

Gender and Socio-Cultural Patterns in Sister Carrie

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Abstract

The insistence on gender studies in the recent feminist criticism has opened the door to male voice as a component of a gendered discourse that includes woman and the dominant cultural ideology. Alongside the flexibility in the feminist in the enterprise which is tolerable of a discipline in “an ever-present relation of contiguity with the originating politics of feminism,” male feminists in gender studies have ceased to be looked upon as appropriate “cross-dressers” (Boon and Cadden 1990:23).

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1. Introduction

Theodore Dreiser’s novels portraying women’s condition amid patriarchal conventions at the turn of the century foreground the issue of gender in significant ways. His interest in women’s life and their aspiration for liberation from the chains of tradition and depressing socio-economic conditions, as we notice these articulated particularly in *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, and *An American Tragedy*, is currently being looked into by feminist critics. The radical gender presentations in his first two novels demonstrate his unease with patriarchy and the concomitant gender orthodoxy. However, Dreiser’s designation as a feminist can be pressed only by viewing what the text proffer and what they preclude. There does not seem to be anything ideological or polemical about the liberation of women in these novels. Nor does he chronicle women’s condition in an organized way which bears out his commitment to the feminist agenda. Nevertheless, professional interest in evaluating Dreiser in relation to issues of gender and his response to the dominant culture is worth pursuing on the evidence of a considerable body of women’s experiences filtered through the masculinity prism. Myra Jehlen argued for amplifying the ambit of gynocriticism in the early 80s and made a plea for an “aggressive “ feminist criticism which would be a “radical comparativism “ to evaluate texts by male and female authors sharing the same milieu and material conditions to reveal the “contiguity of the dominant male tradition” (Jehlen 1981) [8]. In same vein, Elaine Showalter is of the view that “fundamental changes have now begun” to treat the “genuine addition of gender as a ‘central problem in every text’ read and taught “and move further towards “Post-patriarchy”. She points out that “rise of the new woman” and crisis of masculinity” at the close of the 19th century is ideal text-milieu” for gender criticism (Showalter 1989:1-11) [12].

The present paper is an attempt to size up *Sister Carrie* along the track of Gender and Socio-Cultural studies. Published in 1900, Dreiser’s first novel raised the hackles of readers and crashed in the literary market because the picture of a poor woman climbing up social ladders by trading virginity to a

flashy drummer, running off with a married man and eventually striking out on her own flew in the face of genteel cultural traditions of America. In *Carrie*’s pursuit of worldly goals, sexual asymmetry and male dominance in American society of the 1890s as well as squalid conditions of working girls in Chicago’s industrialized locations. Dreiser defined the stereotypes of gender. In a ground-breaking essay, which was the first attempt to view Dreiser’s feminism, Sybil B. Weir argues that

Dreiser is the first, and perhaps the only, major American novelist who refuses to present women only as symbols of the American ideals. His female characters may represent the American possibilities, but these possibilities are not, as 19th century fiction asserted, only pastoral and Edenic, nor, as 20th century fiction asserts, deconstructive and immoral. Unlike most American novelists. Dreiser accepts the aspirations of his heroines. Why shouldn’t there be a female version of Horatio Alger? Why should women be expected to be inherently moral, disdainful of materialistic motives, presented as monsters if they are as ambitious? (Weir 1972: 65) [14].

Dreiser’s departure from the traditional attitudes toward sexuality marks some fruitful directions for feminist interpretations of *Sister Carrie*.

Dreiser’s selection of his material to inscribe gender role of the female protagonist is of seminal significance. Critics have hinted at the symbolic relationship between *Carrier Meeber* and Dreiser’s *Sister*, *Emma Wilhelmina Dreiser*- a point rebutted by Ellen Moers in her book *Two Dreisers* (Moers 1969:79) [10] in view of obvious parallels in *Emma*’s elopement with R A Hopkins, a cashier in *Chaping* and *Gore*’s tavern in Chicago, and *Carrie*’s run-away affair with *Hurstwood*. The panic of Hopkins’ wife when she learnt that her husband had absconded with stolen money and *Emma* is supposed to have provided the basis for the *Carrie-Hurstwood* episode in the novel. Yet others have pointed out the influence of Dreiser’s early infatuation with *Sarah* as also his encounter

with a country-girl in a Chicago-bound train around the time Carrie's story begins. But the novelist does not seem to adhere to the gender prototypes available in his personal life and weaves together a range of historical materials to shape the trajectory of his protagonist from a naive compliant girl to stage star with attendant affluence.

