

# Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie in the Context of Consumer Society

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Preddiplomski studij Engleskog jezika i književnosti i njemačkog jezika i  
književnosti

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**Theodore Dreiser's Novel *Sister Carrie* in the Context of  
Consumer Society**

Završni rad

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## Abstract

The influx of immigrants, expanding population, rise of metropolis, industrialization and urbanization gradually led the American nineteenth century society to change into a consumer society. People's desire to not only buy but also to possess things, money, and even other people grew more and more until it became insatiable. Inspired by the consumer society of his time which led either to success or downfall, Theodore Dreiser wrote his most famous novel *Sister Carrie*. This paper explores how Theodore Dreiser criticized the consumer society by depicting its negative outcomes. Having realized that America is everything but a middle class society, he was among the first to show that the society consists of the wealthy and the poor and that neither are contended. The points discussed in this paper show that Dreiser did not accept the world around him, did not want to adhere to the rules and norms imposed by society and criticized people's willingness to do just about anything in order to succeed.

*Keywords:* America, industrialization, material goods, consumer society, Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant American writers of the twentieth century, who was also among the first who tried to portray the consumer society, is Theodore Dreiser. In his novel *Sister Carrie*, he criticizes American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. The novel particularly focuses on consumerism and the consumer society, materialism, capitalism, class differences, the problems of individuals living in a consumer society, and their relationship to each other, money and material goods. All of Dreiser's characters want to achieve happiness but they each attempt this in a different way. However, they have misconceptions about what it means to actually be happy and falsely believe that happiness comes with being rich and able to afford everything they want. They all start out believing that money can buy happiness and are disappointed when they do not attain their goals.

The aim of this paper is to show that although the consumer society has a positive impact on the economy, industry and development in general, it can also have a negative impact on society. It offers false hopes for goals that people try to achieve, and once they manage to achieve them, they are neither happy, satisfied nor contented. They long for more believing they will eventually find their fulfillment, but this rarely happens.

To demonstrate his view of consumer society, Dreiser introduced Caroline Meeber, the main protagonist of the novel, who is a perfect example of a person trying to find her way up the social scale. She is a poor girl who comes to a big city full of hopes and expectations. She manages to achieve her goal of becoming rich, but in fulfilling her dream, she does not achieve happiness. Her failure is to be blamed on the consumer society that deceives people into believing that happiness lies in attaining money and as many material goods as possible.

## **1. THE DEVELOPMENT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONSUMER SOCIETY**

During the nineteenth and the twentieth century, Britain, France, Germany and the United States underwent the process of industrialization and became the most developed countries in the world. At the beginning of the Civil War America was mostly an agricultural country – its population lived on farms in small towns or villages. However, the invention of the steam engine freed the factory from a rural source of water power and allowed it to come into the city.

Economies moved from a landed to an industrial world, which led to the rapid growth of the cities during the late nineteenth century. New York had grown from a city of 500 000 to a metropolis of nearly 3 500 000 inhabitants in only fifty years time (from 1850 to 1900), while Chicago, a town of 20 000 had over 2 000 000 inhabitants by 1900 (Runtić, Survey I). This was a result of immigration of people who moved from villages or small towns to bigger cities and from Europe with the hope of finding a job. During the nineteenth century immigration reached an unprecedented high; between 1840 and 1880, 9 438 000 foreigners arrived in the US – mainly from Britain, Germany, Ireland and Scandinavia (Runtić, Survey I).

The industrial growth brought the United States a period of prosperity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Job opportunities were abundant and factories were flourishing. People made a lot of money in factory management positions and other white-collar jobs. On the other hand, factory workers worked long hours, but they earned low incomes. Consequently, a wide division existed between the rich and the poor. (Novel Summaries Analysis)

The distinction between social classes or in other words between the wealthy and the poor is obvious in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Most of its protagonists, like Sister Carrie come from humble origins and aim for wealth, success and power trying to make their way up the social scale, but none of them are completely successful.

