American Naturalism Revisited: A Bakhtinian Reading of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

ABSTRACT

Because of its polyphonic character, Dreiser's first novel *Sister Carrie* furnishes multiple interpretive possibilities, some of which invite postmodern reading. Heteroglossia is in the novel observable at two textual levels – the generic and socio-ideological one through numerous intrusions of the languages of the growing consumer culture into conventional naturalistic and sentimental plot designs. Such a combination of languages is interesting from both cultural and feminist perspectives. Describing the beginnings of the commodification process that reached America at the end of the nineteenth-century, Dreiser detected the beginnings of what today's cultural critics call "the loss of the real" and anticipated the consumer appetite as a new domineering force on the horizon of social determinants. By signaling a contradiction between traditional languages of the self and the emerging cultural voices, Dreiser at the same time announced the transformation of women's social position and came out with a definition of the modern self. Although he remained true to many elements of traditional poetics, it is precisely such a hierarchy of languages in the novel that failed the late-nineteenth-century horizon of expectations. Yet, at the same time these polyphonic echoes have proved to be the very textual flavor that suits the taste of contemporary reception.

KEYWORDS

American naturalism, Bakhtin, consumerism, cultural criticism, feminist criticism, postmodernism, sentimentality, simulation

More than a century after its emergence, American literary naturalism still welcomes new attempts to recontextualize and reinterpret it and, to quote Donald Pizer, "refuses to die" (*The Cambridge* 14). Theodore Dreiser's first novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) is a good example of the receptional elasticity of American naturalist poetics. Although it failed to attain the approval of its first audience, this novel is one of the most renowned texts of American naturalism that is still getting the attention of critics and readers. In its own time the book was shocking because it abandoned traditional female characterization and conventions of nineteenth-century sentimental morality by showing the heroine, as Lingeman puts it, "rising by falling" (6). Whereas the traditional critical inquiries into this novel stretched mostly along this sentimental axis, contemporary diachronic debates on American naturalism pinpoint the heterogeneous nature of the

realist/naturalist texts, visible among others through their openness to various, often conflicting, generic patterns (Howard 9). Such textual divergence, holds Howard, suggests an active relation of American naturalists with the phenomena of their cultural reality, the inexhaustible semantic potential of the naturalist discourse, and its viability in contemporary socio-historical circumstances (142). These assumptions about American naturalism capture a prevalent mood in contemporary postmodern and cultural theorizing and make room for a Bakhtinian analysis. As for Bakhtin heteroglossia is a historical category, since every textual language is always modified according to the dialogic background of a new period (*O romanu* 187, "Discourse…" 200), each new generation of readers is offered interpretive space no less promising than that occupied by its predecessors. Based on these premises, this revisiting of American naturalism will explore how the interaction between the generic languages of naturalism and sentimentality and the emerging consumer discourses approximates Dreiser's text to contemporary postmodern, cultural and feminist perspectives.

As one of the compositional units through which polyphony enters a novel, inserted genres are, according to Bakhtin, important markers of the subversive nature of a text (qtd. in Bauer 7-15). Such a generic subversion is very evident in Dreiser's novel. Heteroglossia in *Sister Carrie* arises from a split between two incompatible realities of the self – the anonymous and the public one. The anonymous reality, the cruel world of hardships and poverty, embraces Carrie immediately on her arrival in Chicago. In her sister's family and her first work place she notices the impersonality and passivity of the world around her. Yet, at the same time, she realizes that Chicago offers another reality, too: "All during the long afternoon she thought of the city outside and its imposing show, crowds, and fine buildings" (31). According to Kaplan, at the beginning of his novel Dreiser divides Chicago into two cities: the night sphere of liberty and desire and the day sphere of work in which desire is extinguished by the gloomy reality (141). Textually, the gap between the two realities is revealed through a polyphonic shift. Although conventional naturalistic and sentimental formulas stretch throughout the novel, they are continuously manipulated by the language of the consumer desire, the new reality of the self in which "women were spending money like water" (229). The duel between the consumer and sentimental discourse becomes obvious when, although slightly ashamed that she accepted Drouet's offer, Carrie realizes:

> …she was still glad. Now she would have a nice new jacket! Now she would buy a nice pair of pretty button shoes. She would get stockings, too, and a skirt, and, and (48) … Curiously, she could not hold the money in her hand without feeling some relief. Even after all her depressing conclusions, she could sweep away all thought about the matter and then the twenty dollars seemed a wonderful and delightful thing. Ah, money, money, money! What a thing it was to have. How plenty of it would clear away all these troubles. (51)

Although Dreiser never denies Carrie's conscience, "a thing which represented the world, her past environment, habit, convention" (70), he nevertheless directly measures it against her consumer desire: "… if the drag to follow beauty be such that one abandons the admired way, taking rather the despised path leading to her dreams quickly, who shall cast the first stone? Not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring" (368). Domination of the consumer language over sentimentality is also detectable from the way Drouet seduces Carrie since he uses monetary discourse and not that of romance: "Now I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll go over here to Partridge's and you pick out what you want… Then we'll go to the show to-night" (53). The consumer discourse thus functions as an apology for the heroine, an attempt to dilute the reader's reproach.

Zender argues that Dreiser's characters reveal two forms of identity – the "received" one, a person is born to, and "achieved" or created identity, and concludes that characters in *Sister Carrie* are deficient in "received identity" (2). This is particularly true of Carrie, whose past life is neglected throughout the novel in favor of the new identities she achieves. It is only when she is completely absorbed in the anonymous self, when her failure to find a job or her illness detaches her from the "shiny" world, that she remembers her home in Columbia City (31) or her father "in his flour-dusted miller's suit" (108). Likewise, when Drouet leaves her without resources, and the gloomy reality threatens her again, "her thoughts went out to her sister in Van Buren Street" (181). Such a past-orientation is frequently accompanied with the language of sentimental morality, as during such moments she reproaches herself with her moral failure. Yet, Dreiser adds that such thoughts "would come infrequently… when the pleasant side was not too apparent" (70). Whenever she is lost in reverie about the world of enjoyment, Carrie completely forgets about her past: "She would have a far-off thought of Columbia City … but, on the whole, the little world about her enlisted her whole attention" (39). When she is seduced by possibilities of self-transformation, Carrie again shows her capacity to exclude herself from the present reality. During her successful stage debut, she "forgot all about the company present" (125). Travelling to New York with Hurstwood, as she "looked out upon the flying scenery she almost forgot that she had been tricked into this long journey against her will … She quite forgot Hurstwood's presence at times…" (204).

Carrie's future orientation becomes even more obvious through her contrast with Hurstwood. Like Carrie, Hurstwood, too, is in the beginning full of illusions. Dreiser describes him as a "romanticist… capable of strong feelings" (95). His dreams of Carrie are for Hurstwood the only means of escape from a depression that overwhelms him. His infatuation with Carrie is in the beginning so strong that his intention to leave Chicago with her seems like a perfect solution. Accordingly, like Carrie, Hurstwood is also future-directed in the beginning: "He looked and dreamed a new dream of pleasure which concerned his present fixed condition not at all" (109). Yet, unlike Carrie's, Hurstwood's characterization consistently absorbs the naturalistic strategies.

Immediately before his flight to New York, his possibilities get narrow. Prompted by the loss of power in the family and his wife's blackmail, the accidental clicking of the lock and influence of wine, Hurstwood steals the money from his employer. His moral fall is thus attributed to general human weakness, dominance of instincts over reason, chance and outside factors. In accordance with the naturalistic discourse, Hurstwood's development follows the plot of decline. The naturalistic language is manifested through his past orientation, as well. Immediately after his theft, he is seized by strong feelings of remorse, "'What a fool I was to do that,' he said over and over. 'What a mistake!'" (197). In the next days he becomes even more aware that "that sum or any other could never compensate for the state which he had thus foolishly doffed" (202). In New York Hurstwood's grief over his past public self is so strong that it prevents him from building a new life. Opposite from a sociable and dynamic citizen of Chicago, unable to solve his existential problems, in New York Hurstwood becomes extremely nostalgic, isolated, passive and depressive. His shift from the public towards anonymous reality of the self is explained by Dreiser's ironical naturalistic remark, "Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York" (214). According to Howard, Dreiser offers an explicitly deterministic explanation for Hurstwood's New York fall. Depression and remorse create in his body destructive substances or "katastates," poisons that impair the existing condition (100). Fighting "against the difficulties of a changed condition" (219), Hurstwood once again nostalgically laments his past public self. His new business partner fills him with disgust since he is not the same class of people he was involved with in Chicago. After his first business has failed, Hurstwood happens to be in an identical situation like Carrie at the beginning of the novel. He, too, wanders the streets looking for a job; however, his past self haunts him so much that he does not even hit upon an idea to apply for "lower" jobs, "Bartender – he, the ex-manager!" (252). Throughout the novel Hurstwood's past public self continues to interfere with his New York reality. When he describes his attempt to run a streetcar, Dreiser again calls him "the ex-manager" (302). The next morning, while he is sleeping at the inconvenient drivers' quarters, Hurstwood is "aroused out of a pleasant dream" of himself "back in Chicago in fancy, in his own comfortable home" (305). However, Hurstwood's inability to shake off his past and recreate his public self is brought to extremes when for days he refuses to leave his home, sitting in his rocking chair and reading.