Dreiser charts a path for her which shows the "half-equipped little knight she was" (Dreiser 1900, 1981:4) without any advantage of family or upbringing, taking on life in the wide world. She weathers the "job-assorted trails" without overt despair and rallies her spirits to earn at least meagre upkeep. At the same time the desire to locate her career lucratively remains alive and strong, pushing her to abandon traditional female roles amid new freedoms gained in the urban mores of Chicago: "She felt ashamed in the face of the better-dressed girls who went by, she felt as though she should be better served, and her heart revolted" (Dreiser 1900, 1981:4).

Dreiser's portrayal of working girls is full of compassion and sympathy. The novelist catalogues the trying conditions of feminine workplaces at the turn of the century and underlines, as it were, the plight of unskilled wage-seekers like Carrie, moving from one business establishment to another. Carrie's hunt for a position and her hard work at a sewing machine in Chicago shoe-factory are akin to those of her peers in the "Tenement fiction." Her fumbling inquiries and tentative employers throw her into different world from which she has stepped out. By pushing a country-bred, coy girl among relatively independent, self-promoting and assertive men of the city, Dreiser makes no bones about his sympathy for the new mobility and expanding opportunities. As the narrator observes.

A flame of envy lightened in her heart. She realised in a dim way how much the city held—Wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole and fulsome heart(ibid:23).

Mesmerised by a staggering array of consumer goods in upcoming department stores of Chicago she realized the misery that results from absence of money. But Dreiser supports her rise into gratifying status and challenges the moral categories, implicit in the popular novels of the day. He takes her along a different track of economic alleviation where she does not sink into the usual fate of wage-earning protagonists in the "working girl" fiction or in sentimental "Costume" romances. He overturns the requisite credo of the genteel literary tradition, as Cathy N. and Arnold E. Davidson (1977:395-407) point out, and undercuts it further by showing Carrie's ambition, her early attempts at acting and decision against the prevalent mores of matrimony and family life delineated in her sister, Minnie's grinding domesticities. But Dreiser is ambivalent in granting sexual autonomy to his protagonist. Even as he defies the dominant culture's stereotypes in depicting Carrie's interior sensibility and in launching her on an altogether unconventional course of security and selfhood, he denies the female wage earner political expression or her response to her work. Nor does he "locate woman's resilience in her work place itself rather than in her after hours pleasures" (Gogol 1992: 43-44). The protagonist of the women workforce was building up and moves were afoot to form the Women's Trade Union League during the time Dreiser was recording the massive entry of

women in Chicago's factory industries. Thus, in spite of his sympathy which goes beyond surface realism in gender presentations in notable ways, Dreiser remains hopelessly muted in rendering the female condition in his historical-cultural context. Was it because the dominant culture was not tolerant of women's transgression from the given sexual dispensation?

The text milieu of Dreiser's first novel saw the widening sphere of woman's action and work and her growing economic confidence but challenges to male dominance did not find support in the 1890s. Even the new century retained its "arm of power" (Gammel 1994:54) by rearguard action and the residue of conservatism. In his later life when he was increasingly turning to talented women to get their feedback on the draft versions of his works, Mencken urged him to seek "the advice of men with hair on their chests—not of men." Dreiser too in his personal life sometimes treated women as sexist stereotypes and this asymmetry passes into his contradictory attitudes to gender issues in his fiction. However, on balance, he was supportive of the rising class of women, their vocational freedom and sexual choices. As Thomas P. Riggio has observed,

Dreiser looked upon these women, who belonged to the generation born in the 1880s and 1890s, as the representative types of the day. He tried to define in their lives an emerging class of woman—the offspring of a century of industrialization, of the movement from town and farm to urban centre, and of rapid shifts in roles and values (Riggio 1980:26) ^[11].

On the other hand, Dreiser was aware of the standards of censorship that the publishers would impose on the novel. He skips any reference to the natural consequences of Carrie's sexual relationships with Drouet and Hurstwood. He is silent on the use of contraception or women's access to birth control measures to avoid complications of the sexual contract. Nancy Warner Barrineau notes that Dreiser was aware of the federal Comstock laws which had declared written material about sex, pornography and contraception as "obscene". She notes:

Certainly Dreiser wrote *Sister Carrie* with an eye tipped toward the force of Comstock; and in 1911, while he was finishing *Jennie Gerhardt*, the 1873 Comstock Law still prohibited honest literary treatment of sexual issues, as well as open discussion and dissemination of birth control information (Gogol 1992:59) ^[5].