Industrial growth resulted in the rapid growth of cities packed with people who either lived on the edge or led a luxurious life. Modern cities have a blinding impact on all people; they attract both the wealthy and the poor and this is the reason why the difference between the two is most noticeable in the cities. Cities attract people with their lights, shops, restaurants, theatres; everything is shiny, glamorous and flashy so that people would be attracted to it. Dreiser believed that "once the mind had been exposed to the gilded shops, the splendid restaurants, the flowers, the silks, the wines, the glances which gleam like light from defiant spears, nothing could save it" (Lynn 514).

However, people see and lead life in a fast-growing metropolis differently, depending on their social status. When Carrie, a poor girl from rural Wisconsin, goes to Chicago, she comes into the city with the hope of finding a job, starting a new life away from her hometown and is very enthusiastic about everything she sees there. Although her sister Minnie lives there, Carrie does not see her arrival as an opportunity to be closer to her sister, but only as a chance to fulfill her dream of being rich and to have all the things that only rich people can afford. From the very beginning, she wants to buy the best and most expensive clothes, go to exciting places like the theatre or expensive dinners in fancy restaurants, and meet influential, wealthy people in order to feel like she belongs among them. She soon becomes aware that this kind of life is very expensive, particularly when she begins to work in a shoe factory that produces shoes that she cannot afford.

On the other hand, when Hurstwood, who used to have a lot of money and led a luxurious life, loses not only his money but also his social position. He experiences what it is like to be

poor and beg on the streets, and finally starts being aware of the difference between the wealthy and the poor in the city. He begins to form a different picture of the city – as a place surrounded by a wall where one has to have a lot of money to be a part of the society inside that wall. He was not aware of this before, but as he becomes a beggar and looks at life from a different perspective, he concludes that if one has no money, people who do will not pay any attention to him. They will not let him into their world because they think that he does not belong among them and they will forget about him because they are happy or at least they think they are. Due to the disappointing realizations, “[h]e began to see as one sees a city with a wall about it. Men were posted at the gates. You could not get in. Those inside did not care to come out to see who you were. They were so merry inside there that all those outside were forgotten, and he was on the outside” (Dreiser 241). The city offers all kinds of amusements, pleasures, and things to buy, but one has to have money to participate in what the city can offer. It is a place of materialism. Therefore, the city is a pleasant place to live in only for those who have a high social status and enough money to afford such a luxurious life.

### **1.1. Individuals in the Consumer Society**

People in consumer society used to think that if they manage to escape poverty and rise “from rags to riches”, they will be happy. That is the main reason why they long only for money and material goods, which are thought to be signs of someone being happy and having a good life. This is how people actually become slaves of capitalism, materialism, and consumer society in general. Wealthy and influential people may seem to be happy, but Dreiser shows us with his novel that they in fact are everything but happy. They do not have



their own identity, do not show their true colors and feelings, and do not accede to their free will. Desire for material goods, which should show their good social standing in the society, is their main driving force. The problem lies in the fact that, no matter how many things or objects they possess, they will never be completely satisfied and will always long for more. Moreover, they can never be happy, contented or fulfilled because their search for fake happiness and fulfillment often ends up in disappointment and emptiness. What is even more, people often become victims of their dreams or the dreams society has imposed upon them.

People who live in this kind of society are materialistic; their happiness is measured by what they have, possess or own. The more they have, the better their reputation and status in the city will be. They always want more and can never be completely fulfilled and satisfied. The society they live in has made them this way. Moreover, for different reasons they often represent themselves as wealthier, or as more powerful than they really are. Drouet wears fine clothes in order to make people think that he has more money than he really does. He is a salesman whose fine success “lay in his geniality and the thoroughly reputable standing of his house” (Dreiser 52). Like Drouet, Hurstwood deceives the people around him as well, but for different reasons. He wants to hide that he cheats on his wife and has affairs with different women when he goes on business trips. In addition, in a similar fashion, Carrie deceives people around her to make them think she is better than she really is in order to be accepted into their world. As Rong explains, “Dreiser’s characters turn to deception not only because of their desire for power but also to gain affection or praise; to bring about personal or social advancement; or to protect the deceived party from the discovery of the truth” (68).

