

# The femme fatale motif in Theodore Dreiser's "Sister Carrie"

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Engleski jezik i književnost – Mađarski jezik i književnost

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**The Motif of Femme Fatale in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister  
Carrie***

Završni rad

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**Abstract**

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) is a story of a climbing femme fatale. It is a depiction of how the main character struggles to finally gain something. While she finds a way of doing it, the question that arises is the morality of her choice. The novel was written in the nineteenth century when women started demanding the change and pursuing their own dreams rather than just being at home raising children. *Sister Carrie* is a perfect example of a young woman starting her life and actually taking control over her own life as a femme fatale. Femme fatale is a woman who uses her charms and looks to get what she wants. She is fatal in a way that she uses her men for her own goals until something better comes along. In an era of harsh consumerism, Carrie decides that her only choice is to use her own image to sell herself in order to become part of the elite because poverty is something she is trying to avoid at any cost. Aware that in life not everything is fair, she hurts people, mostly her men, along her way to success as a real femme fatale. She abandons them while she goes further on her way to the top. In light of naturalist theory, the novel does not hide the true nature of human beings. On the contrary, it shows, and flaunts it. All of the main characters are shown with compassion. The author does not judge any of the characters because he realizes that all human beings make mistakes.

**Keywords:** Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, nineteenth century, capitalism, femme fatale, naturalism

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## Introduction

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is a story of a climbing femme fatale. It is a depiction of how the main character struggles to finally gain something. While she finds a way of doing it, the question that arises is the morality of her choice. This paper will discuss the position of women in the nineteenth century during the capitalist era and how it affected them in the long run, focusing on Caroline Meeber - the main protagonist of Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser based his first novel on real life story of his sister who was abandoned by her lover. In the novel, the author explores the real nature of human beings, the immoral behavior which often arises and tends to be hidden from the eyes of the crowd. Dreiser himself was a realist, so he believed in truthful representation without idealizing anything. At the time he wrote the novel, the motif of femme fatale was something that a lot of women could identify with if they wanted to. Young girls especially started expressing characteristics associated with the term. Dreiser's novel was not widely accepted in the beginning, mainly because it was not advertised enough by his publisher. Many believe that it was actually too objectionable. It was not even popular when it first got published and received some very bad reviews. Nevertheless, Dreiser wrote about something he witnessed every day. Later on, people started recognizing the novel's value and the timelessness of its subject. As Pizer confirms,

Strangely enough, time has not altered the sequential pattern of desire described in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Nor has a drastic change of setting disrupted its design. Indeed, the ways of consuming women in naturalistic fiction appear to be static, impervious to the historical changes affected by a seemingly radical change of setting, of time and place. (Pizer 192)

## 1. The Birth of the Femme Fatale in Caroline Meeber

A femme fatale is an extremely attractive and mysterious woman. The term “femme fatale” means “fatal woman” in French, which clearly points to dangers associated with these types of women. Even though in her true nature Carrie is not a deceiver in any way, she sort of deludes the men around her in doing whatever she wants them to do for her because she sees them as her golden opportunity for a better life. She comes to Chicago at a very young age full of hope and expectations of a better life, but what she finds is nothing but real-life struggles and hardship. Her sister agrees to help her by allowing her to stay at her and her husband's home, but that does not mean she does not have to help with the expenses around the house. One of the first things her sister's husband tells her is to get a job: “You’d better look in those big manufacturing houses along Franklin Street and just the other side of the river, he concluded. Lots of girls work there. You could get home easy, too. It isn’t very far” (Dreiser 10).

