

LONELINESS AND THE ILLUSION OF SUCCESS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF “SISTER CARRIE”

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Abstract This article explores the psychological complexity of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), focusing on how material success and personal fulfillment diverge within the protagonist's journey. Carrie Meeber, a young woman from a rural town, arrives in Chicago with dreams of a better life and gradually ascends into the world of fame and wealth. However, as she gains social recognition and financial independence, she also experiences increasing emotional detachment and existential loneliness. This study argues that Dreiser's portrayal of Carrie exposes the illusion behind the American Dream, revealing how external achievements often mask inner dissatisfaction. Drawing on psychological realism and naturalist elements, the article highlights how Dreiser dissects ambition, identity, and the spiritual emptiness of modern urban life, particularly for women navigating a patriarchal and capitalist society.

Keywords: Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, psychological realism, loneliness, materialism, American Dream, modern woman, identity

Introduction Published in 1900, *Sister Carrie* stands as one of the most influential works in American literary naturalism. Theodore Dreiser's portrayal of Caroline Meeber—later known as Carrie—redefined the scope of female protagonists in fiction by exploring a woman driven not by morality or domestic duty, but by desire, survival, and self-realization. The novel challenges the ideals of success and happiness by contrasting Carrie's rising fame with her emotional detachment and spiritual emptiness. This article aims to analyze *Sister Carrie* through a psychological lens, emphasizing how the protagonist's gradual ascent in society is coupled with deepening emotional isolation. The study examines Dreiser's depiction of individual ambition, social mobility, and the psychological toll of pursuing fame in a materialistic culture.

Main Body:

1. Carrie as a Product of Urban Capitalism

Carrie's transformation from an anonymous small-town girl into a stage celebrity mirrors the rise of consumer culture in urban America. When she first arrives in Chicago, Carrie is overwhelmed by the glamour of department stores, theaters, and advertisements. Her fascination with material objects is not rooted in greed but in a desire for identity, respect, and escape from poverty.

Dreiser shows that Carrie's choices are largely shaped by her environment. The city acts not merely as a backdrop but as an active force that seduces, reshapes, and consumes individuals. Carrie learns early on that beauty and youth can be exchanged for security, as seen in her relationships with Drouet and Hurstwood. The transactional nature of these relationships reflects how capitalism reduces personal value to economic and aesthetic terms.

2. Psychological Realism: Loneliness Beneath Success

Although Carrie eventually achieves financial independence and public acclaim, her internal life remains marked by emptiness. In the final chapters of the novel, she is portrayed sitting alone in her luxurious apartment, reflecting on the transience of fame and the absence of true companionship. Dreiser writes:

“In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.”

This line underscores the central paradox of the novel: Carrie gets what she wanted, but it fails to satisfy her deeper emotional needs. Her rise is not accompanied by personal growth, self-understanding, or love. Dreiser’s naturalist approach insists that human beings are often unaware of their motivations and trapped by their circumstances. Carrie’s sense of alienation, therefore, is not a moral punishment but a psychological reality of modern life.

3. Gender, Desire, and Social Constraints

As a woman, Carrie’s options are limited. Her journey toward self-definition is mediated through men — Drouet, Hurstwood, and later the theater audience. Even when she gains autonomy, it is conditional upon her public image and male approval. Dreiser subtly critiques the double standards of the time: whereas male ambition was celebrated, female ambition was often condemned or sexualized. Despite this, Carrie displays agency. She leaves Hurstwood when he becomes a burden, and she embraces her career even when it isolates her emotionally. Her tragedy lies not in moral failure but in the structural inequalities of her society. The very independence she seeks comes at the cost of authentic human connection — a price paid disproportionately by women.

4. Naturalism and the Illusion of the American Dream

Dreiser, as a naturalist, denies the notion that individuals fully control their destinies. Carrie is influenced by unconscious desires, social forces, and environmental pressures. The American Dream promises that hard work leads to happiness, but Carrie’s story questions that logic. She does not work her way up through effort alone — her rise is shaped by luck, appearance, and relationships. Moreover, the “dream” she pursues turns out to be a mirage. The glamour of success fades quickly, revealing a void beneath. This aligns with Dreiser’s broader critique of capitalist ideology, where success is defined materially, not spiritually or emotionally. Carrie’s story becomes a cautionary tale about mistaking visibility for meaning.

Conclusion

In *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser constructs a nuanced portrait of a woman caught between personal desire and societal expectation, between the allure of success and the ache of loneliness. Carrie’s journey reveals not the triumph of the American Dream, but its inherent contradictions. Though she achieves the material markers of success — wealth, fame, and independence — she remains emotionally unfulfilled, spiritually detached, and existentially alone. Dreiser’s use of psychological realism and naturalist techniques allows readers to witness the subtle erosion of Carrie’s inner life

beneath her glamorous rise. Her condition is not a cautionary tale against ambition but a diagnosis of a modern culture that confuses appearance with substance and status with happiness.

Ultimately, *Sister Carrie* endures because it speaks to a timeless human dilemma: the gap between what we desire and what truly satisfies. Through Carrie's experience, Dreiser critiques the economic and gender systems of his time while offering a deeply human portrayal of aspiration, illusion, and loss. In doing so, he invites readers to reconsider the cost of success — and the quiet tragedy of those who appear to have everything, yet feel nothing at all.

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