

## **DREISER'S SISTER CARRIE: A STUDY IN IRONIC MODE**

**Dr. Keshav Dev**

Asstt. Prof. English  
Hindustan College of Science and  
Technology,  
Farah Mathura (U.P.)

**Dr. S. K. Chauhan**

Professor & Head  
Deptt. of English  
DEI (Deemed University)  
Dayalbagh, Agra-5

Theodore Dreiser is one of major novelists of the Naturalistic stream in America. Something extra ordinary occurred to the American fiction in the mid-twentieth century when the Naturalistic movement began to flourish. It gathered momentum with the Publication of Dreiser's most controversial novel, "Sister Carrie" which fell like abomb shell on the genteel traition of America. Dreiser ushered in a novel phase in American City fiction by introducing Sister Carrie (1900) when he "broke away with the tradition of the sentimental romance" and wrote a new realistic novel and created a work that was in subject matter more original than Stephen Crane's "Maggie".

Though writers like Mark Twain, William Dean Howells and Stephen Crane had already established significant milestoner in the field of fiction writing yet Dreiser came with a more effective realization by creating his "Sister Carrie" as a city Novel which become a genre in Itself.

Born in 1871, the son of Sarah and Paul reiser, Theodore Dreiser was brought up amid utter poverty and scarcity: Dreiser consequently was raised in an atmosphere of constant poverty, looked after by a superstitious, ignorant (although loving) mother, and terrorized by a defeated, often absent minded father, who grew as defeat followed defeat, more and more obsessed with his Roman Catholic religion.

Since he drank the water of experience from the cup of life so exhaustively, he had to witness the various situations which offered ironic mode and that he reflected in his novels in a very clear manner. The city as discovered by Theodore Dreiser may be termed as his own discovery. Gelfant analysis his discovery of the city vis-a-vi his own personality in the following words which denote nothing but the brutal forces of the city bringing even the most powerful ones:

In the Indiana woods he had sensed the harmony and oneness of all life forms, but here as he observed only a brutal struggle for survival, he was predisposed to accept a materialistic explanation of nature's beauty.

Dreiser is the first naturalistic writer to do away with the conventional sense of poetic justice and the introduction of a villain in fiction, by emphasizing the role of social forces and the

effect of the misdirection of the American Dream on the individual consciousness. Dreiser's "Sister Carrie" is the story of a girl who comes to the city in search of pleasure, position, prosperity and glory. Compelled by the forces of the city, she has to surrender to the for us of the metropolis as she is led by the inevitable instincts of self interest. Lost in the dreams of elegant life and carried away by the illusion on success, Carrie breaks all relations with her sister and goes to better her but with Drouet, and later she deserts him also with the hope of the greater amount of success from the middle-aged married saloon manager Hurstwood, under the disgust of underdisguist of unflufilent of the dream of success not leading to "beauty and wealth but money and marriage".

As a young eighteen year old girl she leaves her rural home and makes her first entrance into the world as to seek her fortunes in Chicago, the city of her dreams. This entrance in the world forces her immediately to grow up from ignorance to experience. She is the prototype of innumerable such individuals who have been forced to enter the vartcrowd of the wage earners in the big city of America owing to great necessity and aspirations of a better life. Carrie's progress from scarcity to affluence may well illustrate the classical myth of the American Dream since her story lurks between the illusions and the reality behind the beautiful fa9ade. Carries first notion about the city is full of ambition, hope and happiness which is well evident in her experience of Chicago in the following words:

Through the open windows she could see figures of men and women in working aprons, moving busily about the great streets were well lived mysteries to her; "The vast offices strange masses which concerned far off individuals of importance, she could only think of people connected with them as counting money, dressing magnificently, and riding in carriager why they dealth is, how they laboured to what end it all came, he had only the vaguest conception.

Irony has been a very popular dvice to represent the mode and manner by great writers since time immemorial. It is the expression of meaning through the use of language which normally means the opposite. In other words, It is a situation that appears opposite to what one expects. Most of the great writers and poets have made Irony an effective tool in their works to display their talents. Ovid, Chaucer, and many other writers in different languages have shown mastery in the use of irony in their respective works. Dreiser too has shown the display of this scale in a marvelous manner. What can be a better way of desploying ironic mode when Carrie, the dreamer in the beginning has to realize the emptiness of life amid the affluence of material possessions?

Oh Carrie, Carrie? Is bihd striving of the human heart!  
----- know?, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor Content"

When the curtain goes up in the first chapter of the novel, it appears that the city has already reached Carrie by way of Minnie and Hanson, her sister and brother-in-law and much has taken place in her life (this has been left to the imagination of the reader). The stories that she has heard from Minnie/and Henson about Chicago's glory have awakened in her dreams of, and love, passion and curiosity for city life. She appears, more or less, as dreamy and ambitious as Eustacia vye, or Madeline lee or Emma Bovary: but while in the cares of Eustacia Vye and Emma, the passion for life is ingrained in their basic nature, in the care of Carrie the passion for life.....cosy and luxurious is the result of the city force working in her from the very beginning.

It is the force, enshrined in her ambition, that compels her to leave the sweat home of here parents which a gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss, a touch in her throat when the cars clacked by the flour mill when her father worked by the day, a pathetic sign as the familiar green environs of the village passed in review and the thread which bound her so lightly to girl hood and home 4. Irretrievably broken from the very moment she finds herself is Chicago.<sup>5</sup> Her drift is complete and irreversible. Her relations with her parents are broken for ever and there is no hope for her return. The qualities with which she is equipped is she steps into the threshold of Chicago, are not sufficient to protect her from involvement in the intricate, magnetic city force. At the outset one discovers her a woman of unassuming manners, full of illusions and ignorance of youth, and even unarmed like Hardy's Tess with bookish knowledge and unlike Henry James' Isabala, Archer and Milly Theale, devoid of intuitive grace. She is possessed of a mind rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis.

The above description clearly shows that Carrie had left her rural home for the prosperity of her parents in the hope that she would get a comfortable shelter in her sister Mnnie's house in Chicago. But ironically enough, the sister fails to provide an emotional welcome to Carrie because of which she looks to other and falls a victim even compromising with her chastity. Can there be a greater irony than the fact that Carrie does not remember her parents and other family members during the course of her stay at Chicago as well as New York?

Carrie has come to the city to fulfill the Dream of Success. It includes her ambition to lead a luxurious life with a convincing social position and "she longed and longed and longed".<sup>6</sup> Carrie wants pleasure, position and self but she is still confused. She feels her many dreams being fulfilled by Drouet and says:

As money, Money! Money! What a thing it was to have how plenty of it would clear away all these troubles?

Drouet, may be termed as an agent of the city which exerts its powerful influence upon Carrie's life. Both exchange love but fail in realizing it for ever. She takes him as a stepping stone to the achievement of her self-interest which is not only high but grows stronger day by day. He, on the other hand, gets full enjoyment from her by anchoring his emotions in her heart. It is really ironical that Drouet who had aroused hopes in Carrie, is suddenly abandoned by her for a married hotel manager Hurstwood. Thus the fidelity of Carrie is transformed into opportunity in Chicago since, "The Chicago that Dreiser describes is a mediating term. It is a *synecdoche* for America, of which it is the most compact and representative part; and on the other hand, it is a *metonymy* for Carrie whose small, future oriented self with its plans and expectations extending out into reality like trolley tracks and strings of gas lamps, the surrounding city magnifies and gives a concrete expression to."

The extra-ordinary power with which the book is vested lies in the powerful delineation of Carrie's counterpart, Hurstwood. He too, like Carrie, is a victim of American Dream. If Carrie is lonely in the vast city of Chicago because she has no relations there, Hurstwood, too, is all alone, because the world with which he deals can give him only lip service and no affection and sympathy though the circle of his relations and friends is very wide. He tells Carrie:

You think I am happy, that I ought not to complain? If you were to meet all day with people who care absolutely nothing about you if you want day after day a place where there was nothing but show in difference, if there was not one person in all those you knew to whom you could appeal for sympathy, or talk to with pleasure, perhaps you would be un happy too.

The common saying that God made man and man made the city, proves quite true in case of any city of the world. When God's man want perfection, man's city fails to achieve the norms of perfection so far as a happy life is concerned. Carrie too when comes under the complete hypnotic influence of the city, she too is lost in the mire of anxiety. How she possesses more than she had ever had before- a good house, fine clothes and "an air pleasing in the extreme". But Carrie lacks that contentment surpassing wealth which may bring real happiness to her. To quote Dreiser:

"Here, then, was Carrie, established in a pleasant fashion, free of certain difficulties which most ominously confronted her, laden with many new ones, which were of a mental order..... She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse, between these two images the wavered, hesitating, which to believe"

Hurstwood seeks joy in Carrie's company. He leaves his children and wife besides his job. He leaves Chicago too to try his luck in another city. It is really a great irony of his life that Carrie who flourishes materially fails to give due recognition to Hurstwood. What can be a greater irony that Carrie becomes a great actor and Hurstwood, a bagger, poor Hurstwood dies the death of a bagger - unloved and uncared for. Hurstwood who is, "Schooled in winning those birds of fine feather" 11 becomes an object of pity. Therefore, it is also a warning to those who crave for more despite satisfactory life conditions.

The triangle of Carrie, Hurstwood and Druet offers an interesting study in ironic mode since one can study their characters, aptitudes and inclination with a continuous contrasting manner. If Carrie is confused in her aims and fails to understand the forces of life. If Hurstwood seeks his happiness not in the present but in the future which is still unborn, Druet..... an American go gather, free from all consideration about the forces of the world..... seeks meaning and life in what he has, what he can easily possess, and what he can do for his own advantages in the present. When Carrie goes away from his life, he damn cares for her, because he has used several women like her and will use hundreds of such women in future. When he figures again at the end of the novel, it is not because he has come to see her intentionally but because he happens to see her name on the programme and finally on the stage. "Then it struck me all at one." 12 Even at this time, though older, he appears in the same fine clothes the same stocky body, the same rosy countenance. He, unlike Hurstwood, knows and understands well what Carrie is like.

The title of the novel "Sister Carrie" is wonderfully ironic. Dreiser must have done so with a definite purpose. This shows the hollowness of American morality. She is still a sister though she has been cut off from her elder sister, and has been living the life of a kept woman. Despite a great material success in the end, she fails to have her own family and feels morally defeated, spiritually disillusioned and tragically placed in a dilemma. At the height of success, She realises that life means not only material success but some thing else also, and that all her dreams are empty and destructive of all that is good in man. She hears the words echo in her ears;

In your rocking chair by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream much happiness as you may not feel?

The irony of Carrie's life should be viewed in a larger perspective as the irony of an average American city dweller during the twentieth century. They have yet they do not have, as most of them lead a life without contentment. That is why Carrie remains lonely in the crowd of the city.

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