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# Trabajo Fin de Grado

Título del trabajo: “Stirring Troubled Waters”:  
Carrie’s Alter Ego and Role Reversal in  
*Dreiser’s Sister Carrie*

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**Abstract:** Published in 1900, *Sister Carrie* is Theodore Dreiser's first novel. It tells the story of a young woman, Carrie Meeber, and how she clears herself a space in the big cities of Chicago and New York at the turn of the century. She ends up corrupted by the expectations of a woman of her time and becomes the mistress of two men. Her way to the top of the social ladder comes with the decay of the men she used as steps. Thus, together with her actions, the narrator's description gave rise to a new interpretation of her figure: a gold digger. However, contradictions in the narrator's descriptions of her lead the reader into a swirl of confusing emotions towards Carrie's character and hence, limit us to take a clear position in the story in which the ending can be defined as ambiguous. This dissertation aims to explore how Carrie could be on the one hand perceived as an opportunist, while also being a character who challenges the gender expectations of her time. This contradictory reading is due to a clash in Carrie's attitude and action and also in the narrator's descriptions of her. My analysis pretends to show how the narrator induces a portrayal of Carrie as a materialist while at the same time reinforcing and subverting gender roles. This analysis might finally serve as a guide to the reader to help us take a stand in the novel.

**Key Words:** Succubi; Gender Roles; Materialism; Feminism; Narratology;  
*En-Soi/Pour-Soi*

**Resumen:** Publicada en 1900, *Sister Carrie* es la primera novela de Theodore Dreiser. Cuenta la historia de la joven Carrie Meeber, y cómo esta se abre un camino en las grandes ciudades de Chicago y Nueva York al final del siglo. Termina corrompida por las expectativas de una mujer de su tiempo, y se convierte en la amante de dos hombres. Su camino ascendente en la escala social coincide con la decadencia de los hombres que ella utilizó como peldaños. Así, junto a sus acciones, la descripción del narrador dio

lugar a una nueva interpretación sobre su figura: una cazafortunas. Sin embargo, las contradicciones arrastran al lector en un remolino de confusas emociones respecto al personaje de Carrie y, por tanto, nos limitan a tomar una posición clara en la historia cuyo final puede ser ambiguo. Esta disertación tiene como objetivo explorar cómo Carrie podría ser percibida, por un lado, como una oportunista, al mismo tiempo que es un personaje que desafía las expectativas de género de su tiempo. Esta lectura contradictoria se debe a un choque en la actitud y la acción de Carrie y también en las descripciones que el narrador hace de ella. Mi análisis pretende mostrar cómo el narrador induce una representación de Carrie como materialista al mismo tiempo que refuerza y subvierte los roles de género. Este análisis podría finalmente servir de guía al lector para ayudarnos a posicionarnos en la novela.

**Palabras clave:** Succubi; Roles de género; Materialismo; Feminismo; Narratología:

*En-soi/Pour-soi*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	5-7
2. Putting Sister Carrie into context: Political, historical, cultural, ideological background. Literary Background: Naturalism in the 20th century.....	8-11
3. Narrative techniques and their effect in Sister Carrie.....	12-17
4. The depiction of genders: Genders reversed and reinforced.....	18-25
5. Conclusion.....	25-28
6. WORKS CITED.....	28-30

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, in a German immigrant household where he suffered a miserable childhood due to financial difficulties. His immigrant upbringing and his impoverished childhood strongly influenced his writing and the choice of his topics. He wrote mainly about immigrants and poor working-class characters –*American tragedy* (1925), *Jennie Gerhardt*, (1911)–. He also wrote about fallen women, for which he took inspiration from his sister –*Sister Carrie* (1890). In his attempt to run away from his family's poverty, at sixteen Dreiser traveled to Chicago. Chicago was the place for him to quest for success, just like for his debut novel's protagonist: Carrie Meeber. His school teacher paid for his entrance to Indiana University but he left due to a lack of money. Working with the sons of wealthy Eastern executives, he came to see how lifestyles were organized between the rich and the poor. Although considered sort of illiterate by his school, he began a writing career as a newspaper reporter. He landed his first writing job in 1892, reporting for the *Daily Globe*. Despite the measly articles he wrote, he was making a living out of them. Dreiser traveled to New York where he worked as a reporter. There is a possibility that in NY Dreiser reasoned that a man can write the truth and still be successful. After working for several important magazines, he was encouraged by his friend, Arthur Henry, to write a novel. (Cliff Notes)

He married Sarah White, who helped him edit his best-known novel in terms of length and sexual explicitness. Drawing on the life of Emma, who fled from Chicago to Canada and then to New York with a married man, Dreiser began writing *Sister Carrie* in 1890 – also in an attempt to justify his sister's “immorality” (The Cambridge Companion, 2004). The novel is as well influenced by his adventures in the streets of Chicago. Drunk with the city's “glittering spectacle”, he daydreamed of the mansion and the lovely ladies he would one day have. The novel was purchased by Doubleday, Page, and Company on the recommendation of

the novelist Frank Norris (Lynn, 1956). However, the presentation of the vagaries of urban life and its heroine, who goes unpunished for her transgressions against conventional sexual morality, being this the reason for the subversion of roles, was the most controversial part of the book at the time of its publication (The Cambridge Companion, 2004).

