That laid the foundation for her later independence.

3.2.2. Wife of Hurstwood

When Carrie was dealing with Drouet and Hurstwood, she accidentally heard that Hurstwood had married. Carrie felt devastated. She could not believe that Hurstwood had deceived her. Drouet also knew Carrie's infidelity. He was very angry and left home. Carrie finally chose independence. She began to find a job by herself again. Later, she travelled to New York with Hurstwood. After arriving in New York, Hurstwood invested in a hotel with the remaining money. He continued to serve as a hotel manager. As Carrie, she finally settled with Hurstwood as the wife of Hurstwood. Later, the hotel operated by Hurstwood broke up. They cannot afford the high rent. So they moved to a cheaper place. But Hurstwood did not want to find a new job, so they could only move to the slums later.

3) An Individual Woman

As Beauvoir points in *The Second Sex* that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, which is described as feminine" (de Beauvoir, 1972: p. 225). She presents that females are not born to be an accessory and they are created by the society and nature. When Hurstwood's money was going to be exhausted, Carrie finally woke up. She decided to be an actor finally. Needy Hurstwood no longer stopped because he knew an income was necessary for his family. In this job-hunt process, Carrie's appearance and manners gave her great courage and confidence. She knew how to show her advantages this time. Her behavior was greatly improved, too. Thus she could easily find a job. However, after finding a job, Hurstwood was still unemployed, which made Carrie very unhappy. So, Carrie chose to leave Hurstwood later. Carrie is very talented in acting, so her role was getting better and better. Her salary was getting higher and higher, too. Carrie became famous after several times. She entered the high society at last. Now Carrie has finally got rid of Drouet and Hurstwood. She finally could give herself a good life by her own.

4. Factors to Her Changes

1) Economy

Dreiser once mentioned at first chapter of *Sister Carrie*, "And yet she was interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things" (Dreiser, 2011: p. 2). Carrie was born with a strong desire for material.

She becomes the accessory of man because of economy. When Carrie just arrived in Chicago, she found that things went differently from her imagination. At that time, she was beautiful, but she was still growing up. Moreover, she was very timid. Therefore, Carrie often ran into the wall in the process of finding a

job. Later, she finally found a job, but her salary was very low. The worse was that she had to pay rent to Minnie every week. Thus the salary was not enough for her daily expenses. After Carrie became ill, even this low-paying job was lost. She lost her economic source, so her elder sister wanted to send her back home. But Carrie did not want to go back home. On the occasion of Carrie's desperation, Drouet appeared. Drouet took Carrie to the restaurant to have a meal. He also gave her money to buy clothes. This made Carrie feel happy and saved. She urged for money. She could get nice new jackets, pretty button shoes, stockings, skirts and other beautiful things after owning the twenty dollars. Under the temptation of money, Carrie was corrupted finally. She lived in the apartment rented by Drouet and became the mistress of him.

As Dreiser described, "She really was not enamoured of Drouet" (Dreiser, 2011: p. 81). Carrie did not love Drouet so much, but she loved the life given by Drouet. After a period of time, Drouet introduced his friend Hurstwood to Carrie. Hurstwood was a hotel manager. He was much richer than Drouet. Hurstwood was a high-society person. "When Hurstwood called, she met a man who was more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways. He paid that peculiar deference to woman which every member of the sex appreciates (Dreiser, 2011: p. 82)." "His clothes were particularly new and rich in appearance (Dreiser, 2011: p. 83)." Carrie, who pursued material life, then indulged in Hurstwood. During her performance, Hurstwood even called a lot of friends to watch, even ordered a box. After her performance, Hurstwood gave her flowers. This made Carrie very satisfied. On the contrary, Drouet only praised a few words. The consuming comparison made Carrie more satisfied with Hurstwood.

Carrie becomes independent because of economy, too. After Hurstwood became impoverished, Carrie chose to leave him without hesitation. At that time, she had begun to support herself. If she did not choose to leave Hurstwood, she would deal part of her salary out to support Hurstwood. This made Carrie unsatisfied. Because this means that her quality of life will decline because of Hurstwood. However, when Hurstwood still had money, Carrie never went out to work. At that time, she also lived by Hurstwood. After discovering that Hurstwood had no money, she became independent and decisively left Hurstwood. It can be seen that the economy is the most important reason for Carrie's change. She has always been materialistic.