Carrie starts being aware of the fact that she will never afford anything more than just the pure necessities if she stays with her sister. When she loses her job, she is not willing to leave Chicago because she has already seen the world. She cannot possibly return to the provincial surroundings where she grew up. That is not an option for her. Drouet comes into the game at the perfect moment, actually. She is not very interested in him, but he is very charming, helpful and he seems like he really cares. She realizes that she can profit from him, and starts thinking in materialistic terms: “As for Carrie, her understanding of the moral significance of money was the popular understanding, nothing more. The old definition: ‘Money: something everybody else has and I must get,’ would have expressed her understanding of it thoroughly. Some of it she now held in her hand – two soft, green ten-dollar bills – and she felt that she was immensely better off for the having of them“ (Dreiser 51). She comes to a conclusion that she would rather start a relationship with him than go home. Drouet treats her very well and takes care of her even better than her own family. He gives her everything she wants and more. She is a modest girl, but after seeing what else she can have, she strives for more. Drouet is very graceful, and considering the fact that he is a traveling salesman, he knows very well how to convince people to buy things. That also applies to relationships, at least in his case, because he metaphorically buys Carrie and he is the one who convinces her to stay in Chicago: “Like all women; she was there to object and be convinced, it was for him to brush the doubts away and clear the path if he could“ (Dreiser 56).

Carrie's distressed situation incites genuine compassion, but when Drouet offers her money, it is obvious that he is not being simply chivalric. Giving her the money gives him the

opportunity to feel closer to her; it is a chance of winning her for himself. He is flirting with her. Also, he can help her, and she can help him. In his eyes, it is a perfect win-win situation. Carrie thinks the same way. Even though she has second thoughts and is reluctant whether to accept that kind of “silent“ agreement or not, she goes for it after all. In that way, Drouet figuratively buys her. This is pure psychology; he helps her when she probably needs that the most and hence, he becomes her knight in shiny armour.

The moment when Carrie becomes fully aware of her beauty and her impact on Drouet is the moment when she starts forming herself as a femme fatale

With his money she purchased the little necessities of toilet, until at last she looked quite another maiden. The mirror convinced her of a few things which she had long believed. She was pretty, yes, indeed! How nice her hat set, and weren't her eyes pretty. She caught her little red lip with her teeth and felt her first thrill of power. Drouet was so good. (Dreiser 63).

She becomes apprehensive of her looks and she starts using it more often to get what she wants. One of the ways of building her new role is observing her new lover's preferences in women. She knows Drouet is a womanizer and by it all, extremely charming, so she starts calculating and doing anything that would help her keep him. Carrie learns how to play her role well. She knows what Drouet likes, so she becomes everything he wants her to be because she knows she can gain more from it herself.

When Drouet introduces her to Hurstwood, their relationship starts to fade. Hurstwood is a better catch; he has more money, his style and appearance are real, he does not pretend to belong somewhere he does not. By living in that surroundings, it is only natural that she manages to distinguish more wealthy people from those less fortunate. She also realizes that Drouet is only showing off; he is not the real deal. Unlike him, Hurstwood seems to be something original. He wears simple clothes, he does not feel the need to stand out like Drouet. She feels remorse, but that feeling of guilt and the feeling she is betraying Drouet, the man who helped her so much, is clouded by her ambitions. Besides, Drouet is never going to marry her and she needs that in order to feel better about herself.

## 2. Consumerism

Consumerism is best seen in Julia and Jessica Hurstwood's situation. They are very well off, and Carrie has almost nothing. While Carrie longs to belong to their world, they are longing to belong to an even wealthier world. That brings us to a conclusion that in today's society having enough money simply is not possible because, apparently, you can always have more. There is always something more you can own and buy. While striving for more can be a good thing, sometimes it can be exaggerated. Moreover, the marriage between Hurstwood and Julia is also something that is not filled with love, but is rather a marriage out of need. She is enjoying the cozy life he can offer her, and in exchange he has a lovely wife to show off, which is an obvious example of the transaction of sex for money. Everything needs to look fabulous on the outside, and Julia is performing her job wonderfully.