Dreiser tried to circumvent the censor as well as the dominant cultural bias by attributing Carrie's unconventional sexual behaviour to the circumstances of poverty and destitution and exploring the inadequacies of conventional ethics "when it came to evaluating the morality of individuals in such situations" (Matheson 1980:84) ^[9] yet the book did not earn popular acclaim. It's cold reception was caused by Dreiser's radical departure from stereotyped gender presentations. The American reading public preferred culture's stereotypes in *An American Tragedy* (1925) even as the banner of feminism was being raised by Edna St. Vincent Millany, Margaret Sanger, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and other "New Women" in the 1920's. The commercial failure of *Sister Carrie* compared to the instant success of *An American Tragedy* may be attributed to, apart from Dreiser's matured fictional craft, his challenge

of the culture's ideology of gender which is subdued in the later novel.

Dreiser also presents the gendered perception of power balance in sexual relationship. When women yield to men in the sexual act, they move down on the debit side of the equation and man claims seduction as his victory. Drouet describes his relationship with Carrie as his "delicious conquest" while the latter reflects that she has lost something. But he allows her to remain timelessly tempting and desirable for men without any pathos or psychological trauma in her onward pursuit of cherished happiness. She gives up sexual contacts in her prosperous phase whereby Dreiser shows her progressive empowerment in gender relations. Thus by endorsing Carrie's mental, emotional and spiritual growth through her affairs that release "her higher potentialities of being," Dreiser intervened in the ruling code sexuality and upset the moral appellation sanctioned by the cultural milieu of America in the 1900s (Glicksberg 1971: 38-39) [4]. Gender boundaries in the late nineteenth century American cities are foregrounded by the tenor of male discourse, fellowship and solidarity in the Elks "suspended from Drouet's watch chain (P.5), "the gentlemen Elks (who) knew the standing of one another" (p.177). Hurstwood's "considerable influence, owing to his long standing with the Elks" (p.174), underscore the sociological significance of what late 20th century feminists call homosocial world formed to preserve ideals of masculinity including gains of business and illicit sexuality. Drouet

Could talk races with Hurstwood, tell interesting incidents concerning himself and his experiences with women, and report the state of trade in the cities which he visited, and so managed to make himself almost invariably agreeable....come around after the show. I have something I want to show you, said Hurstwood....Is she a bloode? said Drouet, laughing." "come around about twelve, said Hurstwood, ignoring the question (p. 44,48).

Later on the rivalry for Carrie between the two Elks fellows and her performance in the Elks' theatrical benefit subvert the gender hypothesis fortified by the homosocial preserve. "As Dreiser's principal character", says Scott Zaluda, "She is the central to his critique of constructions of male power" (Gogal 1995: 85). She moves from the fringes of dominant culture and shakes up, as it were, the exclusive preserve of privileged men wielding their Elk medallions. Her presence and prominence in the male-dominated resort is a signifying transaction in the novel to signal the cultural transition in America. Put another way, her desire to locate herself lucratively represents new pressures on social sexual arrangements.

Dreiser keeps on setting up potent correlative of Carrie's rising desire till she reaches a plateau. He endorses herself charted route to material headway and winks at her infringements of the sanctioned way to satisfy her drives for money and security. The tropes of male power and dominance are shown by Carrie's passivity in the sexual act. Irene Gammel in a brilliant essay on *Sister Carrie* points out that "Dreiser chooses as his protagonist a female character who moves from one sexual relationship to the next, apparently planning to "give up" sexual contacts when she becomes rich, is an obvious critique of the sexual practices that the narrator

presents as 'normal' (Gammel 1994: 39-40). By underlining the male -imposed sexuality on female body, Dreiser leaves Carrie unencumbered by moral views and responsibility of premarital sex. With Hurstwood in total infatuation with her she finds "the tables turned" (p.195) and looks up to her lover with a new strength and independence."She was now experiencing the first shades of feeling of that subtle change which removes one out of the ranks of the supplicants into the lines of dispenser of charity" (p198).

