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Consumer Culture in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

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Abstract

Theodore Dreiser, the American novelist (1871-1945), was a keen witness of the huge industrial changes in America. Dreiser minutely portrayed the lives of the poor in society because he had experienced poverty both as a child and an adult and he could also depict the lives of the rich as he was a journalist who was in everyday contact with the facts of such people's life. In one of his novels, *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser, impersonally, represents the struggles of a poor girl who finds her way up the social scale. Carrie, the protagonist of the story, lives in an industrial and commodified society in which people find their identity in items of consumption. In this article, the researchers attempt to examine the dexterity of Dreiser in portraying the inner and outer lives of characters in such a society and in the light of Baudrillard's theory of consumerism and the way this portrait approximates real life.

Key words: *Sister Carrie*; Dreiser; Commodified Society; Baudrillard; Consumerism

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INTRODUCTION

Theodore Dreiser, the naturalist novelist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in America, witnessed and consciously understood the great changes happening in this country and recorded them, in minute details, in his novels. Among the changes in this period are the vast production and consumption of goods, the opening up of huge factories, the development of electricity in the 1880s which augmented factories more than ever, the revolution in mass communication, the construction of railroads, the invention of telephone, the incredible rise of population with the rushing of immigrants into this country, the toil and drudgery of women, the appearance of "titanic industrialists" who held great wealth which constantly widened the gap between the rich and the poor, the removal of rural and agricultural areas as a result of the emigration of rural people to the cities in the hope of finding better job opportunities (Cassuto and Eby, 2004, p.2-3).

As a result, from 1890's to present, the realistic and naturalistic novels in America have dealt with the costs people pay in the name of civilization, growth, and success. Theodore Dreiser is one of the key figures in the tradition of realistic novels in America (Farrell, 1946, p.309), among whose concerns consumerism, gender, class, and power can be named (Cassuto and Eby, 2004, p.2). The objective rendering of these issues by Dreiser makes his novels permanent and related to our own time too. One of the main issues expressed in Dreiser's novel is consumerism whose exploration, is the aim of the present study.

Form 1850s onward, consumerism was speeding rapidly in both western countries and in America (Stearns, 2001, p.47), and intellectuals, clearly, responded to consumerism differently and according to diverse motives. Regarding the importance of consumption, it is not surprising that Baudrillard devoted several of his books including *The System of Objects* (1968), *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (1970), *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), *The Mirror of Production* (1973), and *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) to the study of this crucial issue. According to Baudrillard consumption has a system similar to that of language. He views consumption as a discourse or language or in

Levi-Straussian term a kinship system. It is one way of communication between people and therefore it can be discussed through the terms sign, signifier, signified, and code (Ritzer, 1998, p.7). When consumption is viewed as a system consisting of endless signs, certain features of a modern consumer society can be understood and analyzed systematically. The abundant objects create for the individual an always-felt sense of lack, reification of emotions, identity problems, and break of ties with other individuals. Of course, women's position is further complicated as they are seen as objects in this society.

Consumption and Lack

The consumer society constantly produces objects with needs corresponding to them, leading individuals to feel that they always lack something, and this process explains the never-ending process of consumption. Baudrillard (1998) believes that the growing industrialization and urbanization bring about the ever increasing production of objects and needs. Our growth society is the opposite of affluent society because the needs progress more rapidly than the objects corresponding to them (p.65).

Consumption and the Reification of Values

Individuals' values are reified in the objects because of their emotional distance from their fellowmen and because of their lacks and shortcomings. Because of the lack of enough human relationships, people invest their emotions and passions in the objects which reflect to them the desired images not the real ones. People retreat to the objects in order to find an outlet for their tensions and that is the reason for their personalized relationship with objects (Baudrillard, 1996, p.90-91).

Consumption and Identity

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. The special singularity of the objects is because of the fact that people recognize themselves with them (Baudrillard, 1996, p.91), and they are "taken as the object's aims, and the object *loves"* them. And because they are loved, they are "personalized," and feel that they exist. This is the primary thing, and the "actual purchase of the object is secondary" (Baudrillard, 1996, p.171).

Consumption and the Broken Ties

Baudrillard in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* contends that "in modernity symbolic relations between people are severed, abstracted, and reduced to semiotic, commodified relations plotted on a single, universal scale of identity/difference" (cited in Pawlett, 2007, p.151). As people fall into the competition for establishing their status by acquiring objects and making marginal differences, the real interaction between them is lost.