Carrie, on the other hand, is seen as an item of purchase to the men, but is also a consumer herself: "It is true that Carrie gives her heart to no one but, then, no one ever really wanted it. To Drouet, she was a part of the wardrobe of a conscious affluence, to Hurstwood, a surrogate to negate middle-age disillusionment. She proves her spiritual worth by not confusing gratitude with love" (McAleer 84). Moreover, hedonistic pleasures keep Carrie in Chicago; she wants all of those dresses and all of the shiny things. She is not the only one, everybody strives for fancy things and all of those things are just waiting to be possessed. Carrie indeed becomes a typical female consumer. Nevertheless, she does try to control herself in the very beginning when she refuses Drouet's money, but then later on, she succumbs to money's charms and all it can give her. Her consumer drive takes her so far that in the end, when she becomes a famous actress, her billboard posters depict her as a consumer product in a department store window.

Carrie's admiration and appetite for nice things make her frustrated. Throughout the novel, money and power control each of Carrie's relationships. **First in her bonds with her sister, where she and her husband are actually looking forward to profiting off of Carrie because they thought Carrie would be able to bring more money into their household. Second, in her relationships with Drouet and Hurstwood, because she is attracted to their money and reputation so she stays in a relationship with them.** In this way, everybody is a customer, giving something for something else like Carrie is giving her attention for money. This brings us back to the beginning where Carrie accepts Drouet's money. What happened then was a simple exchange of values. Once she feels the money in her hands, she feels bound to him. By giving Carrie the money, Drouet buys himself the right to spend more time with her. It seems that Carrie too learns



something from Drouet, and that is that image is everything; hence, she does not stay with Hurstwood later on since he is not wealthy enough anymore nor is his social status any better.

### 3. Women in the Nineteenth Century

Men perceived women as possessions back then.

The beliefs gave women a central, if outwardly passive, role in the family. Women's God-given role, it stated, was as wife and mother, keeper of the household, guardian of the moral purity of all who lived therein. The home was to be a haven of comfort and quiet, sheltered from the harsh realities of the working world. Housework took on a scientific quality, efficiency being the watchword. Children were to be cherished and nurtured. Morality was protected through the promulgation of Protestant beliefs and social protest against alcohol, poverty and the decay of urban living. (Hartman).

Drouet owns Carrie at the beginning. His intensive need to possess her actually leads to him losing her. He introduces his "wife" to Hurstwood because he wants to show her off as she was young and beautiful.

Women were not allowed to behave freely before, and it is like that with Carrie too. Even though she is intrigued by Drouet from the very start, and wants to obtain a relationship with him, she thinks it is improper to have an affair with a man so she controls herself. She is in an in-between pleasure and reserved, and cannot decide which way to follow. Nevertheless, when it comes to choosing whether to give in to this romance or whether to go home, her choice is unquestionable.

There are also double standards involved. Hurstwood and Drouet feel that they have the right to control their women: "Rather than see Carrie as she really is, Hurstwood sees her as he wishes she would be 'a wife who could thus be content'" (Eby). Hurstwood tries to control Julia, and Drouet tries to control Carrie. They are of the opinion that it is perfectly fine because they secured a nice life for their women. That is why they feel it is perfectly acceptable for Hurstwood to have an affair as long as nobody is ever going to find out about it, and Drouet thinks it is perfectly normal to flirt with other women even though he is in an intimate relationship with Carrie.

Hurstwood's enduring belief that he deserves the absolute control of decision-making for his family inevitably leads to his downfall. He chooses not to negotiate with Julia's lawyers concerning their divorce, so she sues him. By asking for the money like that, she also expresses her consumerist character. Nevertheless, she is not an average woman either. She plays the role desired by society most of her life, and she is pleased with it. She has everything she wants and her role profited her greatly. The moment her husband stops providing for her the way she wants

him to, she rebels and shows that she is not going to be just a nice and polite wifey. The same thing happens to Hurstwood later on with Carrie. He fails in his husband role, so she leaves him. Apparently, Carrie is confused by her role in society. The reason for that is the fact that women are not rebelling in any way before that. On the one hand, they want to be independent, and on the other hand, that is not something they are used to or witness very often. Women are stuck in between two behavior norms, but few of them start demanding some change.

