

The Growth of Sister Carrie from the Perspective of Naturalism

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Abstract

Dreiser was an outstanding American novelist of naturalism. As the beginning of his fame, Sister Carrie is a vivid portrait of American life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and a reveal of the impact of the environment on people, which embodies the determinism of naturalism. This paper presents a way to change the class by describing the growth of a woman. On this basis, this paper will combine the theory of naturalism and Bildungsroman to explore the development of sister Carrie and find out the essence of her upbringing.

Keywords

Sister Carrie; Growth; Fate; Determinism.

1. Introduction

Sister Carrie, an eighteen-year-old peasant girl from Colombia, was alone on the train to Chicago, eager for the big city. It was the first time she had ever been in such a lively and prosperous place. On the one hand, she had seen so much that she had never seen before, and the affluent society and modernization had strengthened her desire for material things and money; on the other, the sudden change of life pattern had stored up trouble for the future [1]. In the process from naive to mature, she is almost passive acceptance of changes. Simultaneously, Carrie is always inundated with numerous choices. After surviving a series of hardships, Carrie finally lived the life she had always dreamed of. However, the innocent girl did not increase her intelligence in dealing with practical problems, especially in dealing with men. Although, as an adult female, she gained money and wealth, her rise from rags to riches is driven by the whole society and the surrounding environment. Behind such a character is a reflection of society's cruel treatment of people at that time.

From the perspective of naturalism, it is easy to find out the logic behind the sister Carrie's growth. Naturalists believe that instinctive desires drive human behavior and control human destiny; heredity and environment determine social acts and personal characteristics; only those who adapt to the environment can survive [2]. The process of Carrie's growth acts in conformity with the basic pattern of Bildungsroman: innocence-temptation-runaway-perplexity-test-loss of innocence-epiphany-understanding of life and self [1]. She has, nevertheless, no choice. For better survival, within the constraints of environment and society, she was driven forward by external forces, greed and lust [3]. Carrie had never fought decisively or obstinately against anything by choosing to accept all the changes that came with growing up. Being devoid of the essential steps of growing up, the juvenile farm girl didn't become mature. She just had more experience and insight than when she first arrived in Chicago.

2. The First Stage of Growth: Fake Independent Life

In the late 1990s, the United States shifted from an agricultural country to an industrial one, with rapid urbanization and large-scale industrial production impacting the self-sufficient rural

economy, which has led to the displacement of people who used to depend on agriculture to find alternative employment in the big cities. Sister Carrie was one of them. American literary naturalists believe that, in the operation of Social Law, human free will is minimal, or even non-existent. Survival is the highest goal of human life [2]. It can be seen that the decision to go to the metropolitan city was not Carrie's own idea, but an option to adapt to the changes in society, which makes the most suitable for her subsistence. Her Sister, Minnie Hanson, was the first guide on her path. The Hansons lived a tough and frugal life, which obliged her to look for a job. However, when she first came to Chicago, without a clear plan, she knew merely the job market in Chicago. In the wake of no skills of her own, she had to try ceaselessly and finally found a job as a worker in a shoe factory. There's no doubt that it's a hard job and pays little. To make things worse, she lost her job a couple of weeks later, closing heels of her illness. At that moment, she was in a pickle: return to her hometown or accept "relief" from Drouet. She struggled for a long time, at a loss and depressed.

This vacillation persisted throughout her acceptance of Drouet. When he gave her 20 dollars, she thought about giving the money back, but she also felt that money was a cure for her troubles. She walked into the mall on Dearborn Street again, her desire fueled by gorgeous clothes and exquisite jewellery. She insisted on giving the money back when she met Drouet again, however, the gentleman continued to praise her and persuade her, took her shopping for clothes and shoes, and suggested a solution: that Carrie should move out to live with him. The innocent and inexperienced girl could no longer resist the temptations both material and financial, of the city and of the man [4]. "She followed her desire to carve led her. She was as yet more drawn than she drew" [5].

After changing into her new clothes, Carrie stood before the mirror and saw two antithetic versions of herself: a more beautiful "Carrie" in the mirror, and a worse Carrie in the mirror representing morality on the inner side. Without the help of others, she would not gain a foothold in the city and live the life she wanted. On the surface, Sister Carrie had left her sister's home to live her own life without worrying about money, but in fact she was still dependent on other people. She had no ability to make a living herself, and she had no responsibility for her future life.

Under the control of the environment, she had no choice but to change from a hard-working woman to a mistress. On account of Zola's belief in an "absolute determinism" in natural phenomena [6], from the first time when she could not escape the control of fate and chose to reap without sowing, there is only one way to go for the future Carrie.