Contrary to Hurstwood, throughout the novel Carrie easily throws away her past selves. The language of the new consumer culture very much supports such future orientation and redirects her seemingly traditional naturalistic plot. Unlike Sloane, who argues that Carrie has reduced possibilities in life, which is the "central feature in her motivation" (43), Howard observes that the eagerness with which she takes up the role of a consumer is a potential that, in spite of the unfavorable conditions, directs her development and flight into a better future (43-48). It is precisely her consumer desire, powerful imagination and the future orientation that power Dreiser's "novice"

throughout her "conquest" of the public world. Both her sister and the factory girls have reduced possibilities, too, but they nevertheless remain unmotivated and passive.

Dreiser achieved yet another subversion of the naturalistic discourse by relieving Carrie of any guilt. Unlike Hurstwood, in Carrie there is no trace of katastates, although she, too, is fully aware of her unconventionality. Even though she sporadically experiences short-lived postponed repentance, in Carrie there is no real remorse. This becomes obvious when she ignores Drouet's question whether she was seeing Hurstwood while he was away. Although she is confronted with her "badness," Carrie keeps behaving innocently, as if she herself does not believe in her guilt: "No such thing," answered Carrie. "It isn't true. Who told you that?" (163).

Although the consumer discourse is the main reason why the sequence of events within Carrie's plot escapes the realist-naturalist convention, the two languages sometimes complement each other. Eby warns that the power of the new consumer language lies in its appeal to human psychology. By experiencing "desire", a person conforms to the laws of invidious comparison, which includes "observation, contrast, emulation", and consecutive transformation of the self (1-3). Still, envy, which is at the root of these languages, is also one of the human drives. Insatiability, according to Gelfant, is not only a sign of "social conditioning", but is also an "innate human condition" (179). In this sense, Dreiser's exploration of the consumer discourse goes beyond Veblen's socio-psychological categories, and even anticipates some postmodern cultural assumptions that the consumer society dominates one's personality by creating one's desires and needs (cf. Baudrillard, "Pop" 173). Likewise, the public reality captures Carrie's self like a magnet that is superior to all other forces and renders her powerless. Accordingly, as the dominant external force in the novel, the consumer desire is also condensed to the naturalistic discourse. At the same time, the naturalistic discourse diminishes Carrie's moral responsibility, as well. In accordance with the teachings of Darwin and Spencer, Dreiser points out not only human helplessness, but also the influence of chance, instincts and emotional condition upon one's moral reaction. For Dreiser the cause of our moral action is largely incomprehensible since the realization of our free will is constantly hindered by our instinctive nature. Consequently, he stresses that Carrie's material desire is nothing but an instinct to flee hard work, poor life and her vulgar fellow-workers, and that she is helpless against that: "In Carrie -- as in how many of our worldlings do they not? -- instinct and reason, desire and understanding, were at war for the mastery. She followed whither her craving led. She was as yet more drawn than she drew" (57). However, the very fact that Carrie's deviation from traditional morality and her consumer appetite are skillfully packed into the naturalist plot opposed nineteenth-century literary standards. Warren argues that *Sister Carrie* was shocking not because of its refusal to punish vice and reward virtue, but because it nurtured a belief that "vice and virtue might, in themselves, be mere accidents, mere irrelevancies in the process of human life, and that the world was a great machine, morally indifferent" (542). Howard, too, stresses such incompatibility

between Puritan morality and the naturalist philosophy: "Indeed, if forces rather than free will determine action, how can we speak of evil?" (81). Simultaneously, such a dialogue of languages considerably emphasizes the reader's interpretive choice. As St. Jean contends, if you believe in man's free will and responsibility, Hurstwood is guilty, but if you see life as ultimately beyond personal control, he is innocent (8).