Consumption and Women

Women are seen as active consumers in society. The individual is said to please himself, because it is in this way that he can please others. This objective is mainly directed at women. Women are the main target of self-indulgence by the force of the "myth of woman" (Baudrillard, 1998, p.95). According to Sullerot, culture defines for women the definition of being a woman, i.e. making herself pleasing to others and in this way the woman is actually consuming herself (qtd. in Baudrillard, 1998, p.95). Therefore, not only women's relation to others is based on consumption but also their relation to themselves (ibid.).

DISCUSSION

Sister Carrie which is considered as the best and most representative of Dreiser's novel (Stegner, 1965, p.vii) relates the faith of a girl who leaves her poor family from Colombia City, a little town at that time, and after experiencing the life in two big cities, Chicago and New York, becomes an actress at the end. Dreiser's purpose, here, is to represent the realities of the modern consumer society and the status of individual in it. He regards himself as a medium for communicating these social issues (Riggio, 2004, p.57).

The Unceasing "Voice of Want"

As it was explained, according to Baudrillard, consumer society cultivates endless desires in human beings. Likewise, Carrie remains to the end full of insatiable longings; in other words, she remains poor in spirit as she becomes dependent on external signs for her happiness. Lears (2004) states that "what Dreiser understood—and it was his deepest insight into modern American culture—was that the narrative of lack was never ending" (p.78). The city is full of enticing objects which lead Carrie to ambition and desire for luxury. These commodities attract Carrie to themselves all the time, no matter if she is able to buy them or not. When she is moneyless and searches for a job at a department store, she is mesmerized by "the dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, haircombs, purses" (Dreiser, 1982, p.23) and there is nothing there which she does not want to have. She can feel the "claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally" (ibid.). Later in the novel, when she has enough money to spend, her ambition is not diminished but intensified. In the following passage, the wooing of Carrie by commodities is described:

> Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear. The voice of the so-called inanimate! Who shall translate us the language of the stones? "My dear," said the lace collar she secured from Partridge's, "I fit you beautifully; don't give me up." "Ah, such little feet," said the leather of the soft new shoes; "how effec-

> tively I cover them. What a pity they should ever want my aid." (Dreiser, 1982, p.106)

When consumption is viewed as a system consisting of signs, one may understand why commodities are so important for Carrie. After leaving her sister and living with Drouet, Carrie sometimes thinks about what she has done. But her "voice of conscience" is answered by the "voice of want" (Dreiser, 1982, p.99). She thinks that she may return to her previous life if it meant only hunger and hard work, but suppressing her desire for good clothes, she could never even think of (Dreiser, 1982, p.107). The reason for this dependency, even at the cost of losing her virtue, is that she comes to regard commodities as signifiers of different values such as beauty, happiness, and social and personal prestige. Once she acquires these commodities, she does not find the values she has expected and desires for more objects; consequently, this process incessantly continues. Dreiser states that Carrie does not long for the world of theatre and fashion, but for the things they represent and at last she comes to understand that these are all false signs leading to nothing (McAleer, 1968, p.79).

"The Voice of the So-Called Inanimate"

Carrie comes to appreciate her beauty when she has bought some nice things for herself. She goes to Carson Pirie's and buys a skirt, a shirt waist, and some cosmetics until she looks "quite another maiden." And in her apartment, the mirror assures her that she is pretty (Dreiser, 1982, p.82). Carrie has natural beauty and she knows it but it is only when she buys nice clothes that she is convinced of her beauty and celebrates it. In other words, commodities are indispensible for Carrie to gain self-confidence through her beauty.

For the novel's characters success means having enough money to build an appearance and spend on frivolous activities. Carrie regards success as having enough money to satisfy her desire for things. Hurstwood's and Drouet's success is also measured in material terms. When Hurstwood attends Carrie's first performance *Under the Gaslight*, with a number of his friends, the reader is told that their "stout figures, large white bosoms, and shining pins," bespeak "the character of their success" (Dreiser, 1982, p.185). Drouet also spends an evening drinking and then buying some cigar and this for him represents "in part high life, a fair sample of what the whole must be" (Dreiser, 1982, p.44). At the end of the novel, his aspirations have not changed and still "a good dinner, the company of a young woman, and an evening at the theater" are the basic things for him (Dreiser, 1982, p.519). The material things and entertainments are presented as signs of success in a consumer society and blind the characters to any other means which may endow them with the same or even higher success.

