

A Bird in an Unlocked Cage--Image of Sister Carrie

Ping Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Chongqing Three Gorges University, Chongqing, China

Abstract

Sister Carrier, the protagonist of Theodore Dreiser's first novel *Sister Carrie*, is a controversial character in American literature. Some critics hold the view that Carrier is an "immoral woman" because of her insatiable desires. Others agree to consider Carrie as a "new woman" who struggles to achieve her self-realization. However, the author's opinion does not belong to either side. Based on the analysis of Carrie's rags-to-riches story, this paper examines how traditional values shape her and argues that she remains confined to the role society assigns to her.

Keywords

Sister Carrie, "New Woman", Traditional Values.

1. Introduction

Sister Carrie is a famous novel, written by Theodore Dreiser who is regarded as the pioneer of naturalism. American naturalism was evolved from realism while authors' tone in writing becomes less serious and less sympathetic but more ironic and more pessimistic. "Dreiser wrote according to the aesthetic principle of Realism, which proposes that the business of fiction is not to draw an idealized picture of human beings for the instruction or sentimental satisfaction of readers, but rather to portray life as it is really lived specific circumstances of time and place, and to show how people actually think and feel and why they do what they do" [1, viii]. It is because Dreiser's writing style unveiled the hypocrisy of the bourgeois that *Sister Carrie* delayed to be published for years. After published, *Sister Carrie* failed to cater readers' expectations resulting in its poor market. At the same time, it was fiercely criticized by critics for its immorality. They argue that Carrie, the novel's protagonist, indulges in insatiable desires yet escapes punishment and even achieves fame as an actress, defying conventional morality. As Norris told Henry that he "think the story is immoral and badly written" [2, 1900]. When the novel was first published, it received little acclaim. Among the criticisms, the character of Carrie undoubtedly became the central focus. Lemaster interpreted Carrie in a feminist way arguing that she "challenges woman's social objectification and com-modification" [3, 41]. Based on ethical criticism, Huang Kaihong demonstrated that Carrie's moral tendency was affected and shaped by social environment [4, 144]. Witemeyer examined the symbolic objects closely associated with Carrie, arguing that they serve to "illuminate the ironic discrepancy between such American dreams and unaccommodating realities." [5, 236]. Jin and Hu, however, argued that Carrie failed to transcend social norms; instead, she merely conformed to the traditional role of the "second sex." [6, 86]. However, this perspective is held by only a minority of critics. The predominant scholarly consensus portrays Carrie as a "new woman," citing her economic independence and burgeoning self-awareness as evidence. Yet these arguments rely on selectively extracted textual evidence, undermining their objectivity and persuasiveness. Ultimately, such interpretations fail to substantiate Carrie's status as a genuine new woman figure.

Before discussing whether Carrie is a new woman or not, we may better to make it clear that what the definition of New Woman is. According to the definition of *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, new woman is a woman especially of the late 19th century actively resisting

traditional controls and seeking to fill a complete role in the world. From this definition, two premises are required. First she has to fight against traditional controls and secular values. Then she is supposed to pursue her all-round development instead of being restricted to particular field. In accordance with this standard, the author attempts to explore whether Carrie is entitled to be hailed as a new woman. Structured around three developmental phases - professional, behavioral, and psychological - this paper traces Carrie's transformation only to reveal her fundamental adherence to conventional expectations.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Helpless Stitcher

Many critics advocate women who begin to work outside is the first step to become a new woman. Such argument is cursory, and it does not take the historical background into consideration. In the late of 19th century, the United States was in an era of industrialization and urbanization. With the advancement of economy and city, more and more people swarmed into big city, which resulted in fierce competition and high unemployment rate. Thus, women at the bottom of the social hierarchy were forced to work outside the home to earn a living. Certainly, born in a farm Carrie was one of lower-class women. Her poor family cannot provide her with better life. Therefore in order to live a better life, she went to Chicago. The ways Carrie behaved and reflected while securing employment revealed the profound influence of traditional norms on her consciousness. She saw a six-story structure labeled Storm and King thinking "it was a wholesale dry goods concern and employed women" [1, 14]. She intentionally tried shoe company, clothing company and department stores because they might want young women as clerks or some other positions fit for women. Finally she found a job as a stitcher in Spiegelheim & Co. which makes boy's caps. All positions that Carrie applied for are traditional women's stuffs. In her subconsciousness, she knew exactly what kind of job that women were supposed to do. Meanwhile her affair with Drouet and Mr. Hurstwood was the sound evidence that she was not willing to work outside if she had other options.