Carrie is first introduced to us as a traditional innocent girl with no bad intentions whatsoever. When she enters the world of consumerism, she too wants to belong to that world, she wants to be able to buy all of the things she sees in the department stores' windows. Because of that she becomes a revolutionary and disobeys the norms inflicted upon her:

In exactly the same way that 'her heart rebelled' against the Hansons' attempts to stifle her personality, she chafes when her supposed husband, the bigamist Hurstwood, attempts to contain her desires. Although outwardly placid when they settle in New York, Carrie 'was coming to have a few opinions of her own'. Her reply to him was mild enough, but her thoughts were rebellious. (Eby)

Carrie wants to escape the social norms imposed on her. For her to escape, she willingly chooses to use her looks and beauty. She deliberately chooses to become a femme fatale in a pursuit to liberate herself from her old background and the cruel society surrounding her. Nevertheless, she ends up hurting men associated to her, especially Hurstwood who loses the most.

#### 4. The Independent Woman

“Carrie was an apt student of fortune's ways – of fortune's superficialities. Seeing a thing, she would immediately set to inquiring how she would look, properly related to it” (Dreiser 81). Carrie manipulates men through their desire for her. She uses her sex appeal and their weakness towards her to her advantage. She feels she needs to have them under control in order to succeed. What is interesting is that men think they are the ones in control, which might be true in the beginning of her relationship with Drouet, but later on as she grows in experience she manages to redirect power her way.

When Carrie finds a job as a chorus girl and starts earning money she also starts resenting Hurstwood for not having been able to find a job. She thinks he is not really looking for a job because when she decides to find a job, she finds one pretty quickly. She is the one who has to support him now and that is not something she is about to accept very easily. She becomes more and more independent, which actually empowers her, and Hurstwood stoops so low, which was embarrassing for a man at that time: “He seemed to get nothing to do , and yet he made bold to inquire how she was getting along. The regularity with which he did this smacked of some one who was waiting to live upon her labor. Now that she had visible means of support, this irritated her. He seemed to be depending upon her little twelve dollars” (Dreiser 305). Nevertheless, Carrie evolves into an independent individual. The best example for that is when she starts to support Hurstwood. It is not the other way around anymore. He, as a man, starts depending on her.

## 5. Role-Playing

Carrie's theater fascination can be compared with the real life where everybody wears a mask, different and sometimes extravagant clothes, and everybody plays a certain role: "On stage where all can see, fashion fulfills its promise to confer identity, though the self it creates is factitious and unstable, subject to fashion's notorious vagaries" (Pizer 8).

She gets interested in theater thanks to Mrs. Hale and her gossiping about everything and everyone. Yet, as soon as Carrie goes to Chicago, she enters a new world of false pretenses and greed for money and fame. Slowly but surely, she too sees what everybody else has already seen in all the fuss around it:

In Chicago, she compares her shabby, shop-girl clothes to the elegant fashion of lady shoppers who "elbowed" their way past her to buy the dainty, delicate, dazzling goods displayed in department store showcases. Invidious comparison lights a "flame of envy" in Carrie's heart, and envy arouses mediated desires. Carrie begins to want what she sees other women have – their clothes, and something more incorporated in contemporary definitions of consumerism: the self that is delineated by acquisition". (Pizer 182)

She even forgets where she came from. The narrator comments on the protagonist's actions throughout the story. It is described how women naturally like male adoration, performance, clothing and that they are far from being honest. They are described as being natural actresses, not only on stage, which might even be true.

Carrie might be seen as a very good actress in her relationship with Hurstwood. She "loves" him while he has money, but when he gets stranded, her care for him disappears as well. She leaves Hurstwood because he stops being the breadwinner she wants him to be. She is going somewhere, she is ambitious and she has bright dreams of future: "She was not going to be dragged into poverty and something worse to suit him. She could act. She could get something and then work up" (Dreiser 294). We can easily state that she uses him and she simply does not need him anymore. He cannot provide for her and that is the end of their romance. If we look at it as a trade of sex for money, Hurstwood has nothing more to offer to her; therefore, she does absolutely nothing bad. She concludes that she will be better off without him since she can earn enough money to support herself independently. Thus, she simply stops "doing business" with him and it is a fair game.

Furthermore, Carrie's fascination with theater can be seen as a form of a metaphor. As long as she is bound to play a role, she might as well do it in the theater and earn some money for it. In the theater she feels at home and relaxed. It is the only way in which she could actually be genuine, but in a way that everybody realizes she is acting, so she is not really hiding anything. The irony of it all lies in the closeness of the play she stars in. She plays a role of a young girl who goes from rags to riches, similarly as she did, but she had the financial help of her men. When we look at this coincidence, we can easily conclude that reality suddenly does not differ that much from role-playing.

## 6. Masculinity Problems

Even today, our world is mostly male-dominated. That changes, some would say, rapidly. Women are becoming more independent each day. Carrie is one of the modern women of her age. She is not ready to succumb to society's needs and wait silently while her husband does the business. Hurstwood is not doing so well, so she decides to take the matter on herself. She succeeds greatly because she steps out of her prescribed social norm and Hurstwood is afraid of that.

Hurstwood knows that Carrie will leave him if he ends up without money. He knows that she needs to feel comfortable and careless in order to stay with him. He is very well aware of that, and that is why she never finds out about the theft that led to their flight to Canada, and later to New York. Even though he is trying to keep his financial problems away from Carrie, she notices that he cannot not provide for her as much as he could in Chicago:

Of course, as his own self-respect vanished, it perished for him in Carrie. She could not understand what had gotten into the man. He had some money, he had a decent suit remaining, he was not bad looking when dressed up. She did not forget her own difficult struggle in Chicago, but she did not forget either that she had never ceased trying. He never tried. He did not even consult the ads in the paper any more. (Dreiser 282)

Moreover, when they move to New York, Hurstwood loses his power to control the situation. Even today many men would feel emasculated if a woman had to provide for them. Even though this whole situation might have actually helped Carrie to discover herself as an independent woman, it also damaged his ego, but probably boosted hers: "Hurstwood's diminished income compels her to review her prospects. She had responded to Drouet's overtures because her whole nature protested the grinding woes of poverty. She will not accept those woes now. As Hurstwood begins to fail he looks less and less handsome to her" (McAleer 77).

The truth is that, in New York City, Hurstwood is nobody, and he is having a very hard time accepting that fact, which inevitably leads to his fall.

## 7. Femme Fatale in Relation to the American Dream

In the late nineteenth century, America experienced great wealth, but the disproportion between poor and rich became even bigger. Even though that was the time of prosperity, most of the working class were still poor; not everybody could have been rich. On the other hand, those who noticed and grabbed their own opportunities at the right moment succeeded: “With a continent stretching westward beyond the imagination, and too few men and women to take advantage of it, the poor could command good wages and a better future and the newly arrived were valued if not always welcomed” (Jillson ch. 9).

When Carrie was first introduced to that world, she was dazzled by it just as most of the people were. A young girl who comes to the big city expecting a bright future but ends up wishing for all those things she cannot have. Her behavior appalled other people but the author had no intention of apologizing to anyone for having such an objectionable view on Carrie. He thought she deserved a chance for a better life and that is why he described her behavior as brave and courageous. She had a dream, and she went for it, no matter what. The pursuit of happiness was what it was all about, after all. If she was using her appearances to get to success, so be it: “Columbia City, what was there for her? She knew its dull, little round by heart. Here was the great, mysterious city which was still a magnet for her. What she had seen only suggested its possibilities. Now to turn back on it and live the little old life out there – she almost exclaimed against the thought” (Dreiser 53-4).