Even as Hurstwood's passion is inflamed by Carrie's charms, he drifts from his wife, Julia, and allows the domestic stand-off to simmer. There is romantic triviality in his middle age philandering and his domestic dissimulation is in a large measure responsible for his wife's nonsacrificial and non-yielding disposition. Hurstwood's indifference to study marital relationship and his frivolity attenuate Carrie's promiscuity: "For years he had been steadily modifying his matrimonial devotion, and found her company dull. Now that a new light shone upon the horizon, this older luminary paled in the West. He was satisfied to turn his face away entirely and any call to look back was irksome" (p.114). Dreiser exposes the fissures in his facade of "a respectable home anchorage" in that his true colours- the hypocrisy of the culture's ideology of gender—come out in the masculine world for the "resort which he managed was his life" (p85). Hurstwood is alienated from his uneroticised, desexualized wife but his fondness for illicit sexuality is evident in his social rounds which bring homosocial reinforcement, segregated zones of gender and cracks in "the compassionate, sexual, and parental bonds which thin the family" into simultaneous focus.

Although Carrie, guided by her self-interest, looks for an affluent breakthrough, she is not responsible for Hurstwood's indiscretions which culminate into a scandalous divorce suit filed by his wife. The impending notoriety prods his desire to possess Carrie and run away. With the money lifted from the bar's safe in a state of clouded judgement, he lies that Drouet has been hurt and coaxes her to board a train with him. Eventually, they arrive in New York from Montreal, Carrie knowing nothing about the rash act of theft and desperate reason for his fight. As his fortune takes an irreversible downside, she becomes the breadwinner and seeks her fortune in the amateur dramatics. Dreiser reverses the conventional gender relationship with Carrie supporting the house-hold and Hurstwood running domestic chores. When she realizes that the married life does not keep her well-supplied in material needs, she moves away from the confining responsibilities of family. Her parting note is a terrible wrench for Hurstwood.

Dear George," he read, crunching the money in one hand. "I am going away. I'm not coming back any more. It's no use trying to keep up flat. I can't do it. I wouldn't mind helping you if I could, but I can't support us both and pay the rent. I need what little I make to pay for my clothes. I'm leaving twenty dollars. It's all I have just now. You can do whatever you like with the furniture. I won't want it Carrie. (p 439).

She pities Hurstwood when she comes to know of his having committed the theft at Hanna and Hogg's through Drouet but they have come too far apart. She does not entertain Drouet's "mawkish and silly" overtures either and warms up to a new awareness spurting forth within her, in the inspiring company of Bob Ames who counsels her to read Balzac's *Piere Goriot*.

“Anyone so susceptible to improve should be aided,” (p.482) says the narrator. Her conscience is kindled by Ames’s reflections: “Some people get the idea that their happiness lies in wealth and position. Balzac thought so, I believe. Many people do. They look about and wring their hands over many passing visions of joy. They forget that they had that, they couldn’t have something else. The world is full of desirable situations, but unfortunately we can occupy one at a time. Most people occupy one and neglect it too long for others” (p.482). When Ames guides and goads her to become a medium of expressing the “world’s sorrow and longings” (p.485), she finds herself locked into a fragile state of fulfilment and wistful state of dreaming. Although Dreiser voices pessimistic implications of Carrie’s illusions at the end of the novel, he does valorise her drives for a fulfilling vocation. She is not contained her drives for a fulfilling vocation. She is not contained by deterministic forces and to the extent that she is not circumscribed by the dominant culture’s ideology and society’s power structure. Dreiser offers “a progressive reflection of gender roles in the 19th century” (Vasey 1994:29) ^[13]. Of Course, he avoids candid discussion of the sexual inequities and withholds articulation of fuller judgements on gender because of its paradoxical attitude to women and the pet sensitivities of the reading public. Nonetheless, Carrie’s bravado goes a long way in tempering Dreiser’s naturalism. It exemplifies Dreiser’s ability to extricate himself from the “conventions that dominated twentieth century (Gogol 1995:3) ^[7]. He delineates the cultural situation of America as he sees it at the turn of the century in its complexities, inadequacies, biases, ideologies and self-contradictions, and fittingly so, in describing “frank” sexual matters shows women moving up to undermine masculinity hegemony.

2. Conclusion

To sum up Dreiser was not a feminist but his portrayal of women in his work does help us historicise the issue of Gender and Socio-cultural patterns in modern American Fiction.

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