In 19th-century literature, sexual activity outside marriage was considered criminal behavior. Fallen women like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) could only be tragic figures, but Carrie had a different story: she climbed up the social ladder while becoming a fallen woman (Runtic, 2004). Because of this, the publisher's wife Mrs. Frank Doubleday was horrified by the novel and had her husband withdraw it. Dreiser's female character was so explosively new that the book was suppressed for seven years. Other novelists such as Norris, Crane, and Howells had already dealt with the squalor of the city and the dreams of the "have-nots", but Dreiser set the bar for the naturalistic novel even higher. Howells viewed the poor from the outside and Crane ended up romanticizing his female characters. *Sister Carrie* is the work of an insider. It can be said that this novel is an adaptation of his memories (Lynn, 1956). As Dreiser himself explained:

I went into newspaper work and from that time dates my real contact with life –murders, arson, rape, sodomy, bribery, corruption, and false witness in every conceivable form. (...) Finally, I got used to the game and rather liked it. (The Cambridge Companion, 1995)

Dreiser declared that he started to write it "as if I were used, like a medium" (Lynn, 1956, p.8). Finally, in 1907 another American publisher dared to publish *Sister Carrie*. (Lynn, 1956)

In 1910, Dreiser decided to leave behind his profession and his wife to commit himself to sexual adventurism and full-time writing. Thanks to his keen eye for detail and his truthful portrayal of life, Dreiser claimed to be far superior to his contemporaries (Bai, 2014).

In different ways, almost all of his literary works show his ongoing interest in issues of class, wealth, and poverty. Moreover, he was deeply influenced by scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and even anthropologists of his day, who argued that natural laws (and not divine force) are what guide if not directly govern how individuals act and their outcomes (The Cambridge Companion, 2004). Thus, he was considered “the Father of Naturalism” (Nedorostková, 2020). Right after WWII ended, he died. Before his passing, he admitted that his joining the Communist Party and his turn to socialism – *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928) and *Tragic America* (1931) – were driven by his compassion for the working masses, writing: "I am biased, I was born poor." (The Cambridge Companion, 2004).

These aforementioned naturalist notions dominated Dreiser's writing of *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser's heroine, Carrie Meeber, is a lower-class character. She is described as a poor provincial girl who traveled to Chicago full of vague ambitions and determined to make her way in the big city. In keeping with the naturalist principle, she appears to be fully controlled by forces over which she has no control and who must fight to survive in the ruthless urban jungle. As she loses her job at a shoe factory, she is at the mercy of harsh circumstances and outside forces. Yet, the series of bad events that happen in her life does not result in her failure and progressive deterioration. Carrie's trajectory is not expected in a typical naturalist story: instead of declining, she achieves social success. She resolves her financial difficulties by getting involved in a relationship with two men, the second being married, in exchange for material benefits. We could assume that her way of survival can be compared to the one of the “gold-digger”.



## 2. PUTTING *SISTER CARRIE* INTO CONTEXT:

Despite its inauspicious debut, *Sister Carrie* stood the test of time and became one of the American classic novels. As a precursor to the literary works of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, many would qualify *Sister Carrie* as the very first modern novel to capture the essence of 19th-century US. In *Sister Carrie*, we already find the notion of modernization in the American landscape and more specifically in the cities. The first ones to recognize the social changes brought by the Civil War were naturalists. From 1865 to 1914 onward, the country shifted from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. It is a time of tremendous growth, contrasts —wealth/ privileges vs poverty/discrimination—, and economic transformations, especially for Chicago, the second-largest city at the time. Chicago was considered the great steel company in the country. (The Cambridge Companion, 1995)

The first Skyscrapers were invented in the late 1880s —Home Insurance Building, 1885—. The impact of George Pullman during the boom of railroads —The Pullman Wagon— gave birth to what is known as the Pullman Era. Despite these innovations and progress, the increase in population brought about social change. In 1869, approximately 40 million people were living on American land. In 1900 the number rose to 80 million. That led to social polarization and appalling working conditions for the lower classes. These events marked the birth of a Golden Age or of what Mark Twain would define as the *Gilded Age*. A century after the creation of the US Constitution, a new period of gross materialism and blatant political corruption gave rise to important works of social and political criticism. A new consumer culture appeared in the United States in the 19th century and was driven by the huge economic growth and urbanization of the country. The aftermath was an era of social unrest, political cartoons mocking the rulers of the late 19th-century democracy, and muckraking literature (Runtic, 2004). In between these events, women fought for their right to vote, thus creating the First Wave of feminism (Nedorostková, 2020).

