

Urban Desire, Consumer Culture, And Moral Ambiguity in Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie

Soybnazarov Navruzбек Mashrabboy o'g'li

PhD Student, Jizzakh State Pedagogical University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article reads *Sister Carrie* as a major naturalist novel in which moral experience is shaped by urban modernity, consumer desire, and social inequality. Drawing on close textual analysis and Yoshinobu Hakutani's interpretation of Dreiser's naturalism, the study argues that the novel should not be reduced either to a conventional narrative of female moral decline or to a rigidly deterministic account of human behavior. Instead, Dreiser presents Carrie Meeber as a subject whose desires, decisions, and social mobility emerge within a field structured by economic precarity, class aspiration, spectacle, and chance. Chicago functions not merely as a background but as an active social force that organizes perception, intensifies desire, and narrows the range of viable moral choices. The article further shows that Dreiser complicates mechanistic naturalism by emphasizing the unstable interaction of instinct, circumstance, and partial volition. In this way, *Sister Carrie* transforms moral decline from a purely personal failing into a socially mediated condition of modern life. The study concludes that the novel remains significant because it redefines moral conflict through the interaction of environment, consumption, and limited agency.

Keywords: Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, American naturalism, consumer culture, moral decline, urban modernity, social determinism.

Introduction: Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* remains a central text in American literary naturalism because it places individual desire within a social world structured by economic inequality, urban spectacle, and unstable moral codes. Since its publication, the novel has provoked critical debate not only for its treatment of female mobility and material aspiration, but also for its unsettling account of agency. This critical debate extended not only to the interpretation of the novel but also to the biographical narratives surrounding its composition, some of which were later shown to contain significant factual inaccuracies (Steinbrecher, 1952, pp. 490–493). Early responses often read the novel as an example of crude determinism, assuming that Dreiser reduced human conduct to instinct, appetite, and environmental pressure. Yoshinobu Hakutani challenges this simplified view by arguing that *Sister Carrie* should not be understood as a strictly

mechanistic naturalist novel. Instead, he shows that Dreiser presents human behavior as shaped by circumstance, chance, instinct, and partial volition rather than by a rigid causal scheme alone. Carrie, in this sense, is “passive rather than active, pushed rather than pushing” yet she is not merely an empty figure of deterministic theory. This article argues that *Sister Carrie* is best read as a novel of constrained agency. Rather than presenting Carrie Meeber as either a fully autonomous ethical subject or a wholly passive victim of social forces, Dreiser depicts her as a modern subject formed within the pressures of urban life. Chicago functions as an active structure of experience: it organizes aspiration, sharpens class visibility, and narrows the range of viable choices. Such a reading also accords with Philip Rahv's character-background criterion for naturalism, cited by Hakutani, according to which naturalist fiction grants environment a

determining narrative role rather than treating it as a mere background to action.

The central claim of this study is that Dreiser transforms moral decline from a purely personal failing into a socially mediated condition of modern life. In the novel, ethical instability does not arise solely from inward weakness or defective judgment. It emerges at the intersection of class vulnerability, gendered precarity, consumer seduction, and the affective pressures of the modern city. This makes *Sister Carrie* particularly important for understanding how American naturalism reconfigured the relation between selfhood and morality at the turn of the twentieth century. Methodologically, the article combines close textual analysis with a naturalist socio-moral reading, drawing on Hakutani's revision of determinist interpretations and Rahv's character-background model. On this basis, the article examines how urban modernity, consumer culture, and social inequality reshape moral perception in *Sister Carrie*. The discussion proceeds in four stages: critical framework, urban formation, material desire and moral ambiguity, and Dreiser's revision of determinism through instinct, contingency, and limited volition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical discussion of *Sister Carrie* has long been shaped by the question of literary naturalism. Many early critics read the novel as an explicitly deterministic work in which human behavior is governed by instinct, appetite, and natural force. Within that framework, Dreiser's characters were often treated as biologically and socially driven types rather than as morally complex individuals. This early response helps explain both the novel's controversial reception and its long association with a rigid version of naturalist doctrine. Mid-century criticism also reinforced this view: as Hakutani notes, Lars Ahnebrink treated *Sister Carrie* as a representative work of American naturalism, which shows how strongly the novel remained associated with that tradition. A second influential line of interpretation shifts attention from moral controversy to form and structure. In the formulation cited by Hakutani, Philip Rahv argues that naturalism should not be identified simply by descriptive density or documentary detail. Its more decisive feature is the relation between character and background: a novel becomes naturalistic when the individual is

represented as fundamentally determined by environment, to the point that environment assumes the dominant role in the narrative. This criterion is especially useful for reading Dreiser, because *Sister Carrie* repeatedly presents the modern city as more than a backdrop to human action. Because Rahv is cited here through Hakutani, his position should be treated as a mediated formulation rather than a directly verified primary source. At the same time, Hakutani resists reducing Dreiser to a fully mechanistic naturalist. He points out that more recent critics of American naturalism adopt a less rigid definition of the mode. He also cites Donald Pizer's view that naturalist fiction may stress environment, heredity, instinct, or chance while still preserving the significance of individual life (Pizer, 1965, p. 3). This revision is important because it prevents *Sister Carrie* from being read as a purely doctrinaire text of social and biological determinism.