3. The Second Stage of Growth: New Lover, New Work

It was in Carrie's instinct to imitate. This ability not only enables her to play her femininity better to attract men, but also gives her the opportunity to become an actress. Every choice she made from now on, however, revolved around one of two such things: moving on to the next man, or becoming a performer. According to Darwin's most crucial point of "natural selection," under the influence of natural conditions, living things adapt themselves to their environment; good genes are maintained in the struggle for survival [2]. For Carrie, her beauty and ability to imitate were the outward manifestations of her superior genes, so she relied on her animal nature and used them to gain a foothold in society.

When she met Hurstwood, the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy', she thought he was better than Drouet. Hurstwood is more attentive to women, more fashionable and more sociable. After the first meeting, Carrie spoke highly of him: he was "grace"; he was "a nice man" [5]. She judges people from the surface, and she looks at the world from the same angle. The only thing she

cares about is “money, looks, clothes, or enjoyment” [5]. This attitude continues until the end of the novel, rearing its ugly head again and again.

Under the combined “education” of the city and Drouet, she became an excellent student who imitated the rich’s lifestyles. “When one of her mind sees many things emphasized and re-emphasized and admired, she gathers the logic of it and applies accordingly” [5]. The resultant “training” is to lead her to a girl of “considered taste” [5]. Owing to her change in appearance and temperament, Hurstwood’s inner desire aroused when he saw her for the second time. They began dating in secret, and Drouet’s behaviour, his repeated refusal to marry her, was hastening Carrie into the arms of a rival.

By coincidence, Carrie got the chance to work in a theatre. Her ability to imitate graced a lot to her performance. Hurstwood’s possessiveness for Carrie was further stimulated by her charming figure on stage. For him, Carrie is both the spice of his humdrum family life and the object of his desire [7]. For Carrie, Hurstwood can bring her more emotional enjoyment and better material living conditions. What they had wasn’t love. They do not plan for each other, nor do they make due consideration together for their future together. One of them is dominated by carnal desire and the other by materialism, while both are controlled by this materialistic society. Zola, the father of naturalism, sees determinism as ruling the external world and the psychology of man [6]. Their love affair stealthily was not an autonomous choice, but under the influence of determinism, they are jointly pushed to the only way.

Drouet had a quarrel with Carrie when he learned of her affair. It was then that Carrie knew Hurstwood was married. She didn’t want to believe it, and all of a sudden, she was flooded with so many conflicting emotions: shame, anger, blame and grievance. Instead of reflecting on herself or admitting her mistake of cheating, she insisted that it was all Drouet’s fault who should not have brought Hurstwood to her acquaintance.

Drouet chose to leave. Once again, Carrie was in a predicament of lack of money. Then it occurred to her that she could work in a theatre and earn money on her own. At the same time, she looked forward to Drouet’s return and wrote a letter to Hurstwood, in which she expressed her anger and the message to break off contact with him. Unexpectedly, Hurstwood’s arrival has taken things in another direction.

4. The Third Stage of Growth: Real Independent Life

Cheated by Hurstwood, Carrie boarded a train to Canada with him. When She heard that he was taking her to New York, she almost forgot that “she had been tricked into this long journey against her will and that she was without the necessary apparel for traveling” [5]. She almost forgot Hurstwood’s double falsehoods, even interpreted this experience as a fresh start, like what she did when she first left for Chicago. It was not her intention to live elsewhere, and even though this time she got on the train under the deception of others, she was able to quickly accept the change in circumstances and make a quick choice in her favour [7].

They traveled from Montreal to New York, and her new lover found a new apartment with a lovely, well-appointed setting which refrained from Carrie’s doubt and uneasiness. Submissive Carrie had been a housewife for more than a year, with little entertainment and few friends. It wasn’t until the Vances moved in that she had a social life. The encounter with her new neighbor, Mrs. Vance, at the garbage drop reignited her desire for a material life. After they met, Mrs. Vance often took her to Broadway shows and various social events. She felt like she was transported into high society. All the people and things, including glamorous actresses, flamboyant upper-class life, charming costumes, glittering theatres, as well as the lavish restaurants, in New York, dragged her deeper into the abyss of materialism and money [8].

Three years on, Hurstwood went bankrupt, and after seven months without a job, “the day hung heavily on his hand” [5]. After being rebuffed repeatedly, the used-to-be gentleman became numb and even tried to win some money by playing cards. Who knew things went awry? The result was predictable, and he lost more than one at a time. Finally, there was only a hundred left. If Carrie hadn’t been in a desperate situation, she would never have thought of taking the initiative to find a job to earn money to be shouldering the family.

Although it didn’t go well at first, she was eventually offered a position in the chorus. Because of her eye-catching appearance, she was promoted by her manager as a leader. Lola, a friend of Carrie’s in theatre, provided an incentive for her to move out. The main source is that the once graceful and elegant Hurstwood was long gone who can no longer bring her passion; a contributing factor is that their place was too expensive to rent. She left the borrowed 20 dollars with a letter, departing for the next journey. At the beginning of her leave, she was remorseful of her actions and ashamed of what she had done. Nonetheless, “she did not realize what she was doing by allowing these feelings to possess her” [5].