This period has also been dominated by the new scientific discoveries of the time. The main ones were Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (1859) and Rudolph Clausius's "Second Law of Thermodynamics" (1854). The former promoted the new notion of the survival of the fittest, also known as Darwinism, which refers to those "organisms best adjusted to their environment that is the most successful in surviving and reproducing" (Offer, 2013). However, this notion was cruelly adopted to explain the social injustices of the time. Those at the top of the social ladder tried to justify their inherited wealth since northern industrialism had taken over southern agrarianism. Social Darwinism was derived from Darwinism. Social Darwinism asserts that society is also a jungle, where survival is competition (Bai 2014). As John D. Rockefeller said:

The growth of the big business is merely the survival of the fittest. The American beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working-out of a law of nature and a law of God. (Petrey, 1977)

According to the tenets of social Darwinism, a person cannot choose their life, so fate is up to the mercy of heredity and environment, physical skills or appearance, and/or economic circumstances. Society cannot ensure somebody with the equality of "result", but with equality of "chances". American literature was deeply influenced by Darwinism, mechanical materialism, social Darwinism, and French writer Émile Zola. American Naturalism began to forge a new approach to imaginative fiction. (Bai, 2014)

## **2.1 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF NATURALISM**

These aforementioned events marked the beginning of the naturalistic literary movement (1865-1900). It was first formulated by French writer and theorist Emile Zola but it was Frank

Norris who introduced it to American Literature (Nedorostková, 2020). It burst out with Crane, Norris, and finally Dreiser. Unlike realism, it criticized the political basis of society, especially the growing wealth of the middle classes through harsh scenarios and plots. Naturalists surpassed the realists by exploring humankind's animal side and the power of instinct over will. A special emphasis was placed on objectivity –regarding reality– and “taboo attitudes” were voiced and justified. Their rhetoric was intense and the new reader was manipulated into feeling sorry for the fate of a working-class man/woman and accepting the rise of fallen women. Naturalism is the foreground for John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, and Tony Morrison, among others. (The Cambridge Companion, 1995)

Naturalism aims to show an objective and a new harsher realism without idealizations and with the ugly aspects of life. Naturalism is based on social Darwinism. Darwin claims the world is a product of evolution. His theory denies the Judeo-Christian account of the creation of the universe by God and the semi-divinity of humanity by connecting human beings to the animal world (Bai, 2014). As for the characters of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser describes them as living in a natural environment like animals and controlled by the environment like puppets: “looked at as dumb brutes look, as dogs paw and whine and study the knob. They shifted and blinked and muttered, now a curse, now a comment” (47). Naturalism argued that natural laws, and not divine forces, controlled the actions and destinies of humans. Thus, one's heredity and social environment determine one's character and influence his/her actions (Zhang, 2010). Like Carrie, naturalistic characters belong to a lower social and economic class and are dominated by their environment and heritage. Thus, we are led to the idea of determinism. Determinism would be, in simple terms, the opposite of the notion of “free will”. Humankind cannot control the course of life but depend on nature and fate. Thus, they are defenseless against the forces of nature and unable to change them. In *Sister Carrie*, the

deterministic model can be inferred from the very beginning, for we are led to believe that Carrie's future is already determined by the new environmental factors. When Carrie accepted the "green bucks" from Drouet, she chose her destiny: "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen (...) she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse."  
(1)

Many studies have been done regarding Carrie's figure in the novel. Therefore, in this essay, I attempt to analyze two personal takes on *Sister Carrie*. In the first section, I will explain how one of the effects of the novel's narratological devices might be the portrayal of Carrie as a gold digger. That is, through the lenses of a narratological approach, I will try to explain how the novel pictures our female protagonist as the 19th version of a "wealth seeker". This dissertation will be divided into two parts. In the first part, I will put particular emphasis on the figure of the narrator, mainly Carrie's characterization, and how this positions the reader into a swirl of confusing emotions. Then, in the second one I attempt to demonstrate that through narratology, Dreiser subverts but at the same time reinforces gender roles in the novel. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn.