2) Society

Mark Twain called the late 19th century's America "The Gilding Age" (Twain, 2015). At that time, the United States was in a period of rapid development. The rapid development of the economy meant that people's awareness of consumption was also changing. In the nineteenth century, the United States was in a period when consumer ideology slowly replaced production ideology. The consumer ideology inspired hedonism and refined life. In this ideology, buying goods was not only for demand, but also a way to reflect social status. As a result, women began to focus on dressing themselves, enjoying life, and being no

longer bound by family life and family responsibilities. The ladies often went to stores and theaters. Men also went to restaurants, bars and other places to spend. In this materialistic desire, the ability to consume represented the strength of a person. The American people were drowned in the endless production and display of goods. Under such an ideology, Carrie, who has just stepped into society, was surely easy to be corrupted.

The late 19th century's United States was in the first wave of the women's liberation. As time goes, women began to wake up and realized their rights were deprived. Women began to realize that they were in low social status and were succumbed to men. At that time, the debate focused on the equality of gender equality and the basic rights of citizens. The oppressed women fought against the patriarchal society and demanded the same social, political, and economic rights as men. Carrie was one of them, and she was self-sufficient.

3) Personality

Carrie has always been a person with a strong desire for material. Her every change was also due to the enthusiasm for material. Actually, at first, Carrie was innocent. This meant that this simple girl is more likely to be tempted and deceived. Therefore, he was deceived by Drouet with sweet words and money. Moreover, the life that Drouet gave her also made her willing to be the mistress of Drouet. Later, because of the pursuit of material, Carrie was attached to Hurstwood. That's because Hurstwood's social status is higher than Drouet, and he was more like a gentleman. Hurstwood is truly a high-society person, he can achieve Carrie's dream better.

Carrie was a very capable person. Because Carrie came from the countryside, her clothes were very common. However, shortly after she lived with Drouet, she learned to wear like an urban girl. Moreover, her behavior had gradually become the same as those in the city. She could also show her most beautiful part to others.

Carrie is also a dependent girl. When she could rely on others, she was not willing to be independent. After being the mistress of Drouet, she stopped working, even if she was bored at home alone. After the first performance, she discovered her talent in acting, but she always ignored it. Only when she felt that she could not rely on others can she recall her talent. When Drouet pretended to leave home, she recalled this talent and decided to go out to find a job. However, after she ran away with Hurstwood, she ignored this talent again and became a housewife. Until the end of the story, Hurstwood became needy and unemployed. No income, so she picked up her talent again to made a living. It could be seen that Carrie always relies on others to live a good life but not by herself.

4) People around Her

Drouet and Hurstwood are two important men in Carrie's life. Under their leadership, Carrie stepped out of the bottom society. They took Carrie to experience the life of the upper class. They also turned Carrie from a simple rural girl into an urban girl who is good at dressing up. Without them, Carrie will

not succeed so easily later, even will not succeed. With their help, Carrie discovered her talents in acting. With their help, Carrie is no longer timid and becomes confident. Without their help, Carrie may still be just an ordinary female worker.

Mrs. Vance is Carrie's friend in New York. Mrs. Vance enjoys entertainment. She has a lot of beautiful clothes, shoes and accessories. She is very beautiful and very fashionable, so she is very eye-catching on the street. She invites Carrie to a luxury restaurant to have dinner, takes Carrie to the theater, telling Carrie which style is more fashionable. It was she who let Carrie know about the upper class in New York. New York is more prosperous than Chicago. Therefore, Carrie is more yearning for the life of the upper class in New York. Enthusiasm for high-society life is one of the reasons why Carrie becomes independent.

Although Ames appeared late in this book, and he is just described by few words, he plays a very important role in Carrie's life. Ames is a very positive image in this book. He is smart, loves reading books, respects women, and has his own ideas. He told Carrie that money is not omnipotent, so Carrie's ideological realm is improved and changed. He also recommended some books to Carrie so that Carrie can learn more. At the beginning of the book, Dreiser mentioned that Carrie did not like reading books, but Ames changed Carrie. Carrie, who accepted Ames's advice, started reading and thinking about herself. This made Carrie more independent.

5. Conclusion

At first, Carrie was an innocent girl, but she was gradually attracted by the rich rural life. Thus she became mistress of man and no longer work. However, when she could not rely on her "husband" again, she chose to find job again. At last, she became a famous star and a really urban lady. This thesis mainly analyzes the three stages of Carrie's life and the reasons of her changes.

Carrie was always attached to others, from her parents to her sister, to Drouet, to Hurstwood. She finally becomes independent when she cannot rely on anyone. Carrie has always been talent in acting. However, she ignores her talent when she can rely on others. If she is independent at the beginning, she does not have to sell herself. From Carrie's experience, people can find that women should be independent. Women should rely on their own hands to work, and should not put their hopes on marriage or family. Otherwise, just like Carrie, after Hurstwood was unemployed, her life became needy. Women can achieve personal independence only if they achieve economic independence. Only by realizing the independence of personality can her life be controlled by herself and live the life she wants.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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