Being lack of an aspiration to fight against her destiny and the capability to steer clear of it, she gladly accepted everything fate brought to her, whether it’s love or friendship, life or work. This kind of “obedience” has led her to act out her sad mood on stage according to her manager’s advice, which sparked a furious backlash among the audience and then, she hit the ground running.

She was finally living the life she wanted, money and materials flocking to her. This success was far more physically satisfying than psychologically for her. Mr. Whiters invited her to live in the Wellington, the new hotel on Broadway, while a reporter interviewed her whose reputation entered the spotlight by her triumphant performance. She raked up.

Carrie has spent her life pursuing beauty, money and material things, yet her emotional state wasn’t equal to what she had. “Amid the tinsel and shine of her state walked Carrie, unhappy” [5]. She was guided along by her desires and got the clothes, shoes, house, and money she wanted in her relationships with different men... Only one male makes Carrie question her pursuit, and that is Mrs. Vance’s cousin, Ames. He is a well-educated man. In a luxurious hotel, he told Carrie that he was ashamed of these people for being extravagant and wasteful, meanwhile, he talked about literature in a way that Carrie has never experienced with a man before. He was warm and intelligent, naive and educated. Despite the fact that Ames represents a utterly contrary way of thinking and living for Carrie, who was deeply attracted, she still hasn’t changed her lifestyle and chases the life she aspired to before.

Society has made Carrie. She is an excellent survivor as she catered to the environment by tailoring her experience to her needs and tastes as quickly and smoothly as possible. From this perspective, Carrie has grown up. She was no longer worried about money, gorgeous clothes, or even living by depending on others. However, the lack of a good guide on the road to growth has made her one of those who go with the flow.

There are roughly three types of guides in the growth process: positive guides who help the protagonist grow; inanimate nature or spirits which bring influence to the protagonist; and negative guides who lead the protagonist astray [1]. Her sister and brother-in-law, hardworking, frugal and down-to-earth, lived in poverty. She could have been like them, but the harsh reality and desire for material things made her take the easy way out, so the influence of an upbeat guide, the Hansons, did not come through. From Colombia to Chicago, and then from Canada to New York, the change of environment has gradually enriched her insights. In contrast, the bustling metropolises have inspired her desires and driven her to action. Once the dream becomes a reality, it immediately gives rise to new pursuits, igniting her inclination to pursue a higher level of life [8]. She takes in good part Mrs. Vance as her friend, a negative guide who is completely controlled by materialism and consumerism. Throughout, she was never taught

how to properly face adversity, how to hold the line of morality, and how to use her strengths properly.

When she was confronted with some moral choices, she had internal reflections and struggles, failing to resist the temptation of material things. Wherever fate pushed her, she went. She neither forgets to reflect on the past nor ever seriously considers how she wants to proceed in her future life. Her insight increased, inversely, her perception of herself and society was always the same, which caused the lack of epiphany in her growth process [1]. As a result, she never matured. She shaped herself with an empty shell: on the one hand, she does not have a clear comprehension of her real-self and always compares herself with others from superficial aspects such as appearance; on the other, her willingness keeps raising the status of her ideal-self higher and higher. This dichotomy between the real self and the ideal-self causes Carrie's desire never to end and her pursuit of material things never stops [9].

5. Conclusion

Carrie is lucky. As a rural girl, she transformed herself into a popular actress in a few years. At the same time, she is unfortunate, considering that society gave her many contradictory choices: either to obey morality and become one of the bottom class, or to chase her desires and give up her reputation. From the countryside to the city, she not only undergoes the development of society by witnessing the significant differences between various classes of people, but also felt the oppression and limited choices of the impoverished.

The road of growing up is always full of confusions and challenges, and the adult world has become incredibly complicated due to the rapid development of society, as a consequence, for those young people who have just entered the city, they are often overwhelmed and cannot find the right way. If there is an advantageous leading role, animate or inanimate, who has the ability to give the youths an epiphany, among other things, bringing them some reflections, enriching their experience and enhancing their knowledge of society, the new arrivals could gain a deeper grasp and recognition of the nature of society, which is the real sign of maturity.

Unfortunately, in Carrie's upbringing, there were too few positive guides who produced little effect, while the influence of the negative directions was too great for her to break away from. Carrie has always existed in a confused, ambivalent mood, unable to make choices on her own, but only being pushed forward by others and the social environment. Her perception of self, the people around her, and the environment remains superficial. There is no reflection, no introspection or no resistance within her identity. The ineffective role of the guide and the lack of epiphany gives rise to the remain-unchanged character traits of Carrie, who still passively accepts life, loves vanity and desires material things.

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