To sum up, “individuals in a consumer society try to define their personality and social status through objects, but by doing so they just conform to the pre-existing models which will bring them no singularity; therefore, this desire of theirs becomes a dream which constantly escapes them” (Baghbaderani; Nia 53).

## 1.2. Dreiser's Inspiration for *Sister Carrie*

Theodore Dreiser, as the son of a German textile worker and immigrant, experienced a hard life of the poor people in America. He was forced to leave his life in native Indiana and go to Chicago in order to find a job and earn money. As he was interested in writing, he was hoping to make a career in the literary field. Although he was promoted and managed to move to New York, a hub of journalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, he failed to gain admittance there and because of that gave up his American Dream.

Here we can see autobiographical elements and similarities with the main protagonist of the novel, Carrie. She, like Dreiser, comes from a poor family, goes to a bigger city in order to find a job and escape her miserable life back home. Although he does not approve of her behavior and actions in getting what she wants, he still commiserates with her because he experienced what it is like to have a miserable life. They both rise “from rags to riches” and succeed in achieving something in life, but do not fit into the society. He also shows sympathy for Ames, who also appreciated art as Dreiser did. He stands for his ideas of the unimportance of materialism and consumerism, and instead seeks sense in art.

But he did nevertheless seek to write a story about a young woman whose life exemplifies some of the major problems of contemporary existence – for example, how to survive under difficult circumstances and then what to do with one's life – without recourse to any of the thematic props inherent in then widely current evolutionary theistic beliefs. (Pizer 215)

Furthermore, Dreiser tried to explain the role of the natural law in a fast-growing and changing society and its influence on the people:

He was rather demonstrating his belief that neither traditional ideas about man's innate moral sense nor more recent ideas about a moral center of natural law graspable by an

individual play a role in either the direction or outcome of an individual existence. Natural law, in brief, may indeed shape a life, but its role in so doing is seldom understood by the individual. It is there simply as a given in individual lives, and the role of the novelist is to observe and record its presence in operation. (Pizer 216)

Having experienced all the advantages and disadvantages of the consumer society, Dreiser wrote his novel as a complaint against the goals of the American Consumer Society, which he represents as fake and unworthy after having experienced its cruelty.

### **1.3. The Reception of Theodore Dreiser's Novel**

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* had been ignored for a while before it gained its admittance because he included in the novel all aspects of social reality in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth century. America was believed to be a "middle class" society without any significant difference between its inhabitants. However, Dreiser showed that the society consisted and even still today consists of the rich and the poor and that the difference between the two is everything but negligible.

When critics explain the initial commercial failure of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, they generally focus on the disagreements between the author and his publisher, the Doubleday and Page Company.

The production history of the novel, in brief, begins with Doubleday and Page accepting the manuscript in the spring of 1900. In the summer of that year, Walter Hines Page sent a letter to Dreiser attempting to renege on the contract to publish. Apparently, Dreiser's treatment of Carrie's sexuality made him apprehensive, as the fictional character lives "in sin" throughout a good deal of the narrative. In addition, the author vexed Page by using actual names and places in his fiction. Both of these

objections are comprehensible: the former due to fear of public censure, the latter out of deference to those who would have preferred that their names and establishments not appear in such a scandalous work. (Corkin 605)

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* appeared in the midst of the change of orientation and effectively reflects the new worldview, at the same time arguing for its correctness and promoting its acceptance.

It is possible that the book-reading public of 1900 was not yet ready to perform the intellectual acts necessary to make the novel intelligible. *Sister Carrie's* impact relies on the reader's comprehension of the world of commodities; for it assumes not only that the objects of the world are meaningful but also that the specific importance of these things is fairly obvious. In addition, the novel requires the reader to associate these objects, in all their resonance, with the book's human characters. "If the reader fails to perform these operations, the book deteriorates into a morass of description of various mass-produced objects of the world. If the novel is read "correctly," it engages and affects" (Corkin 606).

