Desire and Dehumanization in Theodor Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

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Abstract. Theodor Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* dramatizes the unbridled greed for wealth and craze for status in an extremely commercialized world. It exemplifies the servitude of a society beholden to a consumerist market, where the affluent prey on the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the poor. The novel captures human relations in their seismic change, where family bonds are breaking down and the family is losing its role as a basic social unit. This article will argue that human desire lies at the heart of family breakdowns in *Sister Carrie*. In doing so, it will provide an insight into the workings of the capitalist system, including its inroads into the shores of human desire – explaining how it robs individuals of their true essence and dehumanizes them. Finally, the article will call for checks and balances vis-à-vis our uncontrollable desires and recommend collective efforts in order to protect the institution of family and bring back commercialized societies from the brink.

1. Introduction

Sister Carrie, published in 1900, represents the spirit of profound social and economic transformation in the United States at the meeting point of two centuries. It portrays the changing relation between the individual and the society as how the United States begins to modernize and cast off its agrarian trappings.

The novel revolves around two main characters who symbolize the rise and fall of individuals in the emerging milieu of fast-track urbanization and industrialization and diminishing family ties. Carrie Meeber is an ordinary girl from a small town who comes to the big city and rises to stardom through retailing her sexuality within the emerging American mass culture of celebrity. George Hurstwood, on the other hand, is a respectable family man of comfortable means which he squanders after developing a fervid sexual desire for Carrie, leading to his tragic demise.

Families before industrialization were mostly extended, consisting of the male head, the wife, the children and the aged parents. Together, they worked on farms and produced things for the survival of the family [16]. Industrialization disrupted this relationship because traditional skills became obsolete and with the male family head having nothing to pass on to his children, people had to migrate to big cities. The patriarchal family order then dramatically turned upside down as the father got unemployed and the wife and children became the breadwinners. Under the circumstances, family life could barely hold out and siblings chose to lead individual lives. That was how thousands of rural Americans rushed to the cities to find jobs and build themselves new lives and identities. And that was how urbanization and industrialization, with its glitz and glamour, changed the way the new settlers lived and looked at the world [15]. In *Sister Carrie*, a young lady leaves the family farm in Wisconsin to find a job in Chicago.

Industrialization, meanwhile, was shaping new human desires. *Sister Carrie* encapsulates the ethos of this transformation in human character and yearning amid the birth of consumerism. Now considered one of the most important classical novels in American Literature, *Sister Carrie* took eleven years to be printed because it was initially considered an unethical story of a degenerate consumerist society which treated people like commodities [17].