### **3. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AND THEIR EFFECT ON HOW THE READER PERCEIVES CARRIE**

The figure of Carrie is undoubtedly a controversial one. First, she is presented as the heroine of a popular romance; a naive and dreamy girl plunging into the new city for a better future. Once in Chicago, as Dreiser puts it, she “rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse” (3). Thus, Carrie is described through the binary thinking the narrator seems to show about her character. Matheson (1980) claims the “cosmopolitan” Carrie is described –internally and externally– as an ambitious and egotist girl that is moved by self-interest. These contradictory descriptions lead the reader to question which one is the real facet of Carrie. The narrator directly addresses the readers and gives them the tools to attain their own interpretation by leaving an open ending. It is here where I open another door to the interpretation of Carrie’s character: Carrie’s behavior, seen in the light of the narrator’s comments/nuanced by the narrator’s comments, together with Hurstwood’s decline/misfortune, of which readers can point to Carrie as the culprit, may portray her as the 19th-century female representation of the female 19th representation of a “succubi” –an opportunist–.

#### **3.1 Characterization of Carrie**

There are three types of characterization in *Sister Carrie*: Third person omniscient narrator who focalizes through the different characters, dialogue, and the narrator’s intrusive ( and moralizing comments which even interrupt the story. According to Matheson (1980), in the novel, readers encounter two types of conflicting sources of information about Carrie. When

the narrator says "Self-interest with her was high, but not strong. It was, nevertheless her guiding characteristic." (4), Carrie is presented as unselfish. Conversely, self-interest was her "guiding characteristic" which contradicts the latter. These types of contradictory statements drag the reader into a sea of uncertainty about Carrie's figure. Is she a True Woman or is she self-interest driven? Due to certain descriptions, Philip Gerber describes her as "unencumbered by moral values," and motivated by egomania (Matheson, 1980). My interpretation does not coincide with Matheson when he affirms that Dreiser, by making use of his philosophical digressions, builds a good impression of her and it is her actions that make an unfavorable one. I believe that both rhetorical devices –incidental comments and images– and Carrie's behavior implicitly create an unfavorable impression on the reader.

One of the first actions that make her pass from "the innocent girl" we have met at the beginning of the novel to "maybe she is not that pure" is when she moves in with Drouet. At the Hansons, she could not enjoy the luxury observed on the streets nor could she "survive" the cold winter of Chicago (Mathson, 1980). Thus, she accepts Drouet's proposal for her convenience, and not for Drouet's beauty: "There was always an answer, always the December days threatened. She was alone; she was desireful; she was fearful of the whistling wind. The voice of want made answer for her" (87). She is not determined to make that decision due to the harsh weather. Readers might think that if she does not succeed in the big city of lights, she can return to Columbia City. However, she has no thought of going back to that "dull" (62) place. She was bewitched by the opium of Chicago and remained at the expense of Drouet's money.

"If I don't get something pretty soon, I think I'll go home."

Minnie saw her chance.

"Sven thinks it might be best for the winter, anyhow."

The situation flashed on Carrie at once. They were unwilling to keep her any longer, out of work. She did not blame Minnie; she did not blame Hanson very much. Now, as she sat there digesting the remark, she was glad she had Drouet's money [...] The thought of Columbia City "aroused all the antagonism of her nature. Columbia City, what was there for her?" (62).

She is already influenced by the petty bourgeoisie. She craves luxury, fashion, and wealth, thus she decides to remain in Chicago and use Drouet's economic support until a better "squeeze" appears. Carrie, seduced by the garments a woman must possess, ambited her to gain in material things. Drouet's ability to materialize her dreams is what draws her to him. Their relationship is not based on love, it is a transaction of youth for money.

Later on, Carrie finds Hurstwood, "a man who was more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways" (89), and she starts realizing that "she was not enamoured of Drouet. She was more clever than he. In a dim way, she was beginning to see where he lacked." (89). Thus, it could be said that after sucking Drouet's spirit –as succubi usually do —she "Use[s] everything and abuse[s] me and then walk[s] off. That's just like a woman. (205). Carrie moves towards a better match –Hurstwood. The latter's wealth and demeanor fascinated her: "It was an important thing to her to hear one so well-positioned and powerful speaking in this manner [...] the man of money and affairs sitting beside her, appealing to her." (118). "She loved him –Hurstwood– the more for thinking that he would rescue her so." (138).

Carrie is then in the direction of degeneration and becomes two men's mistress for two reasons: she does not want to be a "toiler" in the underworld and she is full of desire and greediness. Her degeneration is reflected by Dreiser through Minnie's dream. In New York, she abandons her second attachment because she just found

another higher pursuit for material things. She retains bits of her salary and dreams of spending it all. If she was to support Hurstwood, then who was to buy her clothes? These are some aspects of Carrie's nature that unveil her alter ego.

Carrie's dual personality traps the reader in a swirl of confusion to a point where we may ask if she is truly a gold digger. Moreover, not only Carrie but the narrator as well is confused about what she wants: "At one moment she craves "affection," but a few moments later it is revealed that "If she wanted to do anything better or move higher she must have more—a great deal more." What we know for sure is that the image of Carrie is quite complicated. However, we conclude that Carrie is a victim of society and desire. She has been gaslighted by men and determined by circumstances. From a contemporary approach, Carrie is not cruel but rather determined not to sink into the lower class once again.