## **2. DREISER'S CHARACTERS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM**

Dreiser tried to develop his characters in a sense that every single one of them has his own version of the American Dream that he or she wants to pursue. Although Carrie as a daughter of a flour mill worker belongs to the lower middle class, she is not satisfied with her status and aims for more. In order to escape her miserable life of poverty and wretched working conditions, she leaves her hometown and comes to Chicago. Society directs her into a pursuit of the American Dream, which she follows. Fascinated by the glamorous life of the wealthy people, she herself wants to be a part of it and feel like she belongs there.

However, people under the influence of a rapidly growing and changing society began to misinterpret the American Dream and set up false goals for themselves. Therefore, they can never be happy and achieve the success they long for. Hurstwood is a typical representative of this group. Although a manager of a prosperous saloon with a good reputation, a man with a decent house and a family climbing up the social ladder, he is still not completely satisfied with his life and wants more. He looks for fun when he goes on a business trip and cheats on his wife only because he wants something more, something he still does not own. He is not well educated, but this does not make any difference or make him less valuable than others. Money is the most significant sign of someone's status and therefore makes him an acceptable member of the American upper class. He was also on the edge and began at Fitzgerald and Moy's as a bartender, but he managed to work his way up to the position of manager. No matter what he achieved, he is still being left out of important decision making. Not only do his friends like him for his money and position, but also for his wife. She is completely dedicated to materialism and wants her children to achieve high status on the social ladder:

Mrs. Hurstwood was the type of the woman who has ever endeavored to shine and has been more or less chagrined at the evidences of superior capability in this direction elsewhere. Her knowledge of life extended to that little conventional round of society of which she was not – but longed to be – a member. She was not without realization already that this thing was impossible, so far as she was concerned. For her daughter, she hoped better things. (Dreiser 69)

The world that Dreiser tries to portray the best he can is full of ups and downs, success and failure. People either succeed or fail. There is no one in the middle. However, their status can be changed in the heat of the moment with one small mistake. At the beginning of the novel Hurstwood has everything he could ever have dreamed. However, he is not completely

satisfied and tries to reach for more, which leads to his downfall. He cannot escape financial debts and begins to live life as a beggar. At the same time, Carrie rises quite rapidly “from rags to riches,” earns such a sum of money she has never thought she would, lives in one of the best Chicago hotels and is on the front page of the newspapers. Even when she achieves everything she ever wanted, she still longs for more until she finally realizes that the consumer society deceives people into false happiness.

### **3. CARRIE AS A NEW WOMAN IN THE AMERICAN CONSUMER SOCIETY**

The main protagonist of the novel is Caroline Meeber or Sister Carrie, a poor eighteen-year-old girl who leaves her hometown in rural Wisconsin and moves to Chicago with the hope of finding a job. We do not find out anything about her, her past, character or manners, so we have to form our opinion about her based on her belongings. We learn that “[w]hen Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago, her total outfit consisted of a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse, containing her ticket, a scrap of paper with her sister’s address in Van Buren Street, and four dollars in money” (Dreiser 1). Dreiser’s description of her implies the way people are seen in the consumer society because it ends with the amount of money she had in her pocket. Their feelings, manners and identity are not important, but what makes them who they are and marks them as an individual is their money. After a few days in Chicago, Carrie manages to find a job in a shoe factory that produces shoes that she cannot afford. As a result she concludes that workers are forced to work under wretched working conditions and for very low wages.

She stays with her sister Minnie who lives with her husband in a small one-floor resident apartment. Although they are sisters and have not seen each other in a very long time, Minnie sees Carrie's arrival as an opportunity to help them with their rent payments. "She had invited Carrie, not because she longed for her presence, but because the latter was dissatisfied at home, and could probably get work and pay the board here" (Dreiser 11- 12).