Carrie, likewise, comes to measure happiness by the material things she sees. Consequently, in her view well-off people like Drouet and Hurstwood are very happy and fortunate. When Drouet at the beginning of the novel invites her to a fine restaurant, his demeanor is described as such: "As he cut the meat his rings almost spoke. His new suit creaked as he stretched to reach the plates, break the bread, and pour the coffee." These details mesmerize Carrie completely and she thinks that he "must be fortunate" (Dreiser, 1982, p.63). The auxiliary verb "must" is used as deduction. The fine appearance of Drouet is the prerequisite sign of his happiness and good fortune. In another instance, with her neighbor Mrs. Hale, Carrie goes for a ride in a region called North Shore Drive in Chicago and assumes that people living there are surely happy:

> She imagined that across these richly carved entrance-ways, where the globed and crystalled lamps shone upon paneled doors set with stained and designed panes of glass, was neither care nor unsatisfied desire. She was perfectly certain that here was happiness. (Dreiser, 1982, p.122)

In New York too Carrie goes for a walk in Broadway with her neighbor Mrs. Vance and is awed by so much affluence that she witnesses. She is immersed in a world of fashion in which all around, jewelers, florists, furriers, haberdashers, and confectioners follow in "rapid succession." The street is full of coaches with "pompous doormen" standing at their doors and waiting for the "mistresses of carriages who were shopping inside." Carrie notices among these people "the sprinkling of goodness and the percentage of vice," yet she longs to "feel the delight of parading here as an equal. Ah, then she would be happy! " (Dreiser, 1982, p.324-325). Carrie thinks shopping without restraint is the sign of felicity. Besides regarding commodities and entertainments as signs of human values such as beauty, success and happiness, the characters know or define themselves through the commodities they possess or the entertainments they afford to provide.

The Preeminence of Appearance

The consumer society creates the illusion of singularity and distinction and that is the reason why they are always in competition to acquire things that make them special and shape an identity for them. Carrie at the beginning of the novel, when she becomes acquainted with Drouet on the train, compares her appearance with that of him and uneasily becomes conscious of their difference. As Dreiser says: "The great create an atmosphere which reacts badly upon the small" (Dreiser, 1982, p.306). The great impact that Drouet's clothes have upon Carrie is not only shown by describing the feeling of Carrie at that moment, but more emphatically through the careful description of every particularity of Drouet's appearance:

> His suit was of a striped and crossed pattern of brown wool, new at that time, but since become familiar as a business suit. The low crotch of the vest revealed a stiff bosom of white and pink stripes… (Dreiser, 1982, p.4)

The above features are very important to Drouet, the things without which he is nothing (Dreiser, 1982, p.4). Carrie, impressed by his appearance, is infatuated by him because she regards him as her superior. She even trusts him by giving him her sister's address. In her working place, she abhors the shabby-clothed boys because she compares them to the fine-clothed Drouet and attributes all the bad qualities to the former, while all the "worth, goodness, and distinction" to the latter (Dreiser, 1982, p.42-43). Carrie always compares herself to others and others with each other, and in this way determines her identity and theirs. The more one is different from others in appearance, the more Carrie believes him or her to be superior in identity; in other words, the external signs of affluence bespeak for Carrie the internal elegance and goodness. Identity becomes a commodity to be bought and sold, and therefore humans become lonely and distant from their fellowmen.