### 3.2 Hurstwood: Granted narrative "control". Narrator call for a sympathetic listener.

Many critics agree with the fact that Dreiser placed too much emphasis on Hurstwood's chronicle, to a point that it seems to take over Carrie's story. The narrators' intrusive comments together with the sections of the other characters, overshadow the real protagonist of *Sister Carrie*. James West notes that Sister Carrie became "Hurstwood's book, and his tragedy dominates the narrative." Dreiser adapted the traditional tragic figure to a late 19th-century urban milieu. By giving Hurstwood a voice in the story, he contributes to the making of Carrie as the Succubi who sucks all spirit of man for her self-interest.

Hurstwood's section calls for a sympathetic reader. The narrator describes his survival journey in detail. We see the shadow of the man he once had been and what is more pitiful than a powerful man's decay? The reader is not accustomed to see men, neither in fiction nor reality, in their most tragic shape but women. Unconsciously, the audience sides for a second with Hurstwood's plight and blames for an instant Carrie's ignorance of his condition. Despite



Hurstwood's contribution to his self-destruction, we are still emotionally manipulated by the narrator's description to blame Carrie for his suicide. The account fills us with the most profound emotion. Carrie pities him: "I'd just as leave dig on the streets. Nobody knows me here. - Oh, you needn't do that, said Carrie, hurt by the pity of it. - But there must be other things." (350). he pities himself -" Then something like a bereaved affection and self-pity swept over him." (395), and readers pity him too. After all, he did try to get a job and even pretended everything was still fine. But what Carrie did not understand when she accused him of laziness was the role that his age played when Hurstwood left the house in search of a job. "She forgot her youth and beauty" (344). His money slowly vanishes away while he idealizes his past in Chicago as a way of escaping his current situation.

It was not sleep at first, but a mental hearkening back to scenes and incidents in his Chicago life. As the present became darker, the past grew brighter, and all that concerned it stood in relief. (415)

Lost on the streets and diagnosed with pneumonia he lives at the animal level. Suicidal thoughts come through his mind, but how sad is it that he does not even have enough amount to end his suffering?:

I'm no good now. I was all right. I had money. I'm going to quit this," and, with death in his heart, he started down toward the Bowery. People had turned on the gas before and died; why shouldn't he? He remembered a lodging-house where there were little, close rooms, with gas-jets in them, almost pre-arranged, he thought, for what he wanted to do, which rented for fifteen cents. Then he remembered that he had no fifteen cents" (321).

These events are enough to compel anyone to feel sympathy for the man and a sort of contempt towards Carrie. We have her ignoring his condition and chatting with Lola and

two gallants about success. However, it is in this contrast between his decline and Carrie's rise that the reader realizes that both are just victims of the precarious material world. From contemporary lenses, we know for sure that Carrie has nothing to do with his perishableness. Actually, he had many transgressions and broke the rules of both epochs: his own and ours. He lies, cheats, manipulates, kidnaps, steals, destroying so his own life and messing up Carrie's. Only part of the blame rests on Hurstwood; the rest comes from the society itself, with its oppressive morality and barbaric economy.

#### 4. GENDER REINFORCEMENT AND GENDER SUBVERSION

Regarding Amy Ujvari St. Jean's *Blind Strivings of the Human Existential Feminism in Sister Carrie* (1999), it is reasonable to say that Carrie underwent a shift from a passive object – the Other– to an active subject –the One–. This is also known in Sartre as the *en-soi* and *pour-soi* respectively. However, being the Other does not always mean *en-soi*. The *en-soi* is "an immanence which cannot realize itself, an affirmation which cannot affirm itself, an activity which cannot act because it is glued to itself". On the other hand, Carrie's *pour-soi* attitude is constantly changing and interacting with the *en-soi* in a "perpetual dialectic". It seems that she is on a quest for subjectivity and existential rebellion for the sake of her freedom. Although she makes it by the end of the novel, her character has not always been the One. Carrie is, according to Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex*, the Other —the object—, a consciousness outside her own determined as the Other by the One. Drouet found a new squeeze and Hurstwood's attraction to Carrie is "the ancient attraction of the stale for the fresh". Carrie is thus differentiated and defined concerning man and not with her: "she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential." (Beauvoir, 1949). Even Carrie perceives "herself" through the eyes of the Ones and as objectified by society, referring to herself as "the victim of his –Drouet's– keen eyes" (184). Throughout the novel, she fights between her Otherness and attempting to become the One. Gradually, she starts asserting her subjectivity to an extent where she will objectify others and change situations (Jean, 1999): "She had some power of initiative, latent before, which now began to exert itself" (131). Thus, Carrie's *en-soi* attitude plus her status as the Other serves in the novel to reinforce gender roles and her shift towards *pour-soi* or/and the

One allows her to subvert them. Gender roles reinforcement and reversal are also carried out with male characters, as we will see later on.