After Carrie found a job, Minnie asks her to give money at the end of the week, and leaves her without any money for herself: Although Carrie wants to go to the theatre, she does not have enough money. She wants to explore and enjoy in everything that the city has to offer, but realizes that she needs to have a lot of money for all her plans and wishes. When she got sick because she did not have enough money to buy winter clothes and lost her job, she encountered Drouet, a travelling salesman, whom she met on a train to Chicago.

The specific nature of the relationship between Carrie and Drouet illustrates the functional interaction between them. From the beginning, Drouet attracts her because he presents the possibility of producing gifts to consume. She knows this through her reading of the objective meaning of his wardrobe. As they travel to Chicago on the train, he offers to show her the sights of the city. Her response indicates both the desirability of consuming these experiences and his attractiveness as a producer of these delights. (Corkin 610)

After having heard his story, "[t]here was a little ache in her fancy of all he described. Her insignificance in the presence of so much magnificence faintly affected her. She realized that hers was not to be a round of pleasure, and yet there was something promising in all the material prospect he set forth" (Dreiser 5).

He offered her help in form of twenty dollars, "[t]he money she had accepted was two soft, green, handsome ten-dollar bills" (Dreiser 50). Like many other women of her time, she shows a strong desire, even lust for clothes, status and money, so she makes herself

dependent on two different men (Drouet and Hurstwood), who treat her as a commodity.

Soon after she accepts Drouet's money, they start a relationship and she moves in with him to a much larger apartment. She sees an opportunity for a new start and better life in her relationship with Drouet. She thinks that through him she will be able to buy all the clothes she longs for and have opportunities to be accepted in Chicago's affluent circles.

However, she is not able to develop any deeper feeling toward him or anybody else around her. That is why, when she meets Hurstwood and sees that he can offer her even more than Drouet, she leaves him without any trace of guilt or regret. She was impressed by his looks, clothes, jewelry and power because "[h]e had been pointed out as a very successful and well-known man about town. Hurstwood looked the part, for, besides being slightly under forty, he had a good, stout constitution, an active manner, and a solid, substantial air, which was composed in part of his fine clothes, his clean linen, his jewels, and, above all, his own sense of importance" (Dreiser 35).

Later on, she becomes a famous actress in the theatre. Although she is also an actress in everyday life, in the theatre she gains respect and admiration only because of her looks, not because she is such an extraordinary actress. She even changes her name and creates a new identity once she manages to succeed in the theatre. Her stage name is Carrie Madenda. She tries to run away from her miserable past life and create a new, better life in which she has everything she craves for: money, clothes, jewelry, status and fame.

She invents the name Carrie Madenda strictly from her own fancy, based on its euphony and acceptability for the stage. Carrie's greatest success is in playing this character. This persona is specifically designed for the marketplace, a self-created for the modern economic world, a fictional character playing fictional characters, all the while projecting the illusion of depth and reality. She can project this illusion because



she has nothing else to project, for her being is a shifting entity, not a stable one. She succeeds because of her powers of assimilation. (Corkin 616)

Caroline Meeber is the coldest of all the characters in the novel. She is self-centered, ambitious and concentrated only on her interests. She is ready to do anything to succeed in life and to make her dream come true. She has no ethical sense; she does not show any feelings for people around her, but instead uses them in order to get what she wants. She only thinks about her own happiness, things she wants to possess and the elite to which she wants to belong. “She ‘acts’ to fit the situation and is always able to adapt to new circumstances, but she never really has an identity” (Novel Summaries Analysis). She tries to achieve something in life in a wrong way and this is the reason why she can never be happy. She is constantly searching for happiness through material wealth because of the consumer society she lives in. She has adopted its goals and believes happiness can be found solely in the attainment of material possessions.

In its own time the novel was revolutionary because Dreiser did not punish his heroine's immorality. In literature of the period sexuality outside marriage was considered criminal behavior. “Fallen women” had to be punished. Carrie, however, lives out of wedlock with two men, she also lies about that, walks out on Hurstwood when he needs her the most, and yet, she succeeds; she rises by falling (Runtić, Survey I).