2. Literature Review

The new consumption pattern changed the sexual landscape, navigating into a new terrain where capital was flowing in. This capital flow combined with new freedoms that the urban industrialized society accorded to women transfigured the contours of feminine desires in unfathomable ways. As a result, “money cleared for its prospective possessor the way to every joy and every bauble which the heart of woman may desire” [21]. Dreiser's “pioneering achievement in *Sister Carrie* is to enter deeply into the process through which Carrie becomes the connoisseur of insatiable desires released by late capitalism” [1]. Passing along the busy aisles, “the dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, hair combs, purses, all touched her with individual desire, and she felt keenly the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purchase” [21]. In her passivity, Shulman notes, “she perfectly embodies the compelling power of commodities to assume a magnitude and separateness that make the self seem insignificant and unworthy” [21]. In Chicago, Carrie is walking down the streets where she is carried away by the finery of trinkets, dress goods, stationery and jewelry. “Each separate counter,” Dreiser writes, “was a show place of dazzling interest and attraction. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop” [21]. Industrialization disrupted the traditional relationship between generations. Women earned their own living and were relieved from the control of their families, but most importantly, they were free to tend to their sexualized lure. Dreiser “shows the way it affects people especially responsive to the demands of an emerging consumerism” [1]. Carrie's situation symbolizes the quandary of the modern age. “Critics have enjoyed looking at Carrie as a proto-postmodernist desiring machine” [2]. Dreiser's novel heralded the Hollywood era when glamour and pomp stimulated the consumerist culture. “That is the real scandal of *Sister Carrie* that a human being should become a system for sustaining and disseminating desire” [6]. For Carrie, goods have a life of their own separate from and superior to human beings. Dreiser's characters dramatize the details of the cityscape characterized by economic necessity and urban anonymity, where none of them are able to achieve real happiness. “The possibility of being or becoming nothing - a fear of anomie - haunts Dreiser's characters [3]. According to American biographer William Andrew Swanberg, they are driven by ignorance and inability to withstand the pressures of the shallow American yearning for money, success and fashion. “They know themselves to be dispossessed faceless figures in an urban crowd, and they seek to fashion a distinctive self in the only way they can conceive – by wearing the latest fashion” [3]. Carrie observes that “there is an indescribably faint line in the matter of man's apparel which somehow divides for her those who are worth glancing at and those who are not” [21]. This obsessive desire and interest in the finery of things was driven by the American industrialization marked by mass production of material goods at a speed not seen before. It coincided with the evolution in communication, where motion picture and other modes of mass media goaded the chariots of desire. “Desire is the protagonist of *Sister Carrie*” [5]. Hence, this essay will be focusing on the primordial force of desire and how it affects the destiny of individuals and families.

3. Capitalism and Flows of Desire

According to French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, pre-capitalist social machines are inherent in desire, coding it and its flows and pleasures. Dreiser sums up the state of man as “scarcely beast” and “scarcely human”. He remarks: “He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve by the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other – a creature of incalculable variability” [21].

Capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari say, liberates the flows of desire under the social conditions. “Capitalism is the only social machine that is constructed on the basis of decoded flows, substituting for intrinsic codes an axiomatic of abstract quantities in the form of money [8]. Drouet gives money to Carrie out of a realization of her want. As Dreiser observes, he would not have given the same amount to a poor young man, but we must not forget that a poor young man could

not, in the nature of things, have appealed to him like a poor young girl. "Femininity affected his feelings. He was the creature of an inborn desire" [21]. In his preface

Michel Foucault speculates that power in the capitalist system produces desire. Proponents of capitalism argue that the system is a function of human nature and that there exists an overlap between capitalism and human nature. According to Dreiser, man "will not forever balance thus between good and evil [21]. As an economic and social form, capitalism's appeal is rooted in its relationship to the psyche and the way it relates to its subject and their satisfaction.

a. Leftist Psychoanalysis of Capitalism

Inherent injustice is the main drawback of capitalism because the productive forces which it unleashed in such massive ways have also resulted in vast differences in wealth. "It was a system in which the material benefits did not enrich those who directly made them possible" [9]. The reward from the capital investment hugely dwarfed the toil which generated this reward. In Chicago, Carrie ventures into a commercial region where "the entire metropolitan center possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep" [21]. The capitalist system is biased against the worker: the more wealth he generates, the poorer he becomes. At Carrie's first workplace, "not the slightest provision had been made for the comfort of the employees, the idea being that something was gained by giving them as little and making the work as hard and unremunerative as possible" [21]. The extra productivity which the worker achieves only lines the capitalist's pockets. Capitalism did not just repress workers toiling without proper remuneration but their exploiters as well. "The factory owners who can buy whatever they want nonetheless suffer under a system that prohibits any proper satisfaction of desire" [9]. Anti-capitalist theorists then proposed sexual libertarianism as the remedy in the belief that ending sexual repression would spell the demise of capitalism. Austrian psychoanalysts Otto Gross and Wilhelm Reich heralded a campaign to bring about sexual liberty and end repressed sexuality which gained popular support among the student movements of the 1960s.

