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# Research Innovator

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Editor-In-Chief  
Prof. K.N. Shelke

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A detailed still-life composition featuring a white quill pen positioned diagonally across the frame. The quill's tip is submerged in a clear glass inkwell. To the right, a scroll of aged parchment is partially unrolled, secured with a red wax seal and a red ribbon. In the background, a lit candle in a brass holder casts a warm glow. The entire scene is set on a dark wooden surface, creating a scholarly and historical atmosphere.

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**A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed  
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**Volume II Issue V: October – 2015**

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**Philosophy through Symbolism: A Study of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*****Dr. G. Vasuki***Research Advisor & Asst. professor, Dept. of English, A.V. V. M. Sri Pushpam College, Poondi, Thanjavur, (T.N.) India***V. Vetrimni***Research Scholar & Asst. professor, Dept. of English, Sri Vinayaga College of Arts & Science, Ulundurpet, (T.N.) India***Abstract**

Theodore Dreiser was an outstanding American practitioner of naturalism. He was the leading figure in the National Literary movement. His novels explore the new social problems that had arisen in a rapidly industrializing America. The Naturalistic author presents his theme in a symbolic detail, and ranging from careful descriptions of dress and adornment to descriptions of great American cities and their surroundings. His writings ascribed to a "Mechanistic" theory of reality. Dreiser mentioned in his novels about the realistic depiction of the human conditions negative response to the novel came largely from the book's sexual content.

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*Dawn* (1931), an autobiography dealing with his first twenty years, is a classic of German American literature. In it, Dreiser gives a vivid picture of his German-speaking, Roman Catholic, downwardly

mobile family and offers a moving chronicle of the financial, social, and emotional pressures facing working-class families in the late nineteenth century. His novel tries to find out vision of realism and naturalism, and he highlights the poverty by the social class categories in America such an investigation covering three novels. *Sister Carrie*, *Jemie Gerhardt*, and *An American Tragedy* are the novels that are known for the realistic treatment.

Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900) is a work of pivotal importance in American literature despite its inauspicious launching. It became a signal to subsequent American writers to follow the realistic treatment to all subject matter. In *Sister Carrie* tells the story of a rudderless but pretty small town girl who comes to the big city filled with vague

ambitions. She is used by men and used them in turn to become a successful Broadway actress. This is the first masterpiece of the American Naturalistic movement in its grittingly factual presentation of the vagaries of urban life and in its ingenuous heroine, who goes unpunished for her transgressions against conventional sexual morality.

Although he was to embrace Oriental mysticism as a philosophy of life in his later years, at the time he was writing *Sister Carrie*. Theodore Dreiser ascribed to a "mechanistic" theory of reality. His early life impressed him with the brutality and necessity of a blind fate that imposed itself upon the weak. He came to hate ill luck and blind chance, which invariably ground to shreds any effort the common man made to raise himself. He did not rebel against fate as one rebels against evil; instead, he was so overpowered by the experiences and sights of human suffering that he saw it as a universal principle.

In the 1890's Dreiser began to read the philosophy of nineteenth-century mechanism in Darwin and Spencer, in Tyndall and Huxley. These writers afforded no new revelations but cemented and gave authority to what he had long suspected. Human life was without purpose or meaning; man is an underling, a worthless blob of protoplasm on a dying planet whirling aimlessly through space in Dreiser's own words, "a poor, blind fool." Hating from early childhood anything to do with religion, Dreiser found in mechanism a scientific sanction for suffering. The theory of evolution, as it was then conceived revealed nature as a ruthless process of the struggle for survival; this was merely an extension on a

larger scale of what Dreiser had observed in his boyhood and youthful travels through the eastern United States.

Untrained in logical thought, he had little trouble in transferring the theories of evolution to everyday reality. Mechanism, although it was rather more complicated than Dreiser perceived it, became his notion of "chemisms." Chemic compulsions consist of those desires and drive which are usually unconscious. Dreiser coined the term to evoke the sense of something largely out of human control. "Chemism" attempts to explain human behavior in the terms of chemical or physical science. Through chemisms Dreiser sought to explain all phenomena, organic as well as inorganic. Life is chemism, personality is chemism, emotions and needs are chemisms. Thus, Dreiser makes no distinction between the behavior of beasts, the human sex urge, or any sentiment which people agree to call higher or noble.

Materialism is simply mechanism as it appears in the human order. The world of men, like the world of indifferent nature, is a savage place where only the strongest can survive. Society is an aggregate whole of atomic underlings, each one an independent unit of force and desire, determined somehow by mechanical forces, pushing or making way for other forces as it bumps crazily along. Each individual encounters obstacles which destroy him or meets with fortuitous currents which help him toward his goal. The strong surge ahead, the weak fall back, or worse yet, become the slaves of their betters. This is "Darwinism" at its starkest.

Dreiser combines both the biological determinism of Darwin and the concept of

blind fate in *Sister Carrie*. Severely handicapped by her innocence and poverty, Carrie appears to be caught in an inevitable spiral of disappointment and poverty, were it not for a series of circumstances and coincidences that lift her out of her condition. If Carrie had not met Drouet accidentally on the street after she lost her job, she would have returned home to Columbia City. If the safe door had not by unaccountable chance closed as Hurstwood stood by with his employers' money in his hands, Carrie would not have gotten to New York or become a famous actress. In such a world each one must take advantage of what little opportunity he has, even though it means abandoning or injuring others.

In the bleak world of Dreiser's philosophy, morality is a myth for assuaging the weak. It is a cynical agreement on the part of master and slave to keep the whole system of chemisms from running amuck. Dreiser also believed, however, that "life was somehow bigger and subtler, and darker than any given theory or order of life." It is through this loophole that Dreiser finds the way to write novels of life as it is.

Dreiser not only responds to his fellow man in a very immediate and sympathetic manner, but more importantly, despite the limits of his vision, he understands human beings. His understanding goes far beyond the determinism and chemisms through which he seeks to explain them. Were Dreiser unable to understand humanity in terms other than his restrictive philosophy, readers would not discover in his novels insights about other human beings which they did not have before. In short, Theodore Dreiser is a better artist than his philosophy would allow him to be.

The adjective "elephantine" has been reserved by critics exclusively to describe the style of Dreiser, "the world's worst great writer." It is generally awkward and ponderous; it lacks precision and it moves with a lumbering gait. Even Dreiser's sincerest admirers admit that his style is atrocious, his sentences chaotic, his grammar and syntax faulty. His wordiness and repetitions are at times unbearable; he has no feeling for words, no sense of diction, no ear for euphony. The following sentences from *Sister Carrie* are examples of Dreiser's writing style at its worst: "The, to Carrie, very important theatrical performance was to take place at the Avery on conditions which were to make it more noteworthy than was at first anticipated"; "They had young men of the kind whom she, since her experience with Drouet, felt above, who took them out."

Dreiser's style is, nevertheless, important to the totality of his work. It is as valid a part of his art as his creation of characters and selection of detail. If the style seems to indicate something that is muddled, commonplace, undiscerning, cheap, and shoddy, it does so for the sake of artistic accuracy. When Dreiser writes that he seeks to present "an accurate description of life as it is," he means among other things that a graceful and measured style would detract from or contradict the reality it seeks to present. The reader, like Carrie, must learn the hard lesson of undecorated truth. After reading the novel, one feels this is the way life was, and is.

A page of Dreiser's writing is as distinctive as a page from any other author. To Dreiser, the conscious artifice of a high style seemed to contradict his whole idea that life is something largely out of control. He relaxes his grip on the words



and the pieces fall together as they may. Style itself is a model of the universe he sought to interpret and describe. The naturalistic writer presents his theme through symbolic detail. In this way the symbolic level of the narrative is laid directly over the events and occurrences of the simple story itself. Dreiser's use of symbolic detail permeates the novel, ranging from careful descriptions of dress and adornment to descriptions of great American cities and their surroundings.

The author must make the reader aware that the details are important to the meaning. Dreiser generally accomplishes this end through a kind of "incremental repetition" of important details. Occasionally, however, he shows a lack of subtlety when he addresses his reader directly to reveal his intention. By registering carefully Carrie's reaction to specific details, Dreiser shows her moving from her early naive optimism to her final disillusionment and despair. Carrie's sensitivity to details provides the emotional center of the novel. The most important patterns of details, in addition to clothing and money, are the theater, hotels, and restaurants. These comprise the walled and gilded city to which Carrie seeks entrance. Perhaps the most important single group of objects is the various rocking chairs upon which Carrie rides to dreamland, beginning in her sister's flat, continuing through the several rooms and apartments where she lives, and culminating in her vast suite in the Waldorf.

Dreiser's symbolism reveals the separate and distinct worlds of *Sister Carrie*. There is the realistic world of the "reasonable" mind and the imagined world of the "emotional" world, a world described in

the novel as "Elf-land," "Dream Land," or "The Kingdom of Greatness." This is the world from which Hurstwood emerges as an "ambassador" to bring Carrie back with him. It is this world in which Carrie ironically becomes a citizen — ironically" because it never seems to yield the rewards and beauty it promises. Life is a constant battle fought between the giant armies of frustration and desire.

Dissatisfied with life in her rural Wisconsin home, 18-year-old Caroline "Sister Carrie" Meeber takes the train to Chicago, where her older sister Minnie, and Minnie's husband, Sven Hanson, have agreed to take her in. On the train, Carrie meets Charles Drouet, a traveling salesman, who is attracted to her because of her simple beauty and unspoiled manner. They exchange contact information, but upon discovering the "steady round of toil" and somber atmosphere at her sister's flat, she writes to Drouet and discourages him from calling on her there.