Hakutani's own contribution develops this revisionist perspective further. Although he acknowledges the deterministic pressures operating in Dreiser's fiction, he argues that *Sister Carrie* does not consistently follow the mechanistic logic of Zola's experimental naturalism. Dreiser's characters are shaped by environment, chance, instinct, and circumstance, but they are not reduced to a fixed cause-and-effect system. In this sense, *Carrie* and *Hurstwood* remain psychologically unstable and morally unsettled figures rather than mere specimens of theory. Building on this critical framework, the present article reads *Sister Carrie* not as a crude deterministic tract and not as a conventional moral tale, but as a novel in which urban modernity, consumer desire, and moral ambiguity intersect within a structure of constrained agency. The aim, therefore, is not to abandon naturalism, but to show how Dreiser turns environmental determinism into a more flexible account of subjectivity.

Analysis

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* develops its central concerns through scenes in which environment, labor, and display shape *Carrie's* movement through the modern city. *Carrie's* development is never presented as the fully rational unfolding of a stable self. Rather, Dreiser repeatedly situates her within circumstances that act upon her before she can convert experience into deliberate moral judgment. Hakutani's reading is

especially useful here because it insists that Dreiser's naturalism is not wholly mechanistic: Carrie is deeply conditioned by external pressures, yet her conduct is not reduced to a rigid experimental scheme of cause and effect (Hakutani, 1967, pp. 5–6, 9).

The novel announces this structure from the beginning. Carrie's departure from home is framed through one of Dreiser's most programmatic statements about urban life: when a young woman leaves home, she encounters a world in which "the city has its cunning wiles," and "half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman" (Dreiser, 1900, p. 2). This passage is important because it establishes the city not as passive background, but as an active environment capable of influencing perception itself. The narrator shifts seduction from an individual act to a broader urban process in which spectacle works upon the senses before conscious choice. The city, in other words, works as an impersonal structure of attraction. Dreiser's urban vision thus combines wonder before metropolitan magnificence with an awareness of the city's indifference to the vulnerable individual (Handy, 1959, p. 389, as cited in Hakutani, 1967, p. 11). This is why Carrie's arrival in Chicago should be read as more than a biographical beginning. It marks her entrance into a social order in which experience is mediated by forces that exceed intention. That condition is condensed in the novel's description of Carrie as "a waif amid forces" (Dreiser, 1900, p. 1). The phrase marks Carrie as vulnerable rather than morally empty. Hakutani draws attention to this aspect of Dreiser's characterization when he argues that Carrie's course is shaped by "chance and subconscious direction" and that she remains "passive rather than active, pushed rather than pushing" (Hakutani, 1967, pp. 5–6). This formulation should not be misunderstood as meaning that Carrie is merely inert. Rather, Dreiser presents her as a subject whose responses emerge under pressure, before they become articulate moral choices.

The first sustained example of such pressure appears in the Hanson household. Dreiser renders this domestic space through details that make poverty palpable without turning it into sentimental spectacle. The apartment's disharmonious furnishings, cheap surfaces, and emotional coldness do more than indicate economic limitation; they create an

atmosphere of constriction. Carrie responds to it almost immediately by sensing "the drag of a lean and narrow life" (Dreiser, 1900, p. 13). The significance of this moment lies in its mode of presentation. Dreiser does not make Carrie formulate a social theory of class or an ethical rejection of domestic austerity. Instead, he shows her reacting affectively to a mode of life that feels closed, joyless, and diminishing. The scene therefore exemplifies how social environment becomes psychologically operative. Carrie does not first reason and then feel; she feels the force of her setting before she can stabilize it conceptually.

This dynamic continues in her attempt to enter the urban labor market. Carrie's search for work is marked by repetition, exposure, and bodily depletion. She moves through commercial spaces in which class difference is immediately visible, and her own lack of place becomes legible to others before she can defend herself against it. Hakutani notes that Carrie loses her meager shoe-factory job because of illness rather than laziness or moral weakness. (Hakutani, 1967, p. 5). That detail matters because it displaces the language of personal insufficiency. Dreiser does not organize these scenes to show that Carrie lacks industriousness. On the contrary, he shows how easily fragile employment collapses when the body itself becomes vulnerable. The economic world Carrie enters is not simply demanding; it is structurally indifferent. Her movement toward Drouet must therefore be read against this prior experience of exhaustion, insecurity, and diminished alternatives.