Leftist anti-capitalists say the problem with the system is that it demands too much repression or what Herbert Marcuse calls "surplus repression" [10]. Happiness under capitalism does not rely on a break from repression. According to Marcuse, "the individual lives his repression 'freely' as his own life: he desires what he is supposed to desire; his gratifications are profitable to him and others; he is reasonably and often exuberantly happy" [10]. However, this is just a false happiness which conceals deep dissatisfaction behind its façade. Dreiser has his own recipe. "There is nothing in this world more delightful than that middle state in which we mentally balance at times, possessed of the means, lured by desire, and yet deterred by conscience or want of decision" [21]. Consequently, human instincts "have to undergo a repressive regimentation," a repression of the basic instincts necessary for "the perpetuation of the human race in civilization" [10]. In other words, true satisfaction requires breaking from a commodified life in which desire is inherently repressed.

b. Pathology of Capitalist Desire

Injustice and repressiveness divide leftist critics of capitalism in their diagnosis of the system's ailments through what it provides its subjects with. However, the two sides have homogenous views when it comes to what the system denies to its subjects. The key index of capitalism is keeping its subjects in a constant state of yearning where we are taken to the brink of having our desire realized but never get to that point. The result is an artificial sense of satisfaction which we do not realize. That is to say the satisfaction which capitalism gives to its subjects always falls short of satisfying, keeping them in perennial yearning for the ultimate gratification and asking for newer commodities. Dreiser notes:

Not only did Carrie feel the drag of desire for all which was new and pleasing in apparel for women, but she noticed too, with a touch at the heart, the fine ladies who elbowed and ignored her, brushing past in utter disregard of her presence, themselves eagerly enlisted in the materials which the store contained. [21]

The alternative argument, however, is that the problem with capitalism is not its failure to satisfy but its inability to make its subjects realize where their satisfaction lies. Under the circumstances, adherents of the capitalist regime develop a feverish urge to gratify their dissatisfaction through the accumulation of capital or acquisition of commodity. Carrie's "fancy plunged recklessly into privileges and amusements which would have been much more becoming had she been cradled a child of fortune" [21]. Production, distribution and consumption constitute the capitalist structure which is based on the promise of the better future. "To take solace in the promise of tomorrow is to accept the sense of dissatisfaction that capitalism sells more vehemently than it sells any commodity" [10]. Capitalism's hold over us depends on our failure to recognize the nature of its power. Capitalism functions as effectively as it does because it provides satisfaction for its subjects while at the same time hiding the awareness of this satisfaction from them. According to leftist critics of capitalism, if we recognized that we obtained satisfaction from the failure to obtain the perfect commodity rather than from a wholly successful purchase, we would be freed from the psychological appeal of capitalism. In this way, we would buy the next commodity without a psychic investment in it, which would mark a revolution and a solution. This would create a new system and revolutionize our socioeconomic order. One key feature of the capitalist system is the identity crisis which its subjects grapple with. The system holds out the fantasy of belonging with the commodity which the subjects hope to identify with. Among the city dwellers, Carrie compared poorly and recognized "her individual shortcomings of dress and that shadow of manner which she thought must hang about her and make clear to all who and what she was" [21]. However, the perfect commodity is always missing to give that ultimate feeling of belonging and a sense of identity. The identity crisis is a main theme in *Sister Carrie*; so is Caroline Meeber's painstaking effort to identify herself with commodities. Acquisition and accumulation is a key index of capitalism, with the subject constantly craving for more and more which ensures the survival of the system. In other words, the capitalist system is powered by the desire for the ultimate satisfaction which it cannot deliver. This process amounts to a manipulation where capitalism takes advantage of the human psyche which gratifies itself through the failure to realize its desire. Carrie "realized in a dim way how much the city held – wealth, fashion, ease – every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart" [21]. The system, however, holds out the promise that there is always something better just around the corner, allowing this failure to perpetuate. It also provides a sobering insight into our psyche with its self-deception which explains why the capitalist system appeals to the minds and also why Islam and philosophers such as Plato are apprehensive about desire and its frivolities.