"The Metropolis is a Cold Place Socially"

In the novel the reader is told that "the metropolis is a cold place socially" (Dreiser, 1982, p.462) and as one can see all the discourses between characters are colored by materialistic notions, whether between members of a family or strangers. Carrie's relation to her sister's family is materialized as they are always anxious over a share of the rent by Carrie and there is no feeling of intimacy and sympathy among them. Minnie and Hanson are not considered blameworthy for being cold and unsympathetic, because this is the pressure of the modern life which has hardened and committed them into a routine and hard life. They seldom have enough time and money enough to pay on leisure. Dreiser often intrudes and sympathizes with the characters and the reason may be that he had experienced the life of poverty and hard work (Simpson, 1965, p.110). The relation of Carrie with strangers is also of a material kind, from the managers of the companies to Drouet and Hurstwood. Carrie is likened to a fly that falls into the web of the city and is exposed to indefinite and unlimited dangers:

> If, unfortunately, the fly has got caught in the net, the spider can come forth and talk business upon its own terms. So when maidenhood has wandered into the moil of the city, when it is brought within the circle of the "rounder" and the roué, even though it be at the outermost rim, they can come forth and use their alluring arts. (Dreiser, 1982, p.129)

When she asks the manager of a company for a job, he looks at her as if looking down on a package, so cold and unsympathetic (Dreiser, 1982, p.26). Carrie assents to living with Drouet, even against moral values and personal conscience, because of poverty. After a while, she is again seduced by another man Hurstwood, the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's saloon, and is beguiled to flee with him. But when he declines financially, she leaves him and finally becomes an actress. She is indifferent to both her lovers and only resolves to live with them in order to be provided for financially.

The impossibility of communication is always felt in the novel and it is replaced by the relationship between humans and objects. Lawson (2009) states that "Dreiser's characters drift and dream, they respond to the call of the commodity, the sensory intensity of the shop-window, but they rarely *feel*" (p.156). Department stores do not even include the bargaining of the consumer with the shopper and because of the fixed prices of the objects, the act of consumption becomes wholly the relation between the consumer and the commodity (Brown, 2004, p.90). Carrie forms an amorous relation with what she sees in a department store as she pauses at each fine item before she hurries on and her "woman's heart" grows "warm with desire for them." She is caught in a delightful "middle state in which we mentally balance at times, possessed of the means, lured by desire, and yet deterred by conscience or want of decision" (Dreiser, 1982, p.72). Carrie is seduced by the objects that fascinate her and is placed in a delicious moment of indecision or emotional dalliance. Carrie never feels so passionately about her lovers Drouet and Hurstwood as she does about objects. In fact, she does not want her lovers but only the "comfort and ease" which they represent (Pizer, 1976, p.60). According to Merish (2003), "while Carrie is 'learning to look'—becoming an active consumer subject—she is also learning to see herself as an object according to increasingly exacting commodity standards of taste and social distinction" (p.231).

Woman as "the Most Fascinating of all the Pleasures"

Carrie is treated as a commodity by men in society and therefore she cannot be herself but what others like her to be. This point is manifestly exemplified in the passage where Carrie has performed her first amateur theatrical role in Chicago. Both Hurstwood and Drouet come to appreciate her enormously more than before. According to Crane (2007), here Carrie is transformed to the desired object for her lovers when they see that all the audience desire her. When she is "carried away by her role and not really aware of the audience," she in fact becomes like "an item in a store window—something looked at that does not look back" (p.200). This passage is paradigmatic of Carrie viewed as a commodity all throughout the novel. Other instances among many which highlight the inferiority of women are when Carrie is searching for a role in theater in New York and a manager of a theater judges Carrie as he would horseflesh (Dreiser, 1982, p.396), or the description of her first manager that has "great contempt for any assumption of dignity or innocence on the part of these young women" (Dreiser, 1982, p.400).

In another instance, walking with Carrie, Drouet admiringly points to other women's manners indirectly encouraging Carrie to be like them (Dreiser, 1982, p.107). In this way, she is not only transformed into a "desirable

'woman'," but also is "reconstructed as an 'American' and incorporated within an emerging national commodity market" (Merish, 2003, p.230). When Carrie breaks up with Drouet, he reminds her of what he has done for her and Carrie answers that he has only made a plaything of her. As McAleer (1968) says:

> 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 conspicuous affluence, to Hurstwood, a surrogate to negate middle-age disillusionment. (p.84-85)