On the other hand, Carrie's development towards the public reality goes along with an even more explicit subversion of the sentimental discourse. In the beginning Carrie's plot follows the orbit of the sentimental morality. It is her naïveté, not her imprudence that makes her sometimes "bold," as when she looks back to Drouet on the train at the beginning of the novel (5). The 1981 Pennsylvania Edition of *Sister Carrie*[1] reveals that Carrie is relieved to be able to leave the factory in the end of the day to escape one of her fellow-workers who questioned whether "she was of loose enough morals to suit his purpose" (2nd ed. 371). Sentimentality is very present throughout Carrie's initial relationship with Drouet since she idealizes him and is very submissive. After she has moved into his flat, she seems to revel in domesticity: "By her industry and natural love of order, which now developed, the place maintained an air pleasing in the extreme" (69). She develops the same qualities towards Hurstwood. In New York she dedicates all her time to table decoration, "household tactics" (220), and "the art of making biscuit" (221): "For the first time in her life she felt settled, and somewhat justified in the eyes of society as she conceived of it" (220). Unlike Poirier, a critic from the sixties, who attributed *Sister Carrie*'s plot movements to Carrie's sexual impulse, whereby "Carrie discovers that her sexual interests are excited by the economic and social power in the men she meets" (581), Howard stresses that throughout her relationship with men Carrie among other things looks for "affection, admiration, security" (45). This she seeks by conventional means – primarily through marriage. In the beginning of her relationship with Drouet she hopes to become his wife, remembering the "voluble promises he had made" (71). When Drouet introduces her to Hurstwood, she is very concerned whether Hurstwood knows that she and Drouet are not married (149).

In her relationship with Hurstwood Carrie again exhibits the principal qualities of an "angel in the house." It is her submissiveness that attracts Hurstwood the most. As Kaplan Argues, Hurstwood's passion for Carrie is not "a romantic rebellion against convention," but is instead "compensation for his lack of authority at home" (147, 8). As with Drouet, from Hurstwood, too, Carrie demands marriage. Moreover, in spite of the fact that she "lost her virtue to Drouet," she permits Hurstwood no intimacies before marriage (cf. Grebstein 546). She even agrees to Hurstwood's proposal of flight, but provided that they marry. Thereby, she is extraordinary persistent: "The suggestion of marriage struck Hurstwood forcibly. He saw clearly that this was her idea -- he felt that

[1] This edition, containing the unpublished parts of the original manuscript, provided new insights into Dreiser's work.

it was not to be gotten over easily" (110). On their arrival in Canada, marriage is what bothers her the most (205). Once when she believes that she is married, Carrie shows that in her essence she is utterly sentimental, even pathetic, as Ames later observes, "She felt thoroughly bound to him as a wife, and that her lot was cast with his, whatever it might be" (243). Accordingly, this part of Carrie's characterization is very much codified according to late-nineteenth-century reception. Apart from providing his heroine with numerous sentimental qualities, Dreiser is also very discrete about her sexuality. Although such a restraint is explicable through his naturalistic tendency towards the objective recording of a hero's motives and outside behavior, it can also be interpreted as his adoption of the Puritan tradition and the genteel form of the sentimental novel.

Moreover, Carrie is never entirely to blame for her abandonment of the language of sentimentality, which mostly results from her inability to fulfill her traditional female role. After Drouet has failed to make her his wife, she starts an affair with Hurstwood. Similarly, when after some time Hurstwood reveals that they have not been married at all (267), Carrie realizes that he, like Drouet, deluded her, which prompts her to leave him. It is precisely the awareness of being betrayed and neglected that makes her abandon her sentimental role she in the beginning honestly wishes to play[2]. When Hurstwood starts ignoring Carrie's dinners (222) in New York, Carrie finds no "delight" in domesticity any more (243). Ironically, once he has established her as a domestic woman, Hurstwood's infatuation with Carrie is lost:

> Now, it so happened that from his observations of Carrie he began to imagine that she was of the thoroughly domestic type of mind … since he imagined he saw her satisfied, he felt called upon to give only that which contributed to such satisfaction. He supplied the furniture, the decorations, the food, and the necessary clothing. Thoughts of entertaining her, leading her out into the shine and show of life, grew less and less. He felt attracted to the outer world, but did not think she would care to go along. (222)

When later on Hurstwood refuses to provide for her, Carrie is virtually forced to try the stage, "a last resource in distress" (270).