4. Exploitation of Women and Decline of Families

Industrialization and capitalism changed the basis of the family, transforming it into a unit of consumption from an element of production, which in turn affected the position of women. Before the industrial revolution, individual families served as the centers of economic production commanded by the male head of the household. Women also fulfilled a variety of tasks in and around the home from child-raising to cooking, cleaning, spinning and agricultural chores, which were equally important.

Industrialization changed this setting, where factories and mills produced the commodities which previously were the handiwork of nuclear families. The immediate fallout from this development was the split between work and family which previously kept the family in one piece. The family now served the vested interests of the capitalists who took advantage of the situation to control wealth and power. Women and children provided the army of laborers sought by the emerging nouveau riche classes who brutally exploited them in inhumane conditions. This had a big effect on the family and on personal relations, where the old productive family virtually became dysfunctional. However, the most serious blow to the family as an institution came from the split between the paid work that woman did at the workplace and the unpaid tasks which they continued to carry out at home. Ironically, the patriarchal family not only survived but strengthened under capitalism and industrialization. That was because the new capitalist class sought to use economic,

legal and ideological constraints of the patriarchal system to its own advantage to ensure its class rule. Engels argues that the oppression of women was linked to the rise of class society and the family. Women were subordinated to men, just as the majority of men and women were subordinated to a ruling class [20]. This historic shift destroyed bonds based on equality and solidarity. It reshaped our personal relations according to the needs of successive class societies.

It also changed the foundation of the partnership between men and women into what Engels called "individual sex love" [20]. Engels did not urge the total abolition of marriage, but anticipated its radical transformation and social diminution [20]. Marx also anticipated the abolition of the family, saying the "bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital" [12]. According to Marx and Engels, capitalism has made family a sham. In *Capital*, Marx outlined the way capitalist industrialization was tearing apart the family life of the working class [12]. He focused on economic misery and family neglect which massive exploitation of women and children had caused with the introduction of the machine. The bourgeois family form "was perceived by Marx and Engels as essentially an economic unit based on the 'private gain' of capitalism and an instrument of class oppression reflecting the class antagonisms of nineteenth-century society" [13]. The physical and moral health of a nation is equated with the health of the family. With the privatization of family life, the healthiness of the family and hence the capitalist society is seriously compromised.

a. Commodification of Women

With industrialization, women were suddenly catapulted to the limelight as consumers of household goods. Advertising, mass media and movies began to propagandize physical appearance as key to social status and success for women, making them increasingly self-conscious about their bodies. Soon, the overriding desire to look and to be physically attractive became a servant of consumption and the cash nexus. "In modern capitalist society, marriage and its equivalent common law relationships are entered into freely by men and women on the basis of mutual attraction" [11]. This relationship on the basis of mutual attraction made sex the means by which women had to maintain their husbands' interest. Hence, the role of women crucially changed because of the growing tendency to treat them as sex objects and use their bodies in advertising. The entry of women into paid work transformed their lives in a big way. After her disappointing experience in her first paid work, Carrie meets Drouet who appeals to her in a big way. "Drouet must be fortunate. He rode on trains, dressed in such nice clothes, was so strong, and ate in these fine places" [21]. Women in capitalist societies work outside the home for most of their lives, where they are often subjected to exploitation and treated as commodities. Today, the impact of these changes is reflected in the pattern of marriage, divorce and illegitimate births. In *Sister Carrie*, Caroline Meeber as a simple girl from a small town in Chicago in a desperate hunt for a job undergoes a transformation in character after finding a theatrical career in New York, which vaults her to stardom. "If, in the first part, Carrie's desire to consume expresses a utopian longing for change, her theatrical career puts this change into effect by turning her into a commodity" [4]. The new social status, money and fame does not give her what she wants and she still finds herself in the same powerless position as she was as a job applicant in Chicago.

b. Fall of Families in *Sister Carrie*

Carrie symbolizes the family disintegration under capitalism, initially as a victim who has to leave behind her meager life in a small town for greener pastures and later as an agent of family breakup because of her relationship with married men. As discussed before, extended families and even nuclear families lost their significance as life sustaining organisms under the capitalist system. Minnie is not "exactly touched by yearning, sorrow, or love" when she finds out that her sister Carrie has left them for good in Chicago [21]. Siblings often chose to live separate lives as they sought to climb the ladders of opportunity - Carrie being an example. Her desire for money and material prosperity is insatiable because she strongly believes that it is the only possible way to happiness. That is why Drouet, seemingly a rich, elegant and happy man, attracts her so much. "He was a splendid fellow in the true popular understanding of the term, and captivated Carrie

completely” [21]. Men treat women as a commodity and Carrie understands it well; that is why she does not mind to sell herself in order to get what she desires.

With "individual sex love" defining the bond between men and women under the consumerist mentality, most intimate relationships were affected. After Drouet slipped the greenbacks he had into her palm when she was desperately destitute, Carrie “felt bound to him by a strange tie of affection now” and “she scarcely gave a thought to the complication which would trouble her when he was gone” [21]. Hurstwood is the epitome of a capitalist whose carnal desires get the better of him. Despite having a wealthy married life, he betrays his family and develops a clandestine relationship with Carrie. Unsatisfied desires characterize the bane of these dysfunctional families. Hurstwood's wife Julia is blessed with all means of wealth and comfort but her sufferings are no less than Carrie's. “Mrs. Hurstwood was the type of the woman who has ever endeavored to shine and has been more or less chagrined at the evidences of superior capability in this direction everywhere” [21]. While Carrie covets Hurstwood's opulent life, his wife and daughter yearn for the more glamorous circle of richer people.

The trouble plaguing Hurstwood's family lies in the nature of their marriage which is based on consumerist principles. He regards his wife as one of his belongings, someone who represents his wealth. “The vanity of Mrs. Hurstwood caused her to keep her person rather showily arrayed, but to Hurstwood this was much better than plainness” [21]. Julia in fact has been contracted to produce an heir to his property. She has sold the exclusive right to her body in exchange for the trinkets of Hurstwood's affluent life. “There was no love lost between them [...] In the accepted and popular phrase, she had her ideas and he had his” [21]. Julia's unease with this feeling of subjugation grows as their marriage progresses into the later years. She “drove out more, dressed better, and attended theaters freely to make up for it” [21]. Such an atmosphere “could hardly come under the category of home life ... With the lapse of time it must necessarily become dryer and dryer – must eventually be tinder, easily lighted and destroyed” [21]. And their matrimonial life turns into a living hell when she finds out about her husband's affair with Carrie.

Both Julia and Carrie are unhappy but for quite opposite reasons. Carrie wishes to enter a formal matrimonial bond from which Julia wants to break free. “‘Why don't we get married?’ she inquired, thinking of the voluble Drouet had made” [21]. However, she was “not enamored of Drouet” and “when Hurstwood called, she met a man who was more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways” [21]. The complete ignoring by Hurstwood of his own home came with the growth of his affection for Carrie. When Drouet finds out about the budding affair between Carrie and Hurstwood, he accosts her on the betrayal “after all I did for you”, to which she answers blazing, “What have you done for me?” [21]. When Drouet reminds that he had given her all the clothes she wanted, taken her everywhere she wanted to go and she had as much as he had, and more too, Carrie retorts, “Did I ask you to?” [21]. The breakup in intimate bond between Drouet and Carrie occurs with the same briskness and frivolity in the age-old matrimonial relationship between the Hurstwoods. The last exchange between him and his wife is through a courier who brings him a letter from Mrs. Hurstwood. “I want you to send the money I asked for at once. I need it to carry out my plans. You can stay away if you want to. It doesn't matter in the least” [21]. The next letter is from Julia's lawyer, announcing her plans to file for divorce and alimony if he does not “compromise” – the polite term for money. His wife and children are used to treat him like a bank, which makes him feel profoundly alienated and sends him rushing into an affair with an eighteen-year-old.

The downward spiral for Hurstwood has just started. Fearing financial disaster from his impending divorce, Hurstwood steals money from his employer and tricks Carrie into leaving the country with him, starting a new life in New York where they married under a new name. He tries to work his way up again in New York where “he faced the city, cut off from his friends, despoiled of his modest fortune, and even his name, and forced to begin the battle for place and comfort all over again” [21]. But he never gets back on his feet and his business goes down. Carrie notices, also, that he does not suggest many amusements any more. “This was not the easy Hurstwood of Chicago— not the liberal, opulent Hurstwood she had known. The change was too obvious to

escape detection” [21]. She felt that her life was becoming stale and that things were wrong with him. “It got so that they talked even less than usual, and yet it was not Hurstwood who felt any objection to Carrie. It was Carrie who shied away from him” [21]. Life went by gloomily for a few months until one morning Hurstwood found a message left by Carrie which read, “Dear George, I’m going away. I’m not coming back any more” [21]. He finally comes to his last fifty cents he had saved before he starts living on the streets because he has nowhere to go. Finally, Hurstwood rents a room in a boarding house and kills himself.

Meanwhile, neither Julia nor Carrie is satisfied after they begin a new life. Julia is still bitter after her divorce because she feels betrayed by her former husband. Carrie, on the other hand, is not happy despite a reversal of fortunes which takes place after she lands a job as an actress and starts making good money. She is still as miserable as she was when she had arrived in Chicago to find a job and build a future. “Amid the tinsel and shine of her state walked Carrie, unhappy. As when Drouet took her, she had thought: ‘Now I am lifted into that which is best’; as when Hurstwood seemingly offered her the better way: ‘Now am I happy.’” [21]. Having put her family behind years ago and played a role in the breakup of other families, Carrie is now a lonely wretch who has no one to take care of her or give her consolation at times of distress.

Sitting alone, she was now an illustration of the devious ways by which one who feels, rather than reasons, may be led in the pursuit of beauty. Though often disillusioned, she was still waiting for that halcyon day when she would be led forth among dreams become real [21]. Carrie no longer thought of the elegance of the creatures who passed her. Had they more of that peace and beauty which glimmered afar off, then were they to be envied.

Conclusion

Sister Carrie is a clarion cry of warning about the sorry state of family trends in capitalist societies and their inevitable predicaments. It depicts the quandary of the modern generation which is headed to a desolately uncharted territory. This means the most fundamental unit of society has rapidly deteriorated. The consequences are immense: for instance, the disparity in economic and social outcomes between children raised by married versus single parents has become vast. Any serious attempt to reverse the cycle of poverty must include changing the family structure. This is a gargantuan task and policymakers often choose to shirk it.

While there is no single-bullet solution, a cultural awakening is needed to resurrect the family and restore its sacred aura. Socialites, thinkers and those in mass media must help promote the significance of families and correct the general perception which sees the family as another materialistic institution. Meanwhile, civil societies such as non-profit organizations, charities and businesses can rise to the occasion and help limit the fallout from family breakups.

On the individual level, desires have to be channeled and disciplined. Capitalism dominates because it mimics the structure of our desire which belongs to human nature. Marketing and advertising companies have used psychological research on how desire is stimulated to find more effective ways to induce consumers into buying a given product or service. Personal desires from the perspective of divine religions have to be channeled to function in obedience to God or a lofty objective. This approach is attentive to the situation in *Sister Carrie*, where the characters do not know what makes them happy. Carrie's problem is that she is totally confused after becoming rich. She has no goals because she considered money to be the only means that could make her happy which it did not.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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