#### **4. OTHER CHARACTERS AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CONSUMER SOCIETY**

Charles Drouet is a traveling salesman who caught Carrie's attention when she was travelling to Chicago. She is immediately attracted to him because of his flashy clothes and jewelry which “almost spoke” (Dreiser 48). Although she is the one who wants to use him in

order to get what she wants, he is also attracted to her in a wrong way. Because she is so physically attractive and pleasant to men's eyes, he wants to show her off in public. When a man "possesses" or has a woman like her by his side, he is admired by other men who feel envy and jealousy. However, he does not like her for the person she is, but because of how other men admire her looks and what she represents as "the center of interest" (Dreiser 146). When he informs Hurstwood about her and invites him to come to meet her, he boasts: "I struck a little peach coming in on the train Friday" (Dreiser 39). He shows no respect, no true intentions or future plans with her (although he says he is going to marry her) and uses monetary discourse, not that of romance (Runtić, Survey I). He is a type, a deceiver who wears flashy clothes and jewelry in order to appear wealthier, better and more influential than he really is. He succeeds in tricking Carrie into thinking that he can offer her anything she wants, but as soon as she realizes that he is not as wealthy as he appears and that Hurstwood has a lot more money than he does, she leaves him. Once she becomes famous, he tries to win her back, but does not succeed.

George Hurstwood is, as well as Drouet, a type. He is even a greater deceiver than Drouet because "[h]e had pretended all this affection, all this passion, and he was lying to her all the while" (Dreiser 168). The purpose of his character in the book is to show how even rich people can lose all what they have and become beggars. After having failed to pursue the American Dream, he takes away his life.

Hurstwood is engaged in creating false appearances. In order to preserve his status and position in society, Hurstwood has to present himself with a fake identity not only to Carrie who wants to take advantage of him or Drouet but also to his own family (wife and children who see him as a cash machine) and to his employers. However, once he stops keeping up appearances and confesses everything to his wife, his life takes a bad turn; he loses all his money, power and public reputation about which his family cared more than he himself does.

In a similar way he lies also to Carrie, who fell in love with him (or at least with his money and position), and leaves him after finding out that he does not intend to marry her. Later on, Hurstwood deceives not only Carrie but also himself. In New York, after Carrie leaves him, he is hopelessly searching for a job. In that period, he trades his reality in which he should live for the safety of his rocking chair and the warmth of a hotel lobby. Although he is almost broke, he dines in the Morton House, one of the most expensive New York hotels. He cannot accept the fact that he has lost everything. Because he became ignorant of the reality around him, even Carrie left him and he was left all alone. Only when he becomes a beggar on the street and sees how the world around his closed circle really functions, he realizes that he lives in a cruel world surrounded by people who are either rich or poor and that there is no middle class. Rich people have built their inner circle which is closed for everyone else. The problem is that they do not pay attention to anybody around them and do not see how the society really looks like. "His moral fall is attributed to general human weakness, dominance of instincts over reason, chance and outside factors" (Runtić, Survey I).

Furthermore, Mrs. Vance is definitely a character that is worth mentioning. She lives with her husband in an apartment across the hall from Carrie and Hurstwood in New York. They have a more luxurious apartment and are better off than Carrie. She begins to realize this when they invite her to their apartment. She sees that there are even more attractive, powerful and decent men than Hurstwood and that she still does not have everything she wanted.

He now turned his attention to Mrs. Vance, and in a flash Carrie saw again what she for some time had subconsciously missed in Hurstwood – the adroitness and flattery of which he was capable. She also saw that she was not well dressed – not nearly as well dressed – as Mrs. Vance. These were not vague ideas any longer. Her situation was cleared up for her. She felt that her life was becoming stale, and therein she felt cause

for gloom. The old helpful, urging melancholy was restored. The desirous Carrie was whispered to concerning her possibilities. (Dreiser 244)

