



DEPICTION AND INFLUENCE OF THE SOCIETY IN «SISTER CARRIE» BY THEODORE DREISER

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Abstract: *Theodore Dreiser's novel "Sister Carrie" presents a captivating portrayal of society's influence on individuals, exploring the complex interplay between aspiration, morality, and societal expectations. This abstract aims to delve into the nuanced depiction of society within the novel and examine its profound influence on the characters, highlighting how Dreiser's work offers a compelling critique of the societal norms and values prevalent during the late 19th century.*

Keywords: *Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser, Society portrayal, societal influence, urbanization, industrialization, societal expectations, moral issues, societal norms and values, material success, commodification of women, individual desires*

Theodore Dreiser's "Sister Carrie" stands as a monumental work in American literature, offering a compelling portrayal of societal dynamics and their profound influence on individual lives. Set against the transformative era of industrialization and urbanization, the novel intricately examines the interplay between personal aspirations and societal expectations. Through the experiences of the protagonist, Carrie Meeber, the novel vividly depicts the impact of societal constructs on human behavior and moral contemplations. This essay seeks to unravel the depiction and influence of society within "Sister Carrie," delving into its critique of societal norms and values prevalent during the late 19th century, and highlighting the complex dynamics at play between individual aspirations and the forces of society.

The novel vividly illustrates how societal expectations shape the choices and outcomes of the characters. It explores themes such as the commodification of women, the allure of material wealth, and the tension between individual desires and societal norms. Through Carrie's journey from a small-town girl to a sought-after actress, the novel exposes the constraints and opportunities presented by society, underscoring the transformative power of external influences. Dreiser's multifaceted portrayal of society's influence offers a thought-provoking exploration of human behavior and societal dynamics. By critically examining the characters' decisions and interactions, the novel challenges the reader to reflect on the ethical and existential implications of conforming to or resisting societal pressures.

This article studies the depiction of society within the novel and examine its profound influence on the characters. The novel "Sister Carrie" offers a vivid portrayal of the societal milieu, presenting a nuanced reflection of American society during a period of rapid urban and industrial expansion. Dreiser's meticulous narrative exposes the multifaceted influence



of societal expectations, especially regarding the commodification of women and the allure of material success. Carrie's journey from a small-town girl to an independent woman navigating the complexities of a burgeoning urban environment serves as an illuminating lens through which to explore the constraints and opportunities engendered by societal constructs. The novel evocatively illustrates the tension between individual desires and societal norms, challenging readers to contemplate the ethical and existential implications of conformity and resistance. Through its characters and their interactions, "Sister Carrie" offers a thought-provoking commentary on the impact of societal values on human behaviors, and the far-reaching consequences of societal expectations on individual lives.

The rapid development of industrialization and urbanization contributed to the growth of people's ideological perceptions and social structure. Like others, Sister Carrie found her life and destiny through struggle and hard work. Subsequently, the day she arrived in Chicago. She started looking for a job. Due to lack of labor participation, her bosses turned her down many times, but she dreamed in her dream that she stay and live a better, much better, higher, stronger, more perfect life away from the city. She actually accepted a \$4.50 a week job just to stay in the city. It seemed to her that a modest wage could satisfy her various desires. She walked boldly and calmly toward her dream. Even though she was so determined, she was still plagued by reality. Due to a terrible illness, she lost her job, depriving her of the exceptional opportunity to stay in the city. Her sister's family would not simply shelter her. She had to face the reality of returning home with her dreams shattered. At this exceptional moment, she was innocent, naive, anticipating a wonderful life in the big cities, but she had to achieve her own by her constant labor, not by other tricks and traps. Due to illness and job loss, Carrie's sister had to leave the city she dreamed of living in. However, inwardly she was surprisingly reluctant to do so. She treasured the town very much and was tempted to do so. The city was extraordinarily dear to her and beckoned to her with its potential chances and endless fabric of delight. Roads, lights, magnificent storefronts, theaters, lobbies, etc. They beckoned dangerously to her, but she did not need to take off there. While she was gorging herself, unable to tear herself away, Drouet appeared. He didn't just keep her in town, he took her to upscale restaurants, bought her modern dresses, jewels, gave her a beautiful and comfortable apartment. At this moment, Carrie did not need to make an effort to get what she already needed. She could not deny herself the pleasure of being a gorgeous Drue's woman, in this way she could have something she hadn't had even a short time ago, but she still wasn't satisfied with that. Moreover, she had to become Drouet's affair. She needed to become a true citizen. She needed a rich handsome and liberal man she could rely on for her life. When the huge manager Hurstwood, a richer and gentler man, appeared, Carrie threw herself into his arms without a second thought. Moreover, after learning that Hurstwood had married, she went with him to New York anyway. Why did Carrie make this choice? On the one hand, she was under the weight of life's circumstances, on the other - the surging wave of consumerism had an extraordinary impact on the generally accepted ethical views. According to Pei Qiong & Hang Yue (2022) there are many reasons of Carrie's ethical choices. Here are some aspects chosen for this article:



“At first, this book was rejected by many people and sparked all sorts of discussions. Harper Brothers, the first publisher to read this book, refused to accept this book, he said it is not “sufficiently delicate to depict without offense to the reader the continued illicit relations of the heroine” [1.58.]. H.L.Mencken, a prominent early critic, commented on this novel as “the best American novel I have ever read, with the lonesome but Himalayan exception of ‘Huckleberry Finn’. [2. 478]. American scholars have been studying this novel since the beginning of the 20th century. The role of Carrie in the article was even more controversial. Many people think that it is against morality and ethics, so she should not have a happy ending. In the first half of the 1920s, the criticism of Dreiser’s works mainly belonged to the traditional historical biographical criticism, which overemphasized the historical background of the novel; In the 1960s and 1970s, Dreiser’s novels were carefully read, but most of the studies were divorced from the background of that times; In the 1980s, various critical methods began to be applied to the study of Dreiser’s novels, such as feminist criticism, Freudian psychoanalysis, post structuralism and so on. In contrast, the research on Dreiser’s novels in China was relatively weak. As early as in the 1930s, Dreiser’s novels were first introduced to Chinese readers by Qu Qiubai. However, they received little concern and in-depth study until the 1970s. With the deepening of cultural exchanges, more and more attention were paid to Dreiser, especially his *Sister Carrie*. During the 1990s, researches on Dreiser and his novels mainly fell into three categories: thematic study, reviews and writing techniques. Later, with the spread of western literary criticism, scholars began to study the novel from various perspectives. For example, Jiang Daochao was the first person to study consumerism in novels. [3. 52]. In addition, many scholars chose to start from the perspective of naturalism, because they believed that this novel truly reproduced the American society at that time. In his article *The New Understanding of Sister Carrie’s Naturalism*, Hou Qinghua specially analyzed the naturalism in this novel represented in the form of American Dream. In addition, many scholars tried to analyze the novel from the thematic study. Later, with the development of society, many scholars found a new perspective of ecological ethics. Zhu Zhengwu was the representative of this theory. He believes “Because of the prosperity of materials and wealth as well as the high position of male character, one of the best way to accomplish the spiritual redemption and the peace is to review the ecology and ethics of female character in the process of urbanization”. [4. 56]. Generally speaking, the current research on *Sister Carrie* mainly focuses on the thematic study or criticism, but there are a small number of papers on *Sister Carrie* based on the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism.

In conclusion, Theodore Dreiser's "*Sister Carrie*" stands as a literary testament to the enduring influence of society on human aspirations and behaviors. The novel's rich depiction and influence of societal dynamics provides a compelling platform for critically analyzing the interplay between personal desires and societal constructs. As the narrative unfolds through the experiences of its characters, the novel offers a poignant critique of prevailing societal values during the late 19th century, underscoring the transformative power of external influences. "*Sister Carrie*" continues to resonate as a timeless work,



inviting readers to contemplate the delicate balance between individual agency and the pervasive impact of societal expectations.

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