

DREISER'S PERSPECTIVE OF REALISM IN AMERICAN SOCIETY AS A SHOWCASE OF UNDERPRIVILEGED CLASS

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ABSTRACT

Theodore Dreiser was a revolutionary writer whose novels structured modern American fiction. He successfully showcased the real picture of American society and exposed the false American Dream. He served realism that struck hard the accepted rules of conduct and portrayed life as was perceived. Average American life was shown dominated by materialism and gradually capitalism stagnated the soul of the underprivileged class that felt suffocated with the passage of time and struggled hard to survive. Even ethical conduct was difficult to maintain in such circumstances and social structure virtually collapsed. Family bonds could not sustain and life primarily focussed on achieving economic stability. Miserable souls were in depleted condition and in pursuit of material gains the society was deprived of any class. Anything was equally attainable but compromises in disguise of self-sacrifice became a common feature to rise. Relations were more commercial and sentiments found no room to survive. Deviation from absolute purity and maligned morality developed a split attitude in an average American. Such hard facts of life revealed by Dreiser shook the American system and this was assumed as a shift from traditional genteel literature.

Keywords: *American Fiction, American Society, American Dream, Realism, Underprivileged Class.*

Introduction

In American Literature Theodor Dreiser ventured as a revolutionary writer. He shook the American sentiments by his art of writing that sent deep tremors in the American society. His thoughts were observed as a virtual assault on the American system. Even critics were sceptical about his perception of the American society that was deciphered by him in his debut novel, *Sister Carrie*. It was later substantiated by Swanberg in 1965 in his work on Dreiser. (Swanberg, W.A.(1965).*Dreiser*.) Even Alfred Kazin in 1965 observed Dreiser as a whole new class who initiated disturbing movements in American life through *Sister Carrie*. (Kazin, A.,& Shapiro, C.(Eds.).(1965). *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser*.)

The transition of society from a drowsing rustic into dynamic industrial produced a new social order that evolved typical characters out of prevailing novel situations. Such changes brought forth a fresh bunch of humans that reflected the distinct social behaviour of emerging American society. Such living characters could be observed in *Sister Carrie* and also in *Jennie Gerhardt* and they provided a running picture of American aspirations that floated seamlessly in the last phase of the nineteenth century.

Dreiser's Realism

Sister Carrie at large represented the social and economic transformation of the United States at the turn of century. Human desires increased drastically while family bonding and social knitting ruptured. Human values were intruded on by greed for power and money. Weaknesses of the poor fell prey to the rich. (Hanif, M., & Badri, H. (2018). *Desire and Dehumanization in Theodor Dreiser's Sister Carrie*.)

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The immediate desire of Carrie was to attain materialistic advantages to overcome her miseries and poverty and the mode of attaining them was rather insignificant. Moreover, the poor and needy were more subjected to humiliation and high handedness of the affluent. Here environment and desire together play a role. Exactly in a given situation and society environment decided the fate and also the character of a person. (Bai, L. (2014). Environment and Fate: Helpless Human Beings in Sister Carrie.) Carrie connects with both Drouet and Hurstwood, but the environment of Chicago and of New York forced her to enact what she did and the desire to achieve was of course there but it got strength from the environment of the place and she achieved her desired dream. It appears a tragedy with regards to the fate of Drouet and Hurstwood, but for Carrie, it was the fulfilment of her dream as practically the mode of attaining the desired dream was thought to be insignificant and only the result mattered. Dreiser actually showed the reality behind this beautiful perception. American dream exactly converts to a nightmare in the wild pursuit of wealth and success. Humanity is low down and the basic social fabric appears dented.

Chicago was an important destination for achieving success and realising dreams. It was an evolving civilization in America with no said traditions. It was making traditions and emerging in wealth, beauty, art, and infrastructure. (Dreiser, T.(1956a). *A Book About Myself*.) But at the same time, Dreiser also noticed the dejected miserable souls in the city. He simply put his observations in Sister Carrie with no flavoured fiction. Chicago as a city was there for all to achieve something. Its growing commercial opportunities provided a testing ground for anyone's fortune. (Dreiser, T.(1965). *Sister Carrie*.) Carrie left her village and settled in Chicago. She was too ambitious and self-interest was her inspiration. She was a young rustic woman ignorant about materialistic American society and eager to achieve simple worldly pleasures. She left her home with no regrets. Sentiments were shown to have no space in her life and in every situation she just aspired to keep her dreams alive. Millions in America were in miserable condition and family pleasure for them was a remote dream. They struggled to live their basic life and their dreams far from reality.

Caroline Meeber, affectionately called Carrie, too saw extreme poverty in her family. Poverty-stricken family ties were no longer strong enough to keep them together. Carrie also moves out of her family fold and lands in Chicago to live with her sister hoping for realistic social and economic stability. Here on her way she connects with a successful and attractive youth Drouet who was apparently progressive but soon faces his limitations. He reflected the average youth who came into existence with the industrialisation of America. Most of the young recruits in Chicago worked as labourers and clerks and belonged to the average working class. Even their life was devoid of any type of recreation. Carrie could only imagine becoming a shop-girl but her hapless and miserable condition could not pull her out of the unemployment crowd. She was inexperienced and just like any common American of her class she was no better than a slave. (Caudwell, C.(1981). *Illusion and Reality*.)

Carrie like any average American got stuck between virtual and real worlds. Her dreams of success were far from reality. Even her sister and brother-in-law could not avoid exploiting her. Once during her illness when she lost her job, she becomes Drouet's mistress. Dreiser shows the compromises not as a sinful act but as a step towards success that any country girl like Carrie would make to realise her dream. (McAleer, J. J. (1968). *Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation*.) Here Dreiser could have shown Carrie as a sinful fallen woman but he has portrayed her as a practical dreamer who makes her own ways to succeed. Many critics were troubled by such depiction of American society where girls like Carrie easily shun morality for realising their dreams. Here Dreiser is quite realistic in judging things as they are. He observes society with maturity and Carrie was shown satisfied with her situation and she was considered her own master. (Dreiser, T.(1931).*Dawn*.) She was not blamed for doing any wrong but was credited for successfully improvising her dream. Dreiser even graded society for achieving success goals. When Carrie was out of money and had to borrow some from her sister for lunch, she, by chance, met Drouet whom she observed as a man of fortune and could be trusted upon to make her own fortune. But here Dreiser even clarified that Drouet lacked intelligence and could have been easily tricked by someone of a more refined society. Later, Drouet met a successful man, Hurstwood, in whom he saw his own ambition. So, as Drouet was the goal of Carrie's ambition, Hurstwood was the goal of Drouet's ambition. So after leaving her home Carrie progressed through such stages by even making any necessary compromises to realise her dream. Carrie had a sharp vision and she visualised such situations and moved up.

Such revelation of gradation in society contradicted the American way of life that established that American society was classless and all are equal in true eyes of the law and the constitution. In *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee also the issue of social disparity was raised and the dividing line between upper-middle, middle class, and the lower middle class was questioned in the materialistic world. (Albee,

E.(1980). *The Zoo Story*.) So there are no classes, but capitalism had created classes of exploited and the exploiters such as the labourers or the workers and the capitalistic owners. Such classes had further subdivisions and thus like hereditary classes that existed in the old world, a complex class structure was seen. So, the American dream of the underprivileged faced the consequence of this complex classism in American society. Thus, the American way of life was different from reality. Initially, Carrie came to her sister's home in Chicago and she connects with Drouet with whom she finds her fortune. Now when Drouet introduces Carrie to Hurstwood then this marked his own decline and gradual rise of Hurstwood in favour of Carrie. Carrie and her like are much fascinated by the American dream. The first phase of her dream was realised when she started living with Drouet. Here Carrie weighted her materialistic development more than her moral issues. In the end her material condition was praised rather than anything else. This was a realistic approach by Dreiser where Carrie was shown to be more apt in fortune making and her morality was not questioned. Hurstwood belonged to that middle class that was just below the rich class. Carrie could easily judge the superiority of Hurstwood over Drouet. Even Hurstwood could perceive the superiority of Carrie over Drouet with regards to social grace and refined feeling.

Hurstwood was a successful man in Chicago. His position as a manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's Adams Street resort was quite imposing, but he lacked financial authority. He was socially respected with a wife and two children residing in a posh society. But success in the true sense was analysed by Dreiser and the reality behind it was observed. Hurstwood, like any successful American, was happily placed but in a real sense hollowness in such claims was revealed by Dreiser in the American way of life. The relations were more commercial of sorts and even Marx noted that such capitalistic society was more based on money relation rather than on sentiments. (Marx, K. & Engels, F.(1979). *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.) The domestic life of Hurstwood was lacking love and affection and somewhere Hurstwood was deprived of social warmth and had an intense sense of loneliness. He feels left alone in this materialistically dominated world. Hurstwood conveys his position to Carrie and she responds with all her affection. Here somewhere he is attracted towards Carrie but does a social lapse by breaking conventions of society by moving and breaking away from his family. Carrie joins Hurstwood hoping of attaining her American dream but for Hurstwood, this union is the start of his American tragedy. Dreiser puts Carrie's struggle more forcefully and it seems that success is what all that counts. (McAleer, J. J. (1968). *Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation*.) So, for Carrie's visualization of her American dream, Hurstwood represented the success of the American idea. But for Drouet and Hurstwood this is another aspect of the American success dream. The fall of Hurstwood represents unreliability and insecurity in American society. (Matthiessen, F.O.(1951). *Theodore Dreiser*.)

On one occasion, intense desire momentarily propels Hurstwood to steal money but immediately he wishes to replace the amount but as the safe door is accidentally closed, the money remains with him. Dreiser here emphasises that there are certain forces beyond our control that shapes our life and people move up and down. Here for Hurstwood such forces are social and prompted by insecurity. Hurstwood then takes Carrie to New York where society was evolved to a higher level. Here Hurstwood, a man of moderate means in Chicago, when shifted to New York became insignificant as in New York there were numerous millionaires. Now Hurstwood's career follows a downward journey. Cut-throat competition in the capitalistic society reduces him to a most exploited section of American class structure. Hurstwood as a character speaks for his class and occupation and in changed circumstances loses his place in society making it a social tragedy. (Spiller, R.E., Thorp, W., Johnson, T.H., Canby, H.S., & Ludwig, R.M.(1969). *Literary History of the United States*.) Ultimately Carrie left him when she realises that he now lacked the quality to achieve the goals of success essential for realising the American dream. This was a logical consequence of the ideals of American society that Carrie had adopted. In later years Hurstwood was influenced by the capitalistic system to take anti-social roles. Hurstwood knew that the workers of tram car owners were right and the management was wrong, but he acted as a strike-breaker. Hurstwood was unsuccessful in this act and was beaten up by the strikers and was called a thief who was to rob the poor and steal their job. Hurstwood committed theft by accident in his early days, but in later stages of his life under the influence of a capitalistic system, he became a real anti-social being. So Dreiser showed that the American dream was a dark reality of the American capitalistic system.

The description of poverty in America came as a shock to the readers of *Sister Carrie*. People felt offended when gradation in poverty was described with realism. Moreover, poverty was considered a disgrace and officially it was regarded as non-existent. Even the schemes of charity that were believed to curb poverty were shown to be only ornamental. But actually, in bread lines, people waited like cattle, and the quality of food served was miserable and below dignity. Even social reforms in the last two

decades of the nineteenth century proved insufficient and futile as reformers always made compromises and were opportunistic in nature. (Spiller, R.E., Thorp, W., Johnson, T.H., Canby, H.S., & Ludwig, R.M.(1969). *Literary History of the United States.*)

Carrie's blind run for accomplishing the American dream provided only a little success but the author considers her only as an exception. In New York, Carrie lived with Hurstwood in the same building where Mrs. Vance lived with her wealthy husband. Carrie, through Mrs. Vance, was impressed by the glittering life of rich people in New York. Here in New York Carrie met Robert Ames, a young scholar and a relative of Mrs. Vance, in whom she saw another horizon. Carrie was attracted to him and regarded him as a male ideal. Carrie's submission to Drouet was more by instinct but this is repeated successfully with more superior and affluent persons also and she progressively attained materialistic gains. The triadic movements from Drouet to Hurstwood and to Ames formed the basis of Dreiser's fiction. In Ames, Dreiser created a character whose thoughts were different from those who were immersed in the American dreams. He looked down upon those who were blindly in a run for the money. Ames had a strong influence on Carrie. She understood through Ames that real happiness cannot be achieved by just running after the success goals. Such persuasion may sometimes lead to arrogance and maybe a cosmetic exercise only. Her achievement as a successful actress brought her wealth and she appeared satisfied but Ames made her realise that her real self is yet to surface and her expressions were just for the fulfilment of commercial demands. Carrie through her talent achieved material success, but Dreiser considered her success and joy incomplete as he observed that, sometimes, sitting alone one can dream unparalleled happiness.

Thus, during the transition era needy and underprivileged Americans dreamt of a dignified and successful future but the blind pursuit of success goals under influence of a capitalistic system ruptured somewhere their ethics. American society lost social and moral sobriety and got swayed by the lure of the American Dream. The professed ideals of American society were not exactly practiced. The impact of pursuing success goals on an individual was observed in Sister Carrie and eleven years later Dreiser in Jennie Gerhardt transcript such impact of materialistic ethics on the American family. Even Hurstwood was shown to face disorder in familial ties in Sister Carrie but in Jennie Gerhardt as a consequence of the American dream complete family unit eroded and misfortunes followed closely in modern American Society. (Shapiro, C.(1964). *Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot.*)

In Jennie Gerhardt, the two families Gerhardt's (the poor working-class) and Kane's (the capitalistic class) represented the two extremities of the American social structure. In the transition period, the emerging industrial capitalism strongly influenced American life and the prevailing social and moral norms proved detrimental to the American family. Both Carrie and Jennie violated the moral norms of their society but their ideals of material success were quite different. Carrie blindly chased American Dream and grabbed any opportunity to achieve worldly success whereas Jennie shunned any such American attitude and stuck to her ethics of renunciation. But habitual voluntary sacrifices by Jennie made her lose everything and this led to the condemnation of such an American way of life. Poverty made Jennie and her mother face hardship in life and they struggled to make ends meet. (Dreiser, T.(1956b). *Jennie Gerhardt.*) Life was full of failures and misfortunes for their family and they struggled for all necessities. The plight of all individuals of their class faced such economic hardships and the family structure in America was in distress. At the same time, there was another face of America that was affluent and luxury was their way of life. Dreamers aspired for such a life and probably became victims of such a society. Carrie was a self-seeker and she always moulded her own path to achieve her dream. Jennie was innocent and probably a self-giver with self-sacrificing nature that made her more vulnerable to tragedies in life.

Conclusion

Most average Americans insisted on material civilization. Dreiser showed a contrast between two moral worlds that ran parallel in America. A life-denying morality was abbreviated not more than hypocrisy. Exactly American Dream and American reality were two shades of American life that emerged due to split attitude in an average American. The chase for money that was earlier regarded unethical in religious belief was now getting acceptance. (Weber, M.(1952). *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism.*) Such dualistic morality distracted society from absolute purity and somewhere the society ventured into compromises. This behaviour was forced by certain realities that individuals confronted in everyday life. Jennie was innocent by heart and she was pure in thoughts but somewhere in her mind wishing to be rich was making an impact upon her when she landed in Columbus Hotel. Carrie made her own ways to achieve favours, but Jennie is shown to possess deeper morality and any deviation from her ethics was referred to as a great sacrifice.

The social pressures were exactly shown to influence emotions and human behaviour. Even financial problems forced dramatic changes in human attitude and even marriage as an institution collapsed and family structure eroded significantly. Fate was shown more powerful and individuals moved like pawns on a chessboard where circumstances appeared uncontrolled and any eventuality was equally probable. Jennie was generous and full of charity at heart, but she faced many hardships. Dreiser revealed all such mysteries of life and even contemplated in fiction such hard facts that often went untraceable and primarily unfolded with time only.

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