On the other hand, the only character in the book, who is not a typical representative of the consumer society, is Robert Ames. He is a smart young scholar from Indiana and a neighbor of Carrie's. He believes that the only thing that should have some social or moral value is art. He does not acknowledge materialism, consumerism or anything of that kind, but believes in art. He stands in opposition to other characters in the novel who are convinced that money and wealth are the only means to status and power. He shows contempt against material excess. To him, money has no value at all and is the only one who stands for conscious life. Ames belongs to the upper middle class because he is well-educated and cultivated. On the other hand, Carrie is a daughter of a flour mill worker and herself a working girl, and therefore will always somehow be a part of the working class. Although she rises socially and achieves what she dreams of, she is and never will be equal or even close to Ames and his accomplishments. He earned his position in society with hard work, studying, and in a civilized way, while she is a remorseful animal who uses everyone around her in order to get what she yearns for. They come from two completely different worlds and yet, they both belong to the same circles.

However, Ames also seeks true happiness and does not know how to achieve it, but he believes that education is the most important tool and if one succeeds to cultivate one's mind, he is brighter, better understands the world around him and is closer to reaching the top.

## CONCLUSION

During the nineteenth and the twentieth century, Britain, France, Germany and the United States underwent the process of industrialization and became the most developed countries in the world. The influx of immigrants, expanding population, rise of metropolis, industrialization and urbanization gradually led the nineteenth century society to change into consumer society. People's desire to not only buy but also to possess things, more money, and even people grew more and more until it became insatiable.

Dreiser was one of the many who was a victim of this kind of regime and that is the reason why he wrote his novel *Sister Carrie* as a complaint against the goals of the American consumer society. After having experienced the cruelty of it, he represents it as fake and unworthy. Having survived his own struggle to belong to the New York elite, he was capable of telling the story from his own experience. His characters fight for a better position in the society, but become its victims in the end. In such a society, people lose their identities, they do not know who they are anymore and since they are not honest with themselves, they are unable to be honest with the people around them. Every single character in the novel pretends and at some point loses his/her identity just to achieve something or to appear more successful and important than he or she really is. Carrie pretends that she is in love with Drouet only to get what she longs for. Drouet wears flashy clothes in order to appear wealthier than he really is and to attract young girls like Carrie to show off. Likewise, Hurstwood pretends and deceives in order to hide his affairs and mistakes.

Furthermore, distinction between the wealthy and the poor is more than obvious in bigger cities. Only rich people can afford a decent life in a big city, while others become beggars or work under wretched working conditions for poor wages. They often become so sick and tired that they try to escape their miserable life in search of a better one. Most of the people

think that if they manage to escape poverty and rise “from rags to riches,” they will be happy. This is how they become slaves of materialism, consumerism and the consumer society in general. Wealthy people may appear happy to others, but in fact, most of them are not. They are people who do not have or do not want to show their own identity, feelings, and free will. A desire for material goods is their main driving force. They are willing to sacrifice everything and everyone in order to attain their goal, which is, in most cases, money and a better position in the society. Once they achieve their goal, they are not satisfied because they long for more. Their yearning and appetite for more are insatiable and lead them to their lifelong search for happiness. It turns out that poor people are the ones who are happy and satisfied because they know how to appreciate what they have and never ask for more.

Carrie is the perfect representative of the consumer society in the novel. She dreams of being rich and that is the reason why she runs away from her miserable life and moves to Chicago. She is ready to do anything in order to succeed and to pursue her own dream. That is why she becomes a person without an identity. She has no ethical sense; she does not show any feelings for people around her, but instead uses them in order to get what she wants. She only thinks about her own happiness, things she wants to possess and the elite to which she wants to belong. She stands for all people in the consumer society, who in fact are actors because they act in a deceptive way for different reasons. Dreiser represents her as a typical slave of the consumer society, but a more fortunate one because she manages to attain her goals. However, even the fulfillment of her desires is not enough for her and brings her back to the beginning of her search. Her search for happiness and fulfillment in form of money and material goods ends up in disappointment, and the consumer society is to blame for making her and the rest of the people believe that the road to happiness is found in money and status in society.

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