Many criticize the whole concept of the American dream. While in its core it is supposed to represent freedom, equality and opportunity for everyone, sometimes it just is not like that. The American Dream is the opportunity to become something for everybody who works hard enough. Unfortunately, the reality makes it impossible for most of the Americans to achieve that goal, therefore, people have to compete against each other: “Everyone had to expect New York to tell him he was a nobody; everyone was free to prove New York wrong” (McAlier 88). People should not feel sorry for themselves, because if they work hard enough to achieve their own goals, something is going to happen. Even today, there are so many people that come to New York and all across the United States looking for a better life for themselves, and many succeed, but then again, many fail. As Jillson argues:

Through most of the 19th century, the American Dream of land in the woods or independent craftsmanship remained open to each new generation and to a constantly increasing flow of immigrants. Yet, over the course of the 19th century



the balance of the Founders' dream eroded, the limits slipped away, and the American heart hardened". (ch. 9)

Carrie was there at the right time to go in for her own pursuit of happiness. Her ambition is something to be praised. The whole capitalist system pulls people apart. By that thought, Carrie may be looked upon from two different angles. She may be seen as a nice country girl who became a promiscuous femme fatale or a famous and successful actress. It depends how one looks at the whole picture, but the one thing is for sure and that is that "if she wishes to prosper she must be ruthless..." (McAleer 84). Her looks and charm helped a great deal on her way to success.

Following the principles of the American Dream, Drouet educates Carrie by comparing her to other women, making Carrie see everything as a competition, and as a way of keeping up with others in order to succeed, and stay with Drouet: "Drouet was not shrewd enough to see that this was not tactful. He could not see that it would be better to make her feel that she was competing with herself, not others better than herself. He would not have done it with an older, wiser woman, but in Carrie he saw only the novice" (Dreiser 82).

On the other hand, a simple nature of all human beings formed her as well. "Sister Carrie chronicles her discovery that human nature, to be spiritually sated, requires something more than the fruits of the American Dream. She never does find out what she is seeking, but at the novel's end she is redefining her goals and groping toward a fulfillment which is drawing her back toward Nature- As McAleer explains, "... Although she is impelled by a latent desire to participate in the flux of Nature, society misdirects her into the pursuit of the American Dream which she follows" (76). We can see at the end of the novel that she got everything she ever wanted, she succeeded, but she was not happy. She was miserable more than ever as she sat in her rocking chair.

## Conclusion

Until the nineteenth century women were supposed to be obedient mothers and wives to their families. That did not change a lot all of a sudden, but still, women started demanding changes, and they found their own ways of changing things for themselves for the better. Caroline Meeber was a young girl who decided that she wanted something more than a typical social role that awaited her. She started realizing her own American Dream relying on nobody but herself. The place where she found herself was harsh capitalist society which, even today, makes us continue buying and spending money we do not have on things we, very often, do not even need.

Today's situation can hence be compared to Carrie's position back then. Slowly but surely, people got used to and started acting by the rules economy dictated. That is why people found themselves working long hours at unpleasant jobs just so they could afford something more. It is fair to conclude that capitalistic cravings can never be satisfied. It is simply impossible to stop wanting more. The same thing happened to Carrie. Even when she had gotten everything her heart ever craved for, there was still something missing.

The femme fatale, on the other hand, represents the dominant symbol of this discussion. She is the woman who goes beyond old social norms by playing on the sexuality card and using it as a tool to get what she wants. Maybe not fully aware of it, Carrie was not only playing a part in a theater but in her real life as well. Her disguise in real life was used to seduce men, but not out of mean reasons but because she saw it as her opportunity to take control over her own life and make something of herself. One can easily judge Carrie as being immoral, but the truth is that each one of us is "selling" our own image every time we step out of the house. We disguise our true selves under our clothes and we play many different roles - as parents, students, spouses and many others. The fact is that she succeeded. She became someone everybody looked up on, she reached her goal, however, the goal, in her case, did not feel as good as she hoped for.

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