

PAPER

## IMAGES AND SYMBOLS OF NATURALISTIC FLOW IN “SISTER CARRIE”

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### Abstract

This article explores the naturalistic elements in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, focusing on the main characters and the symbolic imagery used to reflect the interplay between individual desires and societal forces. Through the character of Carrie Meeber and her journey from rural obscurity to urban prominence, Dreiser illustrates the principles of naturalism particularly environmental determinism, social pressure, and innate human drives. The analysis also considers the downfall of George Hurstwood as a complementary narrative showcasing the destructive impact of societal expectations and internal conflict. Furthermore, symbolic representations such as the cityscape and theatrical imagery are examined for their role in emphasizing the themes of moral ambiguity and the illusions of material success. The study underscores how *Sister Carrie* critiques the rigid class structures and moral codes of late 19th-century America, presenting a vivid portrayal of human struggle within the naturalistic literary tradition..

**Key words:** Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser, American naturalism, Carrie Meeber, George Hurstwood, urbanization, determinism, symbolism, environmental influence, literary realism.

### The main part

*Sister Carrie*, published in 1900 by Theodore Dreiser, stands as a monumental example of American naturalism, reflecting the profound societal norms and individual struggles characteristic of late XIXth-century America. This literary movement, heavily influenced by Darwinian concepts of survival and determinism, highlights the intricate interplay between individuals and their environments, emphasizing how social factors and innate characteristics shape human experiences. Dreiser's narrative weaves a rich tapestry of urban life, illustrating the psychological and sociological pressures faced by characters inhabiting the tumultuous landscapes of industrialization and burgeoning consumer capitalism.

Set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing society, *Sister Carrie* reveals the stark realities of poverty, ambition, and moral ambiguity. The titular character, Carrie Meeber, embodies the struggles of many individuals seeking to rise above their social status in a rigid class system. Her journey from a small town to the city of Chicago serves not only to highlight her personal aspirations but also underscores the broader societal forces at play that influence her choices and outcomes. In this sense, Carrie's experiences reflect the naturalist portrayal of human beings

as products of their environment, shaped by social structures, economic conditions, and inherent biological impulses.

Through the depiction of Carrie's rise and eventual fall, Dreiser critiques societal norms that prioritize material success and personal ambition over moral integrity and emotional fulfillment. This theme is further accentuated by the influences of urbanization, which not only create opportunities but also engender moral confusion and disillusionment. The characters surrounding Carrie such as George Hurstwood similarly encapsulate the struggles stemming from societal expectations and personal desires. Hurstwood, who begins as a successful manager but ultimately succumbs to desperation and poverty, exemplifies how external circumstances and internal weaknesses intertwine to shape one's fate.

Dreiser employs a range of symbolic images and motifs throughout *Sister Carrie* to enhance the theme of naturalism. The city itself is often personified, acting as a relentless force that both entices and devours its inhabitants. For instance, the bustling streets of Chicago serve as symbols of both opportunity and moral decay, reflecting the duality of urban life at the turn of the century. Carrie's encounters with the city illustrate her as both a passive participant in and an active victim of the social and economic structures around her. This duality is emblematic of naturalism,

where characters often find themselves caught in circumstances beyond their control, driven by instincts and desires that may ultimately lead to their downfall.

The use of visual imagery in *Sister Carrie* further reinforces the theme of naturalism as it relates to societal critique. The stark contrast between Carrie's initial naivety and her later experiences underscores the harsh reality of urban life. Symbols such as the elaborate theater where she first encounters success represent not just aspiration but also the ephemeral nature of such ambitions. As Carrie becomes entrapped in the glitz and glamour of an urban existence, Dreiser highlights the moral vacuity that often accompanies such desires. The naturalistic portrayal of her character demonstrates how societal norms and personal aspirations can collide, leading to inevitable consequences that reflect both individual agency and environmental determinism.

Carrie Meeber, the protagonist of Theodore Dreiser's "*Sister Carrie*", serves as a quintessential example of a character driven by naturalistic traits. Emerging from a modest background in rural Wisconsin, Carrie's aspirations emerge as a direct response to the socio-economic constraints that define her existence. Her character illustrates the pivotal narrative idea that individual desires are profoundly molded by the conditions of one's environment. In this context, Carrie's journey to urban Chicago becomes emblematic of the struggle between personal ambition and societal limitations, emphasizing the naturalistic tenet that human behavior is influenced by heredity and environment.

Carrie's initial aim to find work in the bustling city underscores her yearning for a better life an essential aspect of her characterization. Raised in a family that embodies the struggles of the working class, she possesses limited access to education and resources. The pressing realities of economic hardship shape her aspirations, positioning her as a product of her environment. This background is pivotal in understanding her motivations; her desire to escape the mundanity of small-town life reflects an innate longing for social mobility and spiritual fulfillment. The vivid imagery of her arrival in Chicago the overwhelming skyline and the cacophony of urban life serves to amplify this longing, presenting a stark contrast to her past and further illustrating the role of external circumstances in shaping her ambitions.

Carrie Meeber arrives in Chicago with aspirations for a better life, symbolized by her perception of the city's opportunities. The rapidly advancing urban setting represents a promise of economic prosperity, social mobility, and personal liberation. Indeed, the city is depicted as a place replete with potential — an alluring metropolis that entices Carrie with visions of affluence and success. The vibrant imagery of city life, such as the bustling streets filled with the sounds of industry, highlights the allure that draws Carrie towards an environment that, in many respects, starkly contrasts with her humble origins in rural Wisconsin.

However, this vibrant representation of the city becomes gradually overshadowed by the darker realities of urban existence. The naturalistic traits of the characters, including Carrie herself, come to reflect the inescapable influence of their environment on their fates. While the city initially appears as a catalyst for Carrie's aspirations, it swiftly reveals itself to be a site of manipulation and exploitation, echoing the deterministic themes central to naturalism. The roles of power, class, and gender in the urban landscape manifest in the interactions Carrie has with other characters, such as Drouet and Hurstwood, who exploit her naivety and aspirations for their own benefit. Thus, Chicago transforms from a mere backdrop of opportunity to a constraining force that limits Carrie's autonomy and shapes her identity in troubling ways.

The geographical landscape of Chicago, characterized by its industrial fortitude and metropolitan allure, thus acts as a crucible for Carrie's aspirations and failures. While she initially finds herself captivated by the spectacle of the city, the symbols

inherent in the urban setting ultimately serve to elucidate the entrapments of her socio-economic reality. The stark imagery of the city representing both the neon-lit promise of consumer culture and the grim shadows of industrial life further enhances the theme of naturalism. Carrie's experiences underscore the idea that individuals are often at the mercy of forces beyond their control, a core tenet of Naturalist philosophy, as the ever-present city serves as both a catalyst for ambition and a relentless reminder of the barriers that define human existence. Hurstwood's character in "*Sister Carrie*" serves as a poignant illustration of disillusionment, encapsulating the precarious nature of social status and the consequent effects of personal ambition and moral failing. Initially presented as a successful manager of a Chicago bar, Hurstwood epitomizes the bourgeois paradigm of respectability and prosperity. However, as the narrative unfolds, his descent from privilege into despair unveils the inherent fragility of such a status a central tenet of naturalistic literature.

Hurstwood's traits his ambition, susceptibility to desire, and emotional fragility serve as mechanics that propel him toward his inexorable downfall. His initial position in society allows him to wield a significant amount of power; however, his attachment to Carrie and the changes in his social circumstances precipitate a series of increasingly poor judgments.

Hurstwood's descent meticulously captures the naturalistic theme of determinism. The forces of society, influenced by socioeconomic contexts and personal choices, dictate the trajectory of his life. For instance, Hurstwood's obsessive desire for Carrie blinds him to the moral implications of abandoning his family and career. His subsequent actions, driven by both desire and despair, illustrate how individual autonomy is often undermined by external pressures and internal weaknesses, underscoring the naturalistic principle of man as a product of his environment.

Symbolism plays a crucial role in elucidating Hurstwood's character as a representation of disillusionment. The city of Chicago itself becomes a character within the narrative, reflecting the broader societal forces that ensnare Hurstwood. The urban landscape marked by exploitation, desperation, and moral decay mirrors Hurstwood's personal deterioration. Symbols such as the fog that envelops Chicago at various points in the narrative serve as metaphors for Hurstwood's psychological state, illustrating the blurring of hope and despair. As Hurstwood's economic stability collapses, the fog becomes denser, symbolizing his growing isolation and the obscured vision of his once-promising future.

Hurstwood's plight culminates in his ultimate failure, characterized by homelessness and suicide in the narrative's denouement. This trajectory not only highlights the violent collision between aspiration and reality but also underscores the naturalistic premise that individuals are often powerless against the deterministic forces of their environment. As Hurstwood wanders through the streets of Chicago, the once vibrant city transforms into a desolate landscape a physical manifestation of his internal despair and a commentary on the psychological toll of unattainable ambition. The imagery throughout these passages magnifies the destructive consequences of disillusionment, emphasizing the narrative's exploration of the human condition in the throes of societal indifference.

## Conclusion

In *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser masterfully portrays the naturalistic dimensions of human existence through the character of Carrie Meeber. Her transformation from a naïve country girl to a figure navigating the complexities of urban life reflects the profound impact of environmental and social forces on individual behavior. Carrie's ambitions, shaped by economic

hardship and societal expectations, underscore the deterministic view central to naturalism that human lives are governed by forces beyond individual control. Through vivid imagery and symbolic representations, Dreiser critiques the illusions of material success and highlights the moral ambiguity that accompanies the pursuit of personal fulfillment in a rapidly industrializing society. Ultimately, Carrie's journey is not just a personal narrative but a broader commentary on the human condition within the framework of naturalism.

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