## **4.1. GENDER REINFORCEMENT**

### 4.1.1 Reinforcement of female gender roles

Dreiser is writing with a consciousness of women's plight in society. He combines the narrator's generalizing statements about women, the voice of society, and the portrayal of Carrie's evolution to engage both, the cultural fiction with which the reader would be familiar, and the social constructions with which Carrie's character development seems to rewrite (Marlow, 2006). In Marlow's words: "the narrator defines a woman's identity based on the cultural assumption that an eighteen-year-old girl can only develop along these two lines" (2006). In the following quote, the narrator perfectly portrays what society expects from an 18th years old girl at the end of the 19th century:

When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility. (3)

This generalization allows Dreiser to explain or call into question the limitations and possibilities that are available to all women in this system and Carrie (Marlow, 2006). Therefore, each agent in the novel reinforces gender roles by creating and maintaining normative expectations for gender-specific behavior.

By using generalizations such as: "Women were spending money like water; she could see that in every elegant shop she passed. Flowers, candy, jewelry, seemed the principal things in which the elegant dames were interested." (283), the narrator defines women as "the priestess of the temple of consumption" (Gilman in Lemaster, 2009). In

*Sister Carrie*, Dreiser constructs taste as mainly a "feminine" cultural practice and underscores the newly public orientation of women's consumer identities in mass culture (Mersih, 1996). Carrie's naïvety does not match the archetypal woman of the days, but material desires connect her to that very image (Marlow, 2006). Thus, according to one of the frequent narrator's digressions: "A woman should someday write the complete philosophy of clothes no matter how young, it is one of the things she wholly comprehends." (6). The narrator thus attaches consumerism and interest in the material exclusively to women's behavior. Moreover, the materialization of Carrie's desires is achieved in the novel through the heroine's innate marketability: "She was capital" (326). Carrie exchanged sex for money, clothes, and security – she recognizes how women sell themselves in a capitalist economy (Nedorostková, 2020).

#### 4.1.2 Reinforcement of male gender roles

In the novel, Dreiser also reinforces male gender roles. The narrator embarks the reader on a discussion of the institution of the men's saloon. Visitors –men– "seek pleasure as well as the satisfaction of shining among their betters". (Cliff Notes)

This was really a gorgeous saloon from a Chicago standpoint. [...] At Rector's, Drouet had met Mr. G. W. Hurstwood, manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's. He had been pointed out as a very successful and well-known man about town. [...] Drouet immediately conceived a notion of him as being someone worth knowing. [...] Hurstwood liked Drouet. The latter's genial nature and dressy appearance pleased him. He knew that Drouet was only a travelling salesman—and not one of many years at that—but the firm of Bartlett, Caryoe & Company was a large and prosperous house, and Drouet stood well." (41-43)

Dreiser shows the reader what was the average interest in men of the time. They enjoyed leisure at a fancy saloon while talking about business and women. As seen in the quote, the narrator implicitly reinforces the idea of men as businessmen preoccupied with their appearance and making good impressions on their fellow companions.

For these men, wealth equates to individual worth. This is the genuine masculine counterpart of the world of Carrie's dreams of fine clothes and manners, wealth, position, and enjoyment. Thus the narrator invites the reader to observe the "aimlessly wandering, dressy, greedy company as not different from Carrie herself, only "luckier" and wealthier". (Cliff Notes)

## **4.2 GENDER SUBVERSION**

### 4.2.1 Hurstwood's dependence on Carrie –female figure.

The successful Carrie is now in the public sphere, while Hurstwood, in a role reversal, has retired to assume a role in the domestic one. Now, he depends on her generosity with her income (Marlow, 2006): "He seemed to be depending upon her little twelve dollars" (348). Besides, clothing reveals the complete inversion of their "marriage". In the beginning years, he was the breadwinner. However, Carrie became the hard-working income producer (Cliff Notes).

"She had been buying for herself as recklessly as she dared" (358) to be a more complete part of the world fate has brought to her, while he dressed poorly, and fetched the groceries.

We're all out of flour," she said; "you'd better get some this afternoon. We haven't any meat, either. How would it do if we had liver and bacon?"

"Suits me," said Hurstwood. (...)