Carrie soon embarks on a quest for work to pay rent to her sister and her husband, and takes a job running a machine in a shoe factory. Before long, however, she is shocked by the coarse manners of both the male and female factory workers, and the physical demands of the job, as well as the squalid factory conditions, begin to take their toll. She also senses Minnie and Sven's disapproval of her interest in Chicago's recreational opportunities, particularly the theatre. One day, after an illness that costs her job, she encounters Drouet on a downtown street. Once again taken by her beauty, and moved by her poverty, he encourages her to dine with him, where, over sirloin and asparagus, he persuades her to leave her sister and move

in with him. To press his case, he slips Carrie two ten dollar bills, opening a vista of material possibilities to her. The next day, he rebuffs her feeble attempts to return the money, taking her shopping at a Chicago department store and securing a jacket she covets and some shoes. That night, she writes a good-bye note to Minnie and moves in with Drouet.

Drouet installs her in a much larger apartment, and their relationship intensifies as Minnie dreams about her sister's fall from innocence. She acquires a sophisticated wardrobe and, through his offhand comments about attractive women, sheds her provincial mannerisms, even as she struggles with the moral implications of being a kept woman. By the time Drouet introduces Carrie to George Hurstwood, the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's – a respectable bar that Drouet describes as a "way-up, swell place" – her material appearance has improved considerably. Hurstwood, unhappy with and distant from his social-climbing wife and children, instantly becomes infatuated with Carrie's youth and beauty, and before long they start an affair, communicating and meeting secretly in the expanding, anonymous city.

One night, Drouet casually agrees to find an actress to play a key role in an amateur theatrical presentation of Augustin Daly's melodrama, "Under the Gaslight," for his local chapter of the Elks. Upon returning home to Carrie, he encourages her to take the part of the heroine. Unknown to Drouet, Carrie long has harbored theatrical ambitions and has a natural aptitude for imitation and expressing pathos. The night of the production – which Hurstwood attends at Drouet's invitation – both men are moved to even greater displays of

affection by Carrie's stunning performance.

The next day, the affair is uncovered: Drouet discovers he has been cuckolded, Carrie learns that Hurstwood is married, and Hurstwood's wife, Julia, learns from acquaintances that Hurstwood has been out driving with another woman and deliberately excluded her from the Elks theatre night. After a night of drinking, and despairing at his wife's financial demands and Carrie's rejection, Hurstwood stumbles upon a large amount of cash in the unlocked safe in Fitzgerald and Moy's offices. In a moment of poor judgment, he succumbs to the temptation to embezzle a large sum of money. Inventing a false pretext of Drouet's sudden illness, he lures Carrie onto a train and escapes with her to Canada. Once they arrive in Montreal, Hurstwood's guilty conscience – and a private eye – induce him to return most of the stolen funds, but he realizes that he cannot return to Chicago. Hurstwood mollifies Carrie by agreeing to marry her, and the couple move to New York City.

In New York, Hurstwood and Carrie rent a flat where they live as George and Carrie Wheeler. Hurstwood buys a minority interest in a saloon and, at first, is able to provide Carrie with a satisfactory – if not lavish – standard of living. The couple grow distant, however, as Hurstwood abandons any pretense of fine manners toward Carrie, and she realizes that Hurstwood no longer is the suave, powerful manager of his Chicago days. Carrie's dissatisfaction only increases when she meets Robert Ames, a bright young scholar from Indiana and her neighbor's cousin, who introduces her to the idea that great art, rather than showy materialism, is worthy of admiration.

After only a few years, the saloon's landlord sells the property and Hurstwood's business partner expresses his intent to terminate the partnership. Too arrogant to accept most of the job opportunities available to him, Hurstwood soon discovers that his savings are running out and urges Carrie to economize, which she finds humiliating and distasteful. As Hurstwood lounges about, overwhelmed by apathy and foolishly gambling away most of his savings, Carrie turns to New York's theatres for employment and becomes a chorus girl. Once again, her aptitude for theatre serves her well, and, as the rapidly aging Hurstwood declines into obscurity, Carrie begins to rise from chorus girl to small speaking roles, and establishes a friendship with another

chorus girl, Lola Osborne, who begins to urge Carrie to move in with her. In a final attempt to prove himself useful, Hurstwood becomes a scab, driving a Brooklyn streetcar during a streetcar operator's strike. His ill-fated venture, which lasts only two days, prompts Carrie to leave him; in her farewell note, she encloses twenty dollars.

Hurstwood ultimately joins the homeless of New York, taking odd jobs, falling ill with pneumonia, and finally becoming a beggar. Reduced to standing in line for bread and charity, he commits suicide in a flophouse. Meanwhile, Carrie achieves stardom, but finds that money and fame do not satisfy her longings or bring her happiness and that nothing will.

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