Drouet's role in the novel becomes intelligible only within that context. He is not introduced as an ethical counterpoint to hardship, but as a figure whose urban ease is translated through material and visual signs. Carrie's response to him is mediated by surfaces: clothing, money, gesture, confidence, and mobility. Dreiser makes this especially vivid in the restaurant scene. "As he cut the meat, his rings almost spoke," the narrator observes; "His new suit creaked as he stretched to reach the plates" (Dreiser, 1900, p. 63). These details are not decorative excess. They reveal a social world in which objects and appearances acquire expressive power. Drouet's attraction lies not in intellectual intimacy or moral seriousness, but in his command of a visible order of comfort and display. Carrie is warmed by the meal, by the room, and by the

assurance that accompanies his spending. Against the Hanson flat and the failed job search, the scene shows why comfort becomes persuasive. Dreiser shows how comfort itself becomes persuasive when deprivation has already weakened the subject's resistance. Hakutani clarifies this point when he notes that Carrie's acceptance of Drouet's help unfolds less as a calculated moral surrender than as a response shaped by circumstance and subconscious direction (Hakutani, 1967, pp. 5–6). Dreiser underscores that logic in smaller narrative details as well. When Drouet offers to buy Carrie a new jacket, it fits her "by accident" (Dreiser, 1900, p. 79). The phrase may seem incidental, but within the novel's larger structure it becomes significant. Carrie's movement upward is not organized as the execution of a coherent personal plan. Chance repeatedly intervenes at points where social appearance and new possibility converge. The jacket episode shows that Carrie's advancement depends on contingent moments within an unequal social field.

Carrie's later response to Hurstwood introduces a more refined form of the same process. What changes is not the basic logic of attraction, but the level at which social distinction is perceived. Hakutani shows that Carrie begins to notice differences between Drouet and Hurstwood that are not moral in any simple sense, but aesthetic and social: the elegance of material, the subdued finish of clothing, the quality of manner, the distinction between patent leather and "soft, black calf" shoes (Hakutani, 1967, pp. 6–7). Dreiser's presentation of these details is crucial because it demonstrates that Carrie's perceptions are becoming more finely attuned to status. She reads hierarchy not through explicit doctrine, but through texture, restraint, polish, and deportment. At this stage, the text shows not a full theory of commodified identity, but a growing sensitivity to class-coded appearance. What the text clearly shows is that Carrie's judgments are increasingly formed through visible gradations of class-coded appearance. Social difference becomes emotionally legible through material nuance.

Dreiser's analysis of moral judgment becomes most explicit in the chapter that reflects on Carrie's relation to Drouet. Here the narrator interrupts the story to question the adequacy of social standards themselves: "Actions such as hers are measured by an arbitrary scale," and despite modern intellectual advances, "we

have but an infantile perception of morals" (Dreiser, 1900, p. 101). This passage is central because it changes the terms of evaluation. Dreiser does not merely say that Carrie should not be blamed; nor does he celebrate her conduct. Instead, he suggests that conventional morality is too crude to grasp the actual complexity of the situation. Social judgment relies on ready-made formulas about virtue, but those formulas fail to account for vulnerability, need, desire, and unequal conditions of choice. The passage shifts attention from individual guilt to the inadequacy of the social standard itself. Hakutani reads this moment as evidence that Dreiser departs from a merely Spencerian or conventionally deterministic account of ethics (Hakutani, 1967, pp. 9–10). That claim is persuasive because the novel's own philosophical commentary repeatedly resists moral simplification.

The well-known chapter on instinct and free will makes this especially clear. Dreiser describes civilized man as existing in an "intermediate stage," no longer wholly guided by instinct and not yet sufficiently governed by reason, "a creature of incalculable variability" (Dreiser, 1900, p. 83). This passage is crucial for interpreting Carrie's conduct. It does not abolish agency, but it does redefine agency as unstable. Human beings are shown as wavering between impulse and judgment, between desire and restraint. Carrie's own formulation of this condition follows almost immediately: "She followed whither her craving led. She was as yet more drawn than she drew" (Dreiser, 1900, p. 84). The emphasis here falls on incompleteness. Carrie is not represented as the sovereign author of her life, but neither is she rendered a lifeless object. She is still becoming, still reacting, still moving within a field where instinct, circumstance, and limited volition intersect. Taken together, these scenes show that Dreiser grounds moral judgment in social and material experience. The city shapes perception, poverty narrows choice, Drouet embodies visible comfort, Hurstwood refines class distinction, and the narrator exposes the limits of inherited moral standards. What emerges from this sequence is not a fully abstract theory of modernity, but a textually grounded account of constrained agency. Carrie's actions become intelligible only when read through the interplay of urban environment, economic insecurity, sensory persuasion, and partial will. In that sense, the novel's analysis of her life

remains inseparable from the conditions that shape it.