2.2. Desperate "Wife"

Influenced profoundly by traditional domestic values, women lived at the late of 19th century deemed that marriage was the most reliable guarantee for women. Marriage to an accomplished man represented the ultimate aspiration for women of that era. "She feels herself weak and timid. She needs a protector," declared George Burnap, in his lectures on *The Sphere and Duties of Woman* [7, 159]. When Carrie lost her job, she felt herself weak and helpless and became a mistress of Drouet who could supply better life for her and to some extent satisfy her desire. "She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse" [1, 75]. According to social norms, a woman could not live with a man before marriage. Therefore, Carrie thought her behavior violating social norms. To justify her behaviors, Carrie asked Drouet "why don't we get married?" [1, 77] Having obtained an affirmative response, Carrie took it as "a pleasant way out". "Under the circumstances, things would be righted. Her actions would be justified" [1, 77]. In Carrie's view, marriage was not only a guarantee for material things, but also for women's reputations. Once she and Drouet got married, she could thoroughly enjoy her life. Hence, when later Carrie had an affair with Mr. Hurstwood, she asked Hurstwood would they get married more than once. The title Mrs. Drouet or Hurstwood would make her feel secured. In other words, being a wife of a man, Carrie did not have to struggle for living.

Moreover, traditional domestic values - which dictated that husbands should provide both material and emotional support for the family while wives were responsible for housework and

childcare - were deeply ingrained in Carrie's consciousness. At the beginning, Hurstwood and Carrie lived a peaceful and comfortable life after eloping to New York. Mr. Hurstwood invested all his rest money into a resort in Warren Street becoming one partner among three. The business did not pay as well as he thought, but it can manage to maintain their life in a decent level. During this period, Carrie stayed at home playing the role as hostess. Besides managing the stuffs in house, she just cared about her appearance and thought about whether she would buy new clothes, a pair of shoes, a hat, a shirt or something like that. She had no idea of Hurstwood's business or she did not mind at all. Later on, Carrie developed an intimacy with her neighbour Mrs. Vance who had more luxurious goods than her. They two together did lady's things which including walking down Broadway, a remarkable feature of the city, and eating in sumptuous hotel. Carrie enjoyed this kind of life so much that she could not accept the predicament when Hurstwood could not earn that much than before. "She began to look upon Hurstwood wholly as a man, and not as a lover or husband" [1, 263]. After his business failure, Hurstwood sank into a state of listless stagnation at home. Anxious about her future, Carrie questioned Hurstwood that "why don't you get out and look for work?" She also said "I'd like to know what you married me for?" [1, 288]. No doubt in Carrie's mind, a man should to earn money and raise his family. She consistently relied on finding proper husbands rather than developing self-dependence. However, insufficient life expense forced Carrie to work outside again. When she had to use her own wage to pay the rent and raise Hurstwood, Carrie was loath to share her money. Finally she moved out and left Hurstwood.

2.3. "Successful" Actress

Carrie's eventual success as an actress and achievement of economic independence did not necessarily signify her embodiment of the new woman ideal. Another woman who lived in the nearly same era as Carrie was widely regarded as a new woman. She was Edna Pontellier, protagonist in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*. In the view of other people, Edna was one of the happiest women in the world, because "she had a generous and affectionate husband, who provided all the necessities she needed; she had a big house and several servants; she had the time and money for vocations" [8, 358]. Yet she derived no joy from materials, being psychologically imprisoned by conventional norms. Edna craved to develop a complete role as self rather than attached herself to her husband. Obviously Carrie was totally different from Edna. Based on her history with Drouet and Hurstwood, Carrie likely would have chosen a wealthy provider like Mr. Pontellier. Definitely, she would be a wife who obeyed to traditional domestic values. Thus her success was a coincidence. With no man to rely on, Carrie had no choice but to be an actress by making use of her feminine beauty.

On the other hand, Carrie was still restricted to certain field. In the late of 19th century, some women would work on handwork such as cleaning, knitting and stitching. Some were engaged in service industry like desk clerk and waitress. Others dedicated to music, literature and art to represent women's elegance. Originally depicted as service worker, Carrie accidentally became an actress and earned his living by her beauty. It seems that Carrie achieved her self-realization, but there was no essential difference among aforesaid three careers. Acting as an art form still conforms to traditional feminine ideals. Women who owned this talent could satisfy their husbands' vanity. Watching Carrie's first performance on stage, "both Hurstwood and Drouet viewed her pretty figure with rising feelings" [1, 149]. However, to Carrie herself, acting was not her dream but a ladder which helped her climb to upper class. She asked Ames who seemed wiser than Hurstwood and brighter than Drouet in Carrie's eyes that did him think it rather fine to be an actor. Ames told her that he thought the theater a great thing. Approval from Ames "set Carrie's heart bounding." "Ah, if she could only be an actress--a good one! This man was wise and he approved of it. If she were a fine actress, such men as he would approve of her" [1, 258].

Therefore, Carrie spared no effort to be a good actress was not out of self awakening but another way to cater men and traditional norms.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, Carrie's story shows that even with career success, she remained bound by traditional women's roles. Whether in terms of social status or the spiritual realm, she failed to make any attempt to resist the unjust situation. But in fact, she could make differences. The cage that restricted her was unlocked. Several times in the novel, she could have other options. But, Carrie herself chose to stay in the cage, which predetermined her tragedy.

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