She opened her purse and laid down a half dollar. He pretended not to notice it. Hurstwood bought the flour—which all grocers sold in 3½-pound packages—for thirteen cents and paid fifteen cents for a half-pound of liver and bacon. He left the packages, together with the balance of twenty-two cents, upon the kitchen table, where Carrie found it. (352)

Hurstwood, unsuccessful in finding another job, expects Carrie to provide for him: “There was something sad in realizing that, after all, all that he wanted of her was something to eat.” (352). Carrie lives in a patriarchal society where women do not have the right to vote, and yet Hurstwood expects her to financially support him, who is not even her legitimate husband. Moreover, her wage is not enough for both, and she realizes that if she is going to continue support Hurstwood, she will not be able to live up to her expectations. (Nedorostková, 2020)

#### 4.2.2 Atypical fate for a male character.

*Sister Carrie* is, in line with Hurstwood's decline, a tragedy. In naturalism generally, tragedy is given by the circumstances. Unlike other Naturalist works in which the female character ends up losing her life, it is now Hurstwood who commits suicide due to the harsh politics of society and his non-compliance with the social/moral norms of the time. His decline begins when he steals at Fitzgerald and Moy. Then, step by step, circumstances overwhelmed his persona and Hurstwood descended toward repentance –“I wish I hadn't done that” (194) to suicide –“What's the use?” (367) – (Epstein, 2001). Hurstwood contributes to his destruction at each step along the way. He is the one breaking the social norm: he steals, manipulates, gaslights, and exchanges his status, family, and moral values of the time for “young flesh”.

Passion in a man of Hurstwood's nature takes a vigorous form. (...) in the morning he was early awake, seizing with alacrity upon the same dear subject and pursuing it with vigour. He would have given anything, it seemed to him, to have the complication ended—to have Carrie acquiesce to an arrangement that would dispose of Drouet effectually and forever. (174-175)

Thus, it could be said that his fate is, in a sense, justified. "Society possesses a conventional standard whereby it judges all things. All men should be good, all women virtuous" (85). He seems to be punished for his digression by the "oppressive morality and harsh economy" (Cliff Notes). His decline accelerates in comparison to Carrie's rise. Carrie's abandonment is the straw that broke the camel's back in a long list of events that ended up with his spirit. The novel finishes with Carrie as the abandoner instead of the abandoned (Marlow 2006). Now it is Hurstwood who "sat in the chair, [...] and thought" (327). Hurstwood having fallen from the "walled city" of the wealthy, resigns himself to failure and defeat (Cliff Notes).

#### 4.2.3 Carrie: Carrie challenges the plot and end of the traditional naturalistic novel: She succeeds.

According to Marlow, in conventional texts, a heroine's plot might end in her marriage or as a nun –marrying God–. A transgressive heroine would end in madness, death, or both. For instance, Zola's Nana dies in the final chapter of her novel. Thus, Carrie's ending might be guessed from these other naturalistic novels. (2006)

However, Dreiser's Carrie stands out from all other heroines of fictional fallen woman fables. Carrie is fiction but also a faithful portrait of the history of real women of the time. Dreiser makes Carrie's story real through the use of biography –Emma's– and challenges conventional fallen women plots, confronting the faulty social constructions



and rewriting his sisters' stories. Hence, Dreiser is also creating a different type of Bildungsroman for Carrie and not the typical domestic one. After she "boarded the afternoon train for Chicago" (3), we start being told the story of a new form of identity available to women, what Heilman and Beetham call the New Woman: "New Women were thus the subjects as well as the objects of debate in the press and so were able to challenge the traditional discourses on femininity, masculinity, sex, marriage, and the family" (in Marlow, 2006).

Dreiser shows no despise that Tolstoy feels for Anna Karenina or the contempt Flaubert feels for Emma Bovary, to name but a few. She is economically independent, experienced, and fancying for more. Although Carrie is described as terribly unhappy at the end of the novel, that is not the end of Carrie. There is closure as we know she will always strive for more, but also an open ending as she is looking towards a non-materialistic desire. If we remember, Ames pointed at something towards which Carrie can strive: "Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that if accomplished, would lie others for her" (455). Ames talks about education, which Marry Wallstencraft describes as a form of liberation. "In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming" (454), Carrie fancies about a new journey –perhaps towards education–; she alone may build a "room of her own". Leaving the ending open is yet another way of subverting the typical naturalistic closure for transgressive heroines.

#### 4.2.4 Carrie's future liberation through profession: Simone de Beauvoir

Carrie's first move toward *pour-soi* and subjectivity occurs when she begins a critical assessment of Drouet's character. The *pour-soi* embodies existential liberation. Beauvoir claims that "every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects

that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties". Her rocking chair is a physical symbol of Carrie's position as *en-soi*, implying stagnation and static motion –a place to think of acting without having to do so–. However, there is a process of role transvaluation that is crucial. Beauvoir refers to it as revolt. In an existential sense, she rebels when she “realizes her objectness and asserts herself to attain subjectivity by seeing the former subject as an object and by actively liberating herself” (Jean, 1999). Carrie breaks away from both stereotypes: she is not only a working ‘married’ woman but chooses a career outside the domestic sphere—at the theatre– (Marlow, 2006). In the following excerpt, we observe Carrie having an awakening. She finally realizes that she must be free from Hurstwood's constraints and decides to put her acting skills to good use in the chorus:

Back in the dining-room she sat in her chair and rocked. [...] Through a fog of longing and conflicting desires she was beginning to see. Oh, ye legions of hope and pity—of sorrow and pain! She was rocking, and beginning to see. (294)

Her new job at the theatre provides Carrie with a path to existential freedom. "When she is productive, active, she regains her transcendence; in her projects, she concretely affirms her status as subject" (Beauvoir in Jean, 1999). Highly affected by Drouet's and Hurstwood's damaging false promises, newly aware of her inner worth, she resolves that "no man should buy her by false protestations or favour" (222). Carrie developed a career as an actress –revolt–, which enabled her to enter the world of subjectivity and allows her to break free from “prostitution” and dependency on men (Marlow, 2006).

## 5. CONCLUSION:

Looking from a 19th-century window, Carrie failed to comply with the norms for women of the time. She was what society deemed as adulterous, as she was engaged in sexual activity without being married and committed. But from a contemporary perspective, we see a Carrie who does not want to belong to the ideological system of her times, thus breaking with the concept of the True Woman. Dreiser seems to rewrite, not only society's thinking of acting as prostitution (Marlow, 2006), but the whole moral theory of the times. Carrie's immorality is not punishment but a decent job on the NY stage. By using the same lenses, we may conclude that both Drouet and especially Hurstwood dug their own grave. The latter sacrificed his family and reputation to run off with her. Unlike Carrie, his actions is be condemned in both epochs.

It is no doubt that the 19th-century ideal for the white middle class was expected to be submissive, domestic, and virtuous. However, when the notion of "The New Woman" emerged in the U.S, a significant change would take place. Thus, Dreiser's heroine is a sign of those times, becoming a transitional figure, moving from the Victorian model of True Woman towards the New Woman. Indeed, her change can be seen in a decisive *reversal of gender roles* or in what the author calls the "beginning of the new order" (395). It starts when Carrie gets a job at the theater and Hurstwood does the shopping. Finding the expected domestic sphere for women subservient and stifling, Carrie switches roles with Hurstwood. She rebels against her husband, but especially against the role women were traditionally supposed to play. This can be seen when Carrie deserts Hurstwood, her parting consists of twenty dollars. She goes from the one receiving "two soft, green, handsome ten-dollar bills" (59) from Drouet to the one giving it to Hurstwood. With this technique, Dreiser brings the novel into a full circle.

In reading the novel through contemporary lenses in hope of finding who is guilty of the tragedy in *Sister Carrie*, I have come to the conclusion that –although Carrie seems to be blamed according to her given description as *materialistic* and her behavior regarding that time– Carrie is a victim of her environment, society’s expectations, and, ultimately, men. If one is to reconsider Carrie’s figure, one can observe that it is also a tragic one. When in Chicago, she finds herself experiencing poverty, broken hopes, and suffering unimaginably at the shoe factory. In an attempt to escape that fate and to find a way to fulfill societal expectations of the women of her time, she becomes the mistress of two men who manipulated her with the impression of their fine clothing. Despite her trying to build a stable relationship with them, she discovers that neither of them wants to marry her at all. Then, Hurstwood makes her soul content again and rebuilds her confidence (Bai, 2014) only to later break it again with lies and empty promises. Whether they want her or not, it is clear what she does not want: poverty. Thus, we cannot blame her for Hurstwood’s fate. In her passivity, she has never initiated her relations with men. Instead, it was Drouet and Hurstwood who let themselves be bewitched by the appeal of young flesh. Hence, they are also transgressive characters. Therefore, Drouet is still an ignorant flat character while Hurstwood commits suicide. Here, Dreiser highlights mechanical power and how it makes everything unavoidable. Carrie accedes to the bourgeois upper class and Hurstwood goes from a manager to a beggar who ends up committing suicide as a result of the mechanical power that pushes them to that situation (Yu, 2010).

What is interesting is how much we wind up sympathizing with the other characters who are exploitative of her in many ways and contribute to our construction of Carrie as succubi. However, we concluded that this is not the case. Dreiser introduces us to two different facets of Carrie. On the surface, Carrie is a soft woman, but she makes the

most of the opportunities fate gave her to an extent that she might be perceived as an opportunist. In that sense, Bai (2014) affirms that she is strong, just as Dreiser said in his other novel “The Financier” (1992):

We are all born in a cruel and bitter world. Who can solve the unfair problems? Someone is born with talents and has the will, and power to chase wealth, while someone lacks and is weak. Strong or weak—— this is the key point, the answer (78-83).

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