DISCUSSION

The preceding analysis suggests that *Sister Carrie* is most productively understood as a novel of constrained agency rather than as either a conventional moral tale or a rigidly deterministic document of naturalism. This reading revises older views that reduced Dreiser to biological or mechanical determinism. As Hakutani demonstrates, *Sister Carrie* certainly foregrounds chance, circumstance, and external pressure, but it does not reduce human conduct to a closed causal system. Instead, Dreiser presents a world in which desire, vulnerability, and limited volition interact within conditions structured by the modern city. This point matters because it changes how moral decline should be interpreted in the novel. Carrie's movement toward material comfort is presented neither as innate vice nor as simple ambition. The novel shows that her decisions emerge within a social order in which economic insecurity, class visibility, and consumer attraction are tightly interwoven. Under such conditions, moral judgment cannot remain abstract. Dreiser's critique of conventional standards becomes especially clear in the passage where he calls social morality an "arbitrary scale" and admits that modern culture still possesses only an "infantile perception of morals." The implication is not that morality disappears, but that inherited moral formulas fail to account for the actual conditions under which choices are made.

The novel is equally important for the way it redefines the role of environment. In *Sister Carrie*, Chicago and New York do not function merely as settings in which character is tested. They shape perception itself. Domestic interiors, shop windows, and commercial spaces shape judgment by organizing what appears desirable, humiliating, attainable, or hopeless. In this respect, the article supports the critical line—associated in Hakutani's essay with Rahv's formulation—that naturalism becomes most visible where environment assumes a determining narrative role. Yet Dreiser's fiction also complicates that model by preserving the instability of inward life. Carrie and Hurstwood are not empty products of social process; they remain affective, impressionable, and morally unsettled figures whose responses cannot be reduced to a single explanatory law. This reading also clarifies

Dreiser's distance from a strictly Zolaesque naturalism. Hakutani argues persuasively that Dreiser does not apply a systematic experimental theory of behavior to his characters. That insight is central to the present article. *Sister Carrie* offers not a mechanical demonstration of heredity and environment, but a more fluid account of subjectivity shaped by instinct, circumstance, and limited self-direction. Carrie's famous condition of being "more drawn than she drew" captures this intermediate state especially well: her conduct is neither fully sovereign nor wholly passive.

The broader significance of this interpretation lies in its implications for the study of American naturalism. If *Sister Carrie* is read only as a deterministic novel, then its ethical and psychological complexity is flattened. If it is read only as a morality tale, then the structural pressures of urban modernity are obscured. The novel matters precisely because it occupies the unstable ground between these two frames. It portrays moral experience as socially conditioned without abolishing inward conflict, and it treats desire as historically organized rather than purely personal. In doing so, Dreiser turns moral decline into a problem of modern social existence shaped by inequality, spectacle, chance, and unfinished selfhood.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that *Sister Carrie* is best read as a novel of constrained agency shaped by urban modernity, desire, and unstable moral judgment. Through close analysis of Carrie's movement from domestic restriction to metropolitan visibility, the study has shown that Dreiser locates ethical conflict not solely within individual character, but within the social and material conditions that organize desire, vulnerability, and choice. The analysis also supports a revised view of Dreiser's naturalism: environment, chance, and subconscious direction matter, but they do not reduce conduct to a mechanistic system. Carrie is neither a wholly sovereign moral subject nor a mere passive victim of circumstance. Rather, she is presented as a modern subject whose actions emerge within the unstable intersection of instinct, economic pressure, class aspiration, and partial volition (Hakutani, 1967, pp. 5–6). At the same time, the novel complicates conventional moral judgment. Dreiser's insistence that society measures conduct by an

“arbitrary scale” and still possesses only an “infantile perception of morals” makes clear that ethical evaluation in the novel cannot be separated from the unequal conditions under which decisions are made (Dreiser, 1900, p. 101). In this respect, *Sister Carrie* transforms moral decline from a purely personal category into a socially mediated condition of modern life. The broader significance of this reading lies in its contribution to the study of American literary naturalism. By showing how Dreiser combines environmental pressure with psychological instability and limited agency, the article clarifies why *Sister Carrie* occupies a distinctive place within the naturalist tradition. Its enduring force lies not in offering a fixed moral lesson, but in revealing how modern urban life reshapes the terms through which morality, selfhood, and responsibility can be understood.

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