When women are regarded as commodities in society, they come to be dominated by men. Carrie is led by the desires of Drouet and Hurstwood hither and thither. Carrie has a "passive and receptive rather than an active and aggressive nature" (Dreiser, 1982, p.316), and therefore is a malleable subject to be dominated by the forces of society. And she is not alone in that, her sister Minnie also has a thin and weary figure and her "ideas of life" are colored by her husband's and she is hardened "into narrower conceptions of pleasure and duty than had ever been hers in a thoroughly circumscribed youth" (Dreiser, 1982, p.15). Hanson's shadow dominates Minnie and marginalizes her. Moreover, once at dinner, the Vances (Carrie's neighbors in New York) talk about a popular book of the time "Molding a Maiden" by Albert Ross. The title is suggestive of the way women are treated in a consumer society, as the verb "mold" is used for upbringing a girl as if she is a statue or a doll, and the attitude of Ames (the cousin of Mrs. Vance and the only character who is critical of the spectacles of consumption) who says this book is cheap, affirms this (Dreiser, 1982, p.338).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, regarding Baudrillard's theory of consumption which reveals the way the individuals in a modern consumer society suffer from the disillusionment of their desires, estrangement from other humans, and the suppression of their subjectivity, one can find *Sister Carrie* an appropriate example to verify the above points. Dreiser realistically presents the modern society of America which was expanding rapidly in terms of industry, technology, population, and commerce. The reader painfully experiences the two sides of this society which Dreiser portrays.

The outer aspect of this society which mesmerizes Carrie all throughout the novel, is the realm of consumption marked by alluring and enchanting objects which are supposed by everyone, except Ames, to be representatives of happiness, success, freedom, and identity, and in short the gateways of the so-called "walled-city" (Dreiser, 1982, p.468). The inner aspect of the consumer society, which Carrie abhors, is the realm of production which is marked by back-breaking jobs done in dingy and suffocating places. Dreiser pays the same if not more attention to the latter realm because it is actually where the pillars of the realm of consumption are erected. The wealthy heads of companies fuel this vicious circle of production and consumption.

The vain promises of the walled-city are shown by Hurstwood's tragic end (he commits suicide by sleeping in a gas-filled room) and Carrie's lack of inner harmony at the end of the novel. Hurstwood in his last moments of life says "what's the use?" and weakly stretches himself to rest (Dreiser, 1982, p.524). This question of his is an answer to all his longings, speculations, and endeavors in his life. He has reached his end both physically and mentally. Carrie is now well-off physically but not mentally, one whom Hurstwood thinks has got into the walled city, the doors of which are closed to him forever (Dreiser, 1982, p.468). The reader is told that Carrie has reached everything which had once been her goals in life including gowns, carriage, furniture, bank account, friends, fame, and beauty, but all these have now "grown trivial and indifferent" (Dreiser, 1982, p.524-525). She still lives and dreams but never feels satisfied, as symbolized by her rocking chair which is "rocking but not going forward" (Yu, 2010, p.212).

Carrie rises materially because she disregards her ethics and morals whenever they come in the way of her success. Hurstwood falls, because he cannot overcome his conscience or fear after having stolen ten thousand dollars from the saloon he works in and thus returns the money. He could have kept the money instead and could have invested in a business. Dreiser of course does not wholly condemn Carrie for ignoring her morality and that was the reason he had problem publishing the novel at that time. He says that "not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness often allures the feeling mind unused to reason" (Dreiser, 1982, p.526). According to Wald (2004), "whether or not Carrie's actions should be condemned is a question Dreiser does not resolve" and that Carrie is both "magnificent and frightening" (p.191).

The only character who reasons is Ames and it is through him that Dreiser offers "a critique of materialistic standards" (Simpson, 1965, p.115). Ames believes that spending lavishly is a shame, that one does not need so much money to feel happy (Dreiser, 1982, p.339), and that clinging to far-off dreams does not do anybody good (Dreiser, 1982,p.506). His ideas are very strange for Carrie "over which she had never pondered" (Dreiser, 1982, p.337). He reasons in contrast to Carrie who dreams all the time, and Dreiser directly says that she will dream such happiness as she may never feel (Dreiser, 1982, p.527). The space devoted to the character of the reasonable Ames is very limited and it is probably indicative of the scarcity of reason as opposed to wasteful dreaming in this society.

Altogether, Dreiser in this novel realistically portrays

a rapidly developing society in terms of the production of commodities and the needs corresponding to them at the same time. The people, like the characters of this novel, are fascinated by the lures of the market place and are given assurance that their final salvation lies in this realm. They are even ready to sacrifice their morality and independence for getting into this walled-city, not knowing that those who are within do not find the final salvation promised by the use of commodities.

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