Yet, Dreiser suggested a subversion of the sentimental language not only through Carrie's shift into the public sphere, but also in form of a reversal of traditional sexual roles. Carrie's shift into the public realm is reciprocal to Hurstwood's withdrawal into the domestic anonymous reality. According to Kaplan, the rocking chair, which Hurstwood hardly leaves, is one of the main sentimental motives in the novel (144), a symbol of the safety and warmth of the domestic world. The fact that "metaphors of

[2] Carrie is restrained not only from marriage, but from motherhood, as well.

enclosure and escape"[3] are applied to the male, not to the female protagonist opens Dreiser's text to feminist reading, too. Through such an unconventional presentation of Hurstwood and Carrie, Dreiser implied a reversal of the patriarchal binary division into male and female spheres.[4] Running away from the calamities of the outside world, Hurstwood becomes bound to the traditionally female private sphere. Opposite from the patriarchal "breadwinner ideal," Hurstwood not only fails in supporting Carrie but also himself. Although he does not believe in Carrie's acting potential and finds that "it is not much of a profession for a woman" (272), Hurstwood nevertheless consents to be supported by her. This ironical reversal culminates at the moment when, before going to her theater rehearsal, Carrie leaves him allowance for groceries: "She opened her purse and laid down a half dollar. He pretended not to notice it" (85). Hurstwood's status of a helpless child is furthermore stressed through allusion to a rocking cradle, evoked by the image of the rocking chair. Because of this, Hurstwood also personifies a man jeopardized by a woman's entry into the public sphere. He talks Carrie into giving up on her acting out of fear of being deserted: "Carrie was pretty. She would get along all right, but where would he be? 'I'd get that idea out of my head, if I were you. It's a lot more difficult than you think'" (271)[5]. A reversal of the language of sentimental morality is also revealed through the fact that it is Hurstwood, not Carrie, who gets punished for his immorality. According to Howard, when it concentrates on fate and catastrophe rather than forces and causality, the plot of decline approaches melodrama (172). This is very much true of Hurstwood's plot since his past reality is a "spell" that brings about his New York catastrophe. Carrie's plot, on the other hand, resembles the traditional male narrative pattern that depicts a hero's active development towards a better social position (cf. Gilbert and Gubar 67). Carrie's full abandonment of the domestic sphere is also evident in that she replaces the privacy of a flat for a hotel room, a "public" home, "place as she had often dreamed of occupying" (331). Unlike Laura, the sentimental heroine from her first play *Under the Gaslight*, whose "love remains to console" her man "when misfortune and evil have defeated" him (140), Carrie unscrupulously leaves Hurstwood, "I don't care… It isn't right that I should support

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[3] In *Madwoman in the Attic* psychoanalytical feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar reveal that "metaphors of enclosure and escape" were a typical pattern of late-nineteenth-century female novels, whose often claustrophobic and agoraphobic heroines were literally and metaphorically "locked," isolated in their rooms and closets (75-89).

[4] The feminist critic Nancy Armstrong has shown how late-nineteenth-century American society was very much influenced by the patriarchal ideological model of "separate spheres." This ideology separated the public, male field of action from the private, domestic, female sphere. This model, nurtured by the then very popular *sentimental domestic novels*, celebrated man's capacity to provide for his family and obtain public success (Armstrong 18-27).

[5] Besides, by entering the public sphere, Carrie threatens other men, too. Although in the beginning the manager intends to leave her out of the show, she remains in the program thanks to her sexuality. She shows a frowning expression, that all men in the audience "would have loved to force away with kisses"; "all the gentlemen yearned toward her. She was capital" (326). As a result, Carrie gets the leading role and the chief comedian is dismissed instead.

him" (292). In that way she fulfils her promise to him from the beginning of their relationship, "I wouldn't stay with you, though, if you didn't marry me" (112).

Carrie's shift from the anonymous to the public reality is entirely controlled by the consumer discourse. Throughout the novel this discourse is indicated mainly through the symbolism of clothes. Both literally and metaphorically, all turning points in Carrie's life are somehow related to her need and desire for new clothes. As a result of her inability to buy herself the winter-clothes, Carrie gets ill and loses her first job. When she wanders through Chicago searching for a new job, powerless against her fatal situation, she unexpectedly meets Drouet, who offers to buy her new shoes and a jacket. Although he, too, speaks in slang like young men at the factory, Carrrie does not refuse him because "he rode on trains, *dressed in such nice clothes*[6]… and ate in these fine places" (45-6). Throughout the novel clothes never fail in keeping their promise of success and social transformation. It is precisely this yearning for pretty clothes that directs Carrie towards Broadway. Although from the beginning of the novel Carrie's consumer desire is constantly present, it is fully liberated only after, being let down by her men, she leaves the domestic world. Faced with a superior appearance of her fellow actresses, Carrie starts wishing "more and more that Hurstwood was not in the way" (284). After leaving Hurstwood, Carrie "had been buying for herself as recklessly as she dared, regardless of the consequences" (290) and "put most of her spare money in clothes" (294).

Apart from clothes, one of the crucial symbols of the public reality in Dreiser's novel is that of a window. Although for Pizer the central symbol in *Sister Carrie* is that of a rocking chair ("Nineteenth…" 545), the window seems to be of at least equal significance. Throughout the novel objects like windows and mirrors produce and reproduce the golden shine of the public reality and serve as its magnets. Significantly, all rooms that fascinate Carrie throughout the novel shimmer in glass and gold:

> On the walls were designs in colour, square spots of robin's-egg blue, set in ornate frames of gilt….On the ceilings were coloured traceries with more gilt, leading to a centre where spread a cluster of lights -- incandescent globes mingled with glittering prisms and stucco tendrils of gilt. The floor was of a reddish hue, waxed and polished, and in every direction were mirrors -- tall, brilliant, bevel-edged mirrors -- reflecting and re-reflecting forms, faces, and candelabra a score and a hundred times. (235)

As a token of the psychology of desire, the window also personifies "the large plates of window glass… rapidly coming into use" (12) in Dreiser's time, which Carrie encounters while she is looking for her first job. Through their seductive contents, these shop windows drag her in the consumer world like quicksand. Yet, the window also

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[6] my italics

represents a barrier between the anonymous and the public world. Whenever she is excluded from the outside world and the gloom and loneliness overwhelm her, Carrie observes the outside world through the window. For Howard, too, the window divides worlds in *Sister Carrie*. Since it shows the material objects and the reflection of a person watching it, the window at the same time incorporates both the object and the subject of desire (146). Yet, it also uncovers the contrast between the rich and the poor because, somewhere behind richly decorated windows, there are "invisible" workers who produce the exhibited goods (Howard 111-115). This dividing aspect of the window is most evident in the beginning of the novel, when, observing the amazing windows, Carrie becomes aware that from within the shop she is gazed upon, too. It is this gaze that makes Carrie realize that she is nothing but "a wage-seeker" (13), which inflames her desire toward better forms of self.

Carrie's urge for self-transformation, induced by an outside gaze, is another example of the consumer strategy that works by imbuing us with values rather than through repression (cf. Gammel 8). Often we mechanically accept the norms by "internalizing the gaze," seeing ourselves with the eyes of an imaginary audience. As a prototype of the world Carrie craves for, Drouet is in the beginning such a mirror of Carrie's self-experience: "Drouet's face lightened as he saw the improvement… Carrie turned before the glass. She could not help feeling pleased as she looked at herself" (54). However, Dreiser's description of Carrie's newly gained self-confidence, which reflects her mirror image, as well as Drouet's approval of her new looks, invites a feminist interpretation, too, since it resembles Freud's thesis that a woman reflects what a man wants to see (cf. Warhol and Herndl 401). Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's ironical reading of "Little Snow White" discloses the mirror in the tale as an instrument of patriarchal dominance (38). Apart from representing a conflict between "mother and daughter, woman and woman, self and self," the answers given by the mirror personify the king, "the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen's – and every woman's - self-evaluation" (38). In this Lacanian sense, the mirror splits and externalizes the self. By showing how the external systems of value precede the individual self and encapture it, Dreiser suggests a dialogue of the consumer language and sentimentality once again. He depicts a similar "looking-glass" conflict within Carrie between the language of conventional morality and her consumer appetite: "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 she wavered, hesitating which to believe" (70).

On the other hand, by adapting to Drouet's vision of her, Carrie contributes to his sense of self, too. As a pretty object of display, she becomes Drouet's window, a spectacle to display his own sense of wealth and standard.

> "Say, that fits like a T, don't it?" he remarked, feeling the set of it at the waist and eyeing it from a few paces with real pleasure. "What you need now is a new skirt…/Carrie

> put on her hat. /"Where are the gloves?" he inquired /"Here," she said, taking them out of the bureau drawer." (58)

Later on Drouet boasts with his "prey" in front of Hurstwood. Similarly, when he visits her in New York, Drouet again wants to brag, "'Well,' he said … 'I want you to come out to dinner with me; won't you? I've got a friend out here'" (349). As in the case of Hurstwood, Carrie's "public" self attracts Drouet more than her sentimental-domestic role. Himself a devotee of the world of the spectacle, Drouet completely consumerizes and refashions Carrie's self. He introduces her to the world of show and theater and even arranges her theatrical debut. In fact, Carrie seems to be very reluctant about her first performance: "'All right,' said Carrie resignedly, 'I'll do it, but if I make a failure now it's your fault'" (116). Hence, once again, Dreiser puts the blame for Carrie's departure from traditional female roles on her men.

Like clothes, the theater, too, lures Carrie like a seducing pit. The play she watches on Broadway with Mrs. Vance, entitled "A Gold Mine" (230), personifies this pit of the spectacle. True to the title of chapter XVI "A Witless Aladdin: The Gate to the World," the stage is for Carrie the fantastic, fairy tale world that offers a vision of "far-off lands and magnificent people" (59) and promises one's unconditional transformation of the self: "She was soon lost in the world it represented, and wished that she might never return" (229). As such, Dreiser's depiction of the theater very much resembles twentieth-century culture's themed environments, which offer us the illusion of reality, which is more beautiful, interesting and entertaining than everyday life. As a simulation of the real world, contemporary play-parks, television and video games offer us roles we could in reality never play (cf. Stoller 2, Sanes, "Traveling" 2). Similarly, Carrie is absorbed by and identified with characters on the stage to such an extent that some scenes make her "long to be a part of them -- to give expression to the feelings which she, in the place of the character represented, would feel … She lived as much in these things as in the realities which made up her daily life" (228). On the other hand, as Fisher emphasizes, in its essence theatrical performance, too, is a simulation since an actor represents feelings he/she does not really feel (551).

The language of simulation is very much present in *Sister Carrie*. Almost every character performs and in that way creates his/her false identity. Dreiser reveals this through textual contradictions. Drouet simulates great affection for Carrie, whereas most of the time she is an object to boast with. On the other hand, although he refuses to marry her, he initiates the play of a husband and wife, which serves no end since both Carrie and Hurstwood know that she and Drouet are not married. As a result, Carrie and Hurstwood feign in front of each other, too. Although he pretends that he believes that Carrie is Drouet's wife, he makes a mistake calling her "a determined little miss" (111). Carrie very successfully fakes in front of Drouet, too, lying about her affair with Hurstwood (162). Her attraction by the public reality prompts her to start simulating even more, feeling "a desire to imitate" this world, particularly women, their walk and

manners (76). In this sense the language of simulation is also compatible with the naturalistic discourse. According to Sanes, the ability to simulate and create deceptive appearances has been one of the imperatives to the survival of living things throughout the history of life on earth ("Nature" 6). By embracing new identities throughout the novel, Carrie exhibits a remarkable adaptability to new circumstances. As Zender illustrates, "In response to the question 'Who are you?' Sister Carrie replies, it appears, 'Whomever you wish to become'" (2). Hurstwood, too, is very much engaged in creating false appearances. Very early Carrie becomes aware that Hurstwood is "a greater deceiver" than Drouet: "He had pretended all this affection, all this passion, and he was lying to her all the while" (168). In order to be true to his public self, in Chicago Hurstwood presents himself with a fake identity to his wife, Carrie, Drouet, and even his employers. Yet, once he stops keeping up appearances and tells everything to his wife, his life takes a bad turