

# Naturalist Elements and Social Critique in Theodore Dreiser's "Sister Carrie"

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J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and  
Philosophy

Zvonimir Obradović

**Naturalist Elements and Social Critique in Theodore Dreiser's  
*Sister Carrie***

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Associate Professor

Osijek, 2018

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## Abstract

The novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) reflects the period in which it was written, the era of emerging capitalism and consumerism. This era corresponded perfectly with American literary naturalism, which spanned the last ten years of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century. Naturalism essentially contains a philosophical thesis that includes notions of determinism and causality, which results in portraying human beings as animals whose life is ruled by external forces. The author of the novel, Theodore Dreiser, is also noted for being a social historian who documented important changes and developments of the late-nineteenth-century American society. *Sister Carrie* is a naturalist novel, portraying the life of a young woman who arrives in the industrially booming Chicago in search of a better future, and ultimately becomes a famous actress. Carrie achieves wealth and fame in the American society by adapting to its norms and conventions as she does everything that is required of her to succeed. Thus, Carrie's character is a true epitome of the naturalist philosophy since she thoroughly embodies the phrase "survival of the fittest." This paper discusses the influence of the naturalist philosophy on Dreiser's novel as well as Dreiser's critique of the American society and its artificialness. It also demonstrates how a society dominated by greed for wealth, which became its main value, lacks true emotion and rather resembles a theatrical performance.

**Keywords:** American naturalism, capitalism, consumerism, determinism, *Sister Carrie*, social critique, Theodore Dreiser.

## Introduction

It is often said that literature is just a mirror of life, and as such, one of its most prominent themes is definitely the critique of society. Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors observed the deterioration of the American society and its departure from the values it once cherished. One of those authors is definitely Theodore Dreiser, American novelist and journalist best known for his novel *Sister Carrie* (1900). Dreiser belonged to the well-known naturalist school, which was vastly influenced by teachings of Charles Darwin and one of his most prominent interpreters, Herbert Spencer. This paper analyses certain features of *Sister Carrie* in relation to naturalism in order to show Dreiser's critical view of turn-of-the-twentieth-century American society. It also explores Dreiser's usage of various symbols, like the theatre and department stores, as tools of social critique.

The first chapter of this paper deals with the poetics of naturalism and its philosophy, whose understanding is necessary in order to fully grasp the novel. Besides being a journalist and a novelist, Dreiser was also a social historian. Therefore, the second chapter of this paper deals with the socio-historical context of the period in which the novel was written, and it gives an insight into some important historical events that were accurately documented in the novel. The third chapter presents the author's view on the emerging consumerism that came to dominate the American culture in the end of the nineteenth century. The last chapter deals with the loss of the meaning of life as observed through the characters of the novel.



## 1. Naturalist Elements

It is of prime importance for a thorough understanding of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* to first define essential elements and components of naturalism and its historical background. According to Pizer, American naturalism encompasses the period of the 1890s and the turn of the twentieth century (5). What differentiates naturalism from the preceding literary movement, known as realism, is the fact that naturalism in its core has a philosophical thesis. According to Runtić, that philosophical thesis includes concepts of determinism and causality, according to which human beings are in fact animals, and their characters and fortunes are determined by two forces, defined as biological and environmental determinism ("Theodore Dreiser"). According to Pizer, literary naturalism derives mainly from the former force, or the biological model, and according to him, "the biological model owes much to Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution, which is based in turn on his theory of natural selection" (47). Due to Darwin's contribution to science, representatives of naturalism, who were vastly influenced by his teachings, started to promulgate the idea that the entire human existence can be explained in scientific terms. What is interesting about Darwin's concept of evolution is the fact that it at the same time contains the idea of devolution. According to Runtić, it is "thus at the same time pessimistic and optimistic – the improvement is granted by the evolution on the one hand and personal decline, animality on the other" ("Theodore Dreiser"). In other words, even though the individual's fate is to die, the whole species is to move ever onward and upward in fulfilling its goal of greater perfection (Pizer 48). It is also no surprise that naturalism is greatly influenced by the English philosopher and biologist Herbert Spencer, who is one of the most prolific interpreters of Darwin. According to Runtić, Spencer sees evolution as a process of changes from simple to complex until a state of equilibrium is achieved ("Theodore Dreiser"). Naturalist style is different from that of realism. The naturalists are interested in lower social classes, and the hero "is usually inarticulate, devoid of deep subjectivity and moral reflection, subject to poverty and suffering, the product of his biological makeup and immediate environment" (Lehan qtd. in Runtić, "Theodore Dreiser").

All these elements can be observed in Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie*, whose main protagonist comes from a small town and is of a lower social class. She is suffering due to her immediate environment, but ultimately manages to climb the social ladder by doing what is

required of her. Thus, Carrie embodies the naturalist philosophy by proving that one can only survive by being strong and by adapting to the newly-created conditions. Hence, the point of evolution is not just survival due to one's innate abilities but it also entails the ability to adapt to any situation no matter the obstacles.

One of the most prominent and well-represented naturalist elements in Dreiser's novel is the plot of decline, which is explicitly portrayed through the character of George Hurstwood and his downfall. According to Richard Lehan, Dreiser's novels "make use of the cycle of life, the rise and fall of human energies," and according to him, Hurstwood's decline is counterpointed by the story of Carrie's rise (64). In other words, while Carrie rises by morally falling, Hurstwood falls as he refuses to adapt to newly-created conditions.

George Hurstwood works as a manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's and leads a comfortable life. In the introduction it is noted that he is a very successful and well-known man in Chicago (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). He is married and a father of two, but his relationship with his family seems rather superficial as it revolves exclusively around money he earns. Due to his acquaintanceship with Drouet, Hurstwood meets Carrie and almost instantly becomes infatuated with her. Despite being married, Hurstwood wants to acquire Carrie for himself as she reminds him of his youth and past exhilarating times. Even though he is infatuated with Carrie, Hurstwood wants to uphold the image of a respectable employee and a husband with people around him, but due to certain circumstances and his carelessness, he becomes a man of action who completely ruins his past reputation. Hurstwood steals the money from the safe of Fitzgerald and Moy's and flees the country whilst he tricks Carrie into going with him. By stealing the money Hurstwood unequivocally seals his fate. From that moment onwards, the plot of decline becomes apparent as Hurstwood slowly starts to transform from an upper-class gentleman to a beggar who commits suicide. According to Runtić, Hurstwood's moral fall is "attributed to general human weakness, dominance of instincts over reason, chance and outside factors" ("American Naturalism Revisited" 438). Hurstwood's life perfectly reflects the naturalist philosophy as he fails to succeed due to his inability to adapt. After his unsuccessful business endeavour, Hurstwood refuses to inquire about jobs which he considers to be beneath him. Despite losing his reputation and social status, he still sees himself as a manager of a prominent Chicago saloon, and as such he believes that he deserves a job compatible to his expertise and experience. One of the phrases representing naturalism is Herbert Spencer's "Survival of the fittest," and by Hurstwood's

example it becomes apparent that those who are not able to adapt cannot survive. While discussing his inspiration for the character of Hurstwood, Dreiser mentioned unfortunate fates of his acquaintances, Clark and Hopkins. He mentions that while he was unemployed, he was scared of suffering a similar fate in a big city such as New York. After seeing once prosperous Clark wandering the streets of New York, Dreiser describes his fear in his book *A Book About Myself*:

In order to be rid of that sense of failure and degradation which had crept over me I took a drink myself. That anyone as capable as Clark could fall so low in so short a time was quite beyond me. The still strongly puritan and moralistic streak in me was shocked beyond measure, and for days I could do little but contrast the figure of the man I had seen about the Republic office with that I had met in that street of degraded gin-mills and tumbledown tenements. (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File)

## 2. The Socio-Historical Context

According to Runtić, American Civil War had a tremendous impact on the social changes of the time, and industrialization in the United States took a much higher scale than it did in Europe (“Theodore Dreiser”). Due to the industrialization, the majority of Americans moved from farms to the cities, leaving the agricultural way of life behind. The population almost tripled by the end of the nineteenth century due to vast immigration, which reached an unprecedented high, while Chicago grew from a town of around twenty thousand to two million by the beginning of the twentieth century (Runtić, “Theodore Dreiser”). Immigrants arriving in America were mostly of European descent, and they wanted to pursue the American Dream. Describing Chicago of the late nineteenth century in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser observes:

In 1889 Chicago had the peculiar qualifications of growth which made such adventuresome pilgrimages even on the part of young girls plausible. Its many and growing commercial opportunities gave it widespread fame, which made of it a giant magnet, drawing to itself, from all quarters, the hopeful and the hopeless—those who had their fortune yet to make and those whose fortunes and affairs had reached a disastrous climax elsewhere. It was a city of over 500,000, with the ambition, the daring, the activity of a metropolis of a million. (*Sister Carrie*, Print 16)

As a typical naturalist novelist, Dreiser was also a social historian, which is exemplified in *Sister Carrie*. Throughout the novel, he mentions several ongoing changes that were happening in the American society in the late nineteenth century. By incorporating some relevant economic issues of his time into the novel, Dreiser gives us his own perspective of these problems. Besides the previously mentioned vivid description of Chicago of the late nineteenth century, he refers to the founding of department stores in the United States and the fact that first three department stores in the United States were established in 1884 in Chicago (*Sister Carrie*, Print 21). Throughout the novel, department stores become an important symbol representing both attractions and hazards of Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century. Dreiser also depicts horrid working conditions in the manufacturing companies, and notes: “Under better material conditions, this kind of work would not have been so bad, but the new socialism which involves pleasant working conditions for employees had not then taken hold upon manufacturing companies” (*Sister Carrie*, Print 35). Manufacturing workers

had to work unreasonable hours for small wages, and they had horrible working conditions: ““Not the slightest provision had been made for the comfort of the employees, the idea being that something was gained by giving them as little and making the work as hard and unremunerative as possible” (*Sister Carrie*, Print 35).

It is also crucial to note the reasons why *Sister Carrie* was so revolutionary in its time. According to Lynn, Dreiser’s critics were appalled by the fact that he did not share the traditional moral ideas of America, as well as traditional ideas of female representation in literature, and mentions Stuart Sherman, who blasted Dreiser for his unconventional portrayal of a world that is devoid of traditional ideas, such as “marriage, chivalry, and citizenship” (513). *Sister Carrie* was written at the turn of the century, and the theme of a sinful woman who is not punished, but is instead rewarded for her misdemeanours was quite controversial at the time. In addition to the controversy connected to its protagonist’s sexuality, Dreiser’s work was also heavily criticized on other grounds. For instance, the United States were believed to be a country dominated by a “middle class.” However, Dreiser’s novel showed the exact opposite from what was believed as it reflected enormous differences between the rich and the poor.

### 3. Representation of Consumerism

According to the Oxford dictionary, consumerism is defined as “the preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods.” It is thus directly connected with gaining profit that could be spent on desired consumer goods. Capitalism and consumerism started to flourish at the turn of the century, and their development was, among other things, documented by Theodore Dreiser in his novel, *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser provided a strong critique of the American society through his representation of consumerism.

According to Nia, “The abundant objects create for the individual an always-felt sense of lack, reification of emotions, identity problems, and break of ties with other individuals” (53). Her claim is corroborated by various segments found in the novel, for example, the strong impression the store windows leave on its observer. According to Runtić, these store windows drag its observer in the consumer world like quicksand; yet, they represent a barrier between the anonymous and the public world (“American Naturalism Revisited” 444). The store windows constantly remind Carrie of material goods that she needs to obtain in order to uphold the image of herself that she wants to represent to the world. According to Gelfant, “these glass windows revolutionized the relationship between insider and outsider by reflecting an image of the outsider upon goods arrayed within” (180). Thus, glass stores became a medium which started to enhance the observer’s desire to buy as they reflect material goods that a person lacks. When Carrie first arrives in Chicago, she starts comparing her attire to that of the more elegant and well-off women surrounding her. Thus, as Gelfant suggests, Carrie starts to crave the “dainty” and “delicate” goods displayed in department store showcases (182). According to Lynn, “in such a world, the only reality is movement, the only good is upward movement, the only objects worth having are those one can not afford” (517). Through Carrie’s example, it can be observed that desire for new and better goods is insatiable and never-ending. Carrie’s insatiable desire for the new and unpossessed serves as an allusion to the whole American society, which believes to have found the true meaning of life in attaining symbols of wealth. Lynn concludes about the characters of the novel:

There is nothing wholehearted about these people except their worship of money and luxury: they are as dehumanized as the artificial city, and their hearts are as cold as the glittering lights that hypnotize them, but like Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, they believe that they have found the symbols commensurate with their capacity for wonder, and they

stake everything on attaining them. (518)

It can be detected that money is the only valuable thing for the characters of the novel and, according to Runtić, quite often “it is only money and fame that represent one’s self” (“American Naturalism Revisited” 449). From the beginning of the novel, the importance of money in everyday life can be observed: “Ah, what was it not to have money! What a thing it was to be able to come in here and dine!” (*Sister Carrie*, Print 59). Money is the only thing that enables a pleasant and convenient life, and it can be concluded from the novel that money equals happiness. Only by having money can one fulfil one’s life purpose that is directly linked to living a luxurious and comfortable life with no worries. Gelfant argues that after Hurstwood loses all his money, reputation, and opulent attire, he also loses the essence of his self (183). Furthermore, Carrie also serves as a proof of this idea as she feels a certain amount of relief and comfort only when she has money:

Curiously, she could not hold the money in her hand without feeling some relief. Even after all her depressing conclusions, she could sweep away all thought about the matter and then the twenty dollars seemed a wonderful and delightful thing. Ah, money, money, money! What a thing it was to have. How plenty of it would clear away all these troubles. (*Sister Carrie*, Print 66)

According to Runtić, the domination of the consumer language over sentimentality is clearly detectable in the novel (“American Naturalism Revisited” 437). All relationships in the novel are to some extent ruled by greed for money and wealth. One of the first relationships encountered in the novel is a familial one, between Carrie and her sister Minnie. Carrie relocates to Chicago to pursue a better life and initially settles at her sister’s place. After she finds a job, she realizes that she cannot even spend her meagre wage on herself as her sister and her husband expect of her to pay the rent: “Minnie was thinking of the resource which Carrie’s board would add. It would pay the rent and would make the subject of expenditure a little less difficult to talk about with her husband” (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). Thus, it becomes apparent that her sister’s only incentive for offering her to live with them is financial gain. Even though they are sisters, Carrie and Minnie noticeably do not have any kind of relationship. After Carrie moves out of their place, she never again contacts Minnie nor does Minnie try to contact Carrie. Carrie and Minnie’s relationship serves as a sort of an introduction to all the other relationships as it foreshadows the nature of future relationships

in the novel.

In the similar vein, the relationship between Hurstwood and his wife is visibly cold and devoid of emotion; the only topics they share are those revolving around the amount of money Hurstwood needs to provide for expenses of his wife and their children. After Hurstwood's wife realizes that he purposely avoids taking her to social events because he is in love with another woman, she is not by any means hurt by the revelation as she does not love him. Quite the opposite, she just sees that situation as an easy way to take all of his money and his possessions: "I want you to send the money I asked for at once. I need to carry out my plans. You can stay away if you want to. It doesn't matter in the least. But I must have some money. So don't delay, but send it by the boy" (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). Similarly, soon after Hurstwood's business fails and he becomes unemployed, Carrie falls into a state of severe distress, but solely because she is afraid of not having enough money: "She thought, at first, with the faintest alarm, of being left without money – not of losing him, though he might be going away permanently" (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). The fear of not having money follows Carrie throughout the whole novel and is quite often represented through her fear of having to wear poor clothes. Thus, her main incentive for not leaving Drouet is that "Her clothes would get poor" (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File) if she does. After Carrie gets her first job in New York, she starts to realize that little money is also no good as it cannot bring her the luxuries that she yearns for: "The metropolis is a cold place socially, and Carrie soon found that a little money brought her nothing" (Dreiser 427). As she starts to earn more money, she slowly becomes infuriated with Hurstwood, who is still unemployed, and as a result she has to support him. This is yet another instance where Carrie shows her life stance. She is bothered by the fact that she has to spend her money on supporting Hurstwood rather than on herself and her own pleasures: "Now that she had a visible means of support, this irritated her. He seemed to be depending upon her little twelve dollars" (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). Through these relationships, Dreiser implies that there is ultimately no love in such a consumerist society which is dominated by money.

Dreiser's stance on consumerism can also be detected at the end of the novel, when Carrie fulfils her goal of becoming rich and famous. Runtić claims that Carrie's "consumer desire is simultaneously encoded as a powerful drive and an instinct for protection" ("American Naturalism Revisited" 450). By getting a job at the theatre in New York, Carrie once again starts climbing the social ladder and her instincts push her to go as far as she can.



As a result, that drive and instinct bring her professional acclaim, money, and admiration of many. However, at the end of the novel, all those worldly symbols that she thought would bring her happiness, lead to a realization that such a life is empty and unfulfilling. Lynn observes that “as Carrie sits in her opulent suite in the Waldorf at the end of the novel, in possession of all the things her heart has ever desired, she is immensely bored” (517). In contrast, Dreiser further explains how Carrie’s life stance does not change, even after she gets all the possible material goods that she desired, as desire in consumerism never ceases to exist:

It does not take money long to make plain its impotence, providing the desires are in the realm of affection. With her one hundred and fifty in hand, Carrie could think of nothing particularly to do. In itself, as a tangible, apparent thing which she could touch and look upon, it was a diverting thing for a few days, but this soon passed. Her hotel bill did not require its use. Her clothes had for some time been wholly satisfactory. Another day 816 or two and she would receive another hundred and fifty. It began to appear as if this were not so startlingly necessary to maintain her present state. If she wanted to do anything better or move higher she must have more— a great deal more. (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File)

Dreiser was also criticized by those who agreed with his analysis of the American society of the late nineteenth century. Although a critique of and an insight into the capitalist society can be noticed in his novel, it is noted by some of his critics that his works were not meant to initiate a change. Thus, Lynn claims that Dreiser had absolutely no interest in political or social reform, and his stance on the poor varied between contempt and compassion (514). Having spent a long period of his youth destitute, he was afraid to go back to such a situation. As a result, he had no interest in remodelling society because “to him fighting and suffering were fundamental to existence, to eliminate them was impossible” (Lynn 514).

#### 4. Simulation – The Loss of the Real

According to Runtić, in *Sister Carrie*, “Dreiser detected the beginnings of what today’s cultural critics call ‘the loss of real’ and anticipated the consumer appetite as a new domineering force on the horizon of social determinants” (“American Naturalism Revisited” 435). “The loss of the real” can perhaps be best seen through the symbol of the theatre, which is well-represented in the novel. Virtually, upon Carrie’s arrival in Chicago, her excitement for the city and everything it contains becomes apparent. Drouet emphasizes theatres as something exquisite, which he recommends Carrie to visit: “So much to see – theatres, crowds, fine houses – oh, you’ll like that” (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). As she moves in with her sister, Carrie insists on going to the theatre, but soon learns that her demands will not be satisfied as going to the theatre represents a luxury that she cannot afford. Shortly after her arrival in Chicago, Carrie accidentally runs into Drouet, who takes her to the theatre. Carrie is flabbergasted by the theatre and everything it represents:

That spectacle pleased Carrie immensely. The colour and grace of it caught her eye. She had vain imagining about place and power, about far-off lands and magnificent people. When it was over, the clatter of coaches and the throng of fine ladies made her stare.” (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File)

The theatre also represents a coping mechanism for the characters of the novel, an escape when they face real problems. Runtić argues that the depiction of the theatre in *Sister Carrie* to a great extent resembles twentieth-century culture’s themed environments, which offer an illusion of reality that is more beautiful, interesting, and entertaining than everyday life (“American Naturalism Revisited” 445). As such, theatres are frequented by the characters of the novel to escape the ugly realities of their daily lives, and that encourages them to dream about better days which are yet to come. An example can be found in Julia Hurstwood, who takes comfort in trivial amusements, such as the theatre, after quarrelling with her husband: “She drove out more, dressed better, and attended theatres freely to make up for it” (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File).

Lynn claims that although it would be an exaggeration to say that *Sister Carrie* is a novel about the theatre, it is a story that revolves around a young girl who gets a part in an amateur production of Augstine Daly’s melodrama *Under the Gaslight*, rises to the head of the chorus line in a New York revue, and ends as a famous actress (515). After Carrie’s first

performance in an amateur production, her value in the eyes of her suitors exponentially increases. Hurstwood is completely smitten by the idea of her after the performance, and Drouet once again mentions that he wants to marry her, this time with more fervour. The theatre becomes such a vital part of Carrie's life that it ultimately becomes a strenuous task to separate acting and real emotion. Furthermore, it becomes apparent in the novel that the "real" world and the theatre have a lot in common, as all of its participants are acting. Thus, Carrie acts both in her daily life as she does in the theatre: "She lived as much in these things as in the realities which made up her daily life" (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). As mentioned by Runtić, theatrical performance is a simulation since an actor represents feelings he/she does not really feel ("American Naturalism Revisited" 445). Thus, it could be concluded that the entire existence of characters in *Sister Carrie* is in fact a performance or a simulation of the real life, since there is no real emotion in them. Carrie longed to feel real emotion; she wanted to experience emotion that the characters she embodied felt: "Some scenes made her long to be a part of them – to give expression to the feelings which she, in the place of the character represented, would feel" (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). Yet, she is unable to fulfil this need in real life.

The novel also documents the emergence of new ways of advertising and publishing. Newspapers play a crucial role for the characters as they can read in the newspapers about the lives of the rich and the famous and see advertisements of things that they should buy. Thus, media directly affects lives of everyday working class people as well, since it gives them a representation of success that they should try to achieve. According to Gelfant, Hurstwood, the man who was once envied, becomes reduced to nothing because he has no money, no clothes, no one, and no exchange value (183). Reduced to a worthless being in a capitalist society dominated by money and greed, Hurstwood finds solace in newspapers and their stories about the rich and their flamboyant lives. Newspapers certainly played a central role in Hurstwood's life even before his ultimate decline in New York. For example, when he escapes Chicago, newspapers destroy his reputation by spreading the word about his misdemeanour. Throughout the novel, Dreiser gives a critique of the newspapers by noting that they often give us just one side of the whole situation. As a result of this reporting, Hurstwood's deed remains incomprehensible for the readers: "All the newspapers noted but one thing, his taking the money. How and wherefore were but indifferently dealt with. All the complications which led up to it were unknown. He was accused without being understood"

(*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). After Hurstwood's business fails, he barely tries to find a new job as he believes that as an ex-manager of a prominent Chicago bar, he deserves to find a much better occupation than that of a bartender. He spends the majority of his time in his apartment where he reminisces about the life he used to lead. Every day, he reads the newspapers about the extravagant lives of various successful celebrities who live their lives to the fullest: "This was for the time only. He was getting in the frame of mind where he wanted principally to be alone and to be allowed to think. The disease of brooding was beginning to claim him as a victim. Only the newspapers and his own thoughts were worthwhile" (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). Runtić suggests that the newspapers emphasize the remoteness from the world of celebrities because photographs and articles are the only way we can approach them ("American Naturalism Revisited" 448). Hurstwood serves as a perfect example of this while he sits unemployed in his apartment and reads about the lives of other people that he does not know, learning about their successes and wealth that he will never achieve.

According to Runtić, Dreiser sees the media as the main creators of representation, which is best seen through Carrie's theatrical career ("American Naturalism Revisited" 448). Carrie measures her success by what the newspapers say of her, and she feels worthy only if the papers think the same. She feels ecstatic for all the praise she is given after her first amateur performance in Chicago. However, her happiness is soon gone after she learns that nothing was written about her performance in the papers: "On the morrow, however, there was nothing in the papers concerning the event, and, in view of the flow of common, everyday things about, it now lost a shade of the glow of the previous evening" (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). Even though she is initially satisfied with her first performance, she is unsatisfied with the realization of how unimportant she still is. Later on, when she tries to get a job as an actress at the theatre, she is informed by its manager that it would be much easier to get a part in a play if she had a written proof that she is experienced, either an article from the newspapers or the program of the play. Hence, it is immensely important for Carrie what the newspapers say about her as her livelihood depends on it. After being praised by the critics and having her name in the newspaper, her value exponentially increases: "Miss Madenda presents one of the most delightful bits of character work ever seen on the Casino stage" (Dreiser). As she becomes more famous, she is offered to live in a luxurious hotel, Wellington, which offers her to live in their suite practically for free, exploiting her fame to

advertise itself: “Anything will do for the summer – a mere figure – anything that you think you could afford to pay” (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). Since her name starts to mean something in the world of consumerism, it is the hotels’ honour and privilege to offer Carrie a place to reside. The staff of the hotel even places her photograph in the hotel’s lobby so that everyone who enters would know that she is one of its residents.

Clothes also serve as an essential symbol through which “the loss of real” is represented in the novel. Gelfant argues that clothing constitutes a universal language understood by everyone, and when Carrie desires beautiful clothes, she yearns for something more as she associates clothes with money and material goods (180). Carrie’s central interest in the novel is finding more amusement and buying better and more expensive clothes. Runtić argues that all important turning points in her life are to some extent related to her need and desire for new clothes (“American Naturalism Revisited” 443). Dreiser goes even further in elaborating Carrie’s obsession with fine clothes by asserting that inanimate objects, like lace collars and shoes, speak to her, call her to buy them: “Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves” (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). Carrie’s first impressions are based almost exclusively on the physical appearance of the person, which results in attire being one of the most important aspects that influences that impression. The relationship between clothes and impression they leave can be perhaps best seen through Carrie’s eyes: “Suddenly a pair of eyes met Carrie’s in recognition. They were looking out from a group of poorly dressed girls. Their clothes were faded and loose-hanging, their jackets old, their general make-up shabby” (Dreiser, Digital File). As Carrie recognizes a girl from the factory, she feels embarrassed, and her opinion of the girl is entirely dominated by the girl’s poor attire. As Gelfant argues, clothes make the woman in Carrie’s eyes, and consequently, she refuses to associate with those who visibly do not share that belief (182).

Thus, clothes are a fundamental and indispensable symbol for the characters in the novel. In the first introduction of Drouet, Dreiser indicates the importance that attire plays in shaping his personality: “Good clothes, of course, were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing” (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). Dreiser further accentuates the importance of clothes by signifying its segregating function: “There is an indescribably faint line in the matter of man’s apparel which somehow divides for her those who are worth glancing at and those who are not” (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File). In further description of

Drouet, Dreiser highlights his love for fine clothes, good food and the company of prosperous men. The relationship between those can be established, as Drouet needs fine clothes in order to be able to socialize with successful and wealthy men. Carrie's infatuation with Drouet is almost exclusively connected with the clothes he wears, places where he eats, and the people with whom he socializes. Runtić claims that, even though Drouet speaks a jargon similar to that of young men working at the factory, Carrie does not refuse him because of his fine clothes and places he frequents ("American Naturalism Revisited" 443). Carrie never feels love or any other true emotion for Drouet, and consequentially, as soon as another, better dressed, wealthier man arrives, she simply redirects her attention. Carrie is almost instantly drawn to Hurstwood due to his fine clothes and refined manners. She is able to recognize by his clothes that he is wealthier and is of a better social status than Drouet, and as a result she develops an instant liking for him. Dreiser asserts that while Carrie ponders whether to leave Drouet and go with Hurstwood, who is persuading her, she is still the victim of his sophisticated manners and fine clothes. Hurstwood is aware of the power he has over Carrie due to his social status and fine clothes: "When he looked at his fine clothes, he saw them with her eyes – and her eyes were young" (*Sister Carrie*, Digital File).

Carrie is, as Gelfant claims, "drawn to what she sees as symbolically charged means to happiness: clothes, comfort and fame" (184). By buying fine clothes, she is simply adapting to the rules of society, manifesting Abraham Maslow's belief that desire is a "genetic . . . biologically determined component of a self driven to seek satisfaction" (qtd. in Gelfant 179). Thus, Dreiser expresses sympathy for Carrie as she is also a victim of her biological predisposition. All the characters presented in the novel are in fact victims of forces which they cannot change or influence.

## Conclusion

Theodore Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, shows that the American society of the late nineteenth century was predominantly oriented towards material goods, and it reflects the fact that the ultimate goal in such a society is acquiring wealth and fame. In his novel, Dreiser documents the socio-historical context of the late nineteenth century and shows the reader what a perilous period that was for an everyday man. The protagonist of the novel, Carrie, portrays a revolutionary image of a young woman who is rising in the social ranks of the American society by morally falling. Although there is no indication that Dreiser condemns Carrie's behaviour, it becomes evident that he quite critically analyses the American society. By comparing their daily lives to the theatre and the artificial reality, Dreiser asserts that such a society, obsessed with obtaining material wealth, loses track of life's true meaning. He compares their everyday endeavours with performances, and it can be concluded that their acts are merely theatrical as there is no true emotion in any of them. Thus, Dreiser's characters end up in a tragic way, miserable, empty and consumed by the society, the only possible outcome in such a world. His protagonist, Carrie, ends up rich and famous, but eventually faces meaninglessness of her existence. Although the novel was written in 1900, it is still quite relevant for our present-day situation, and it ultimately begs a question: Has anything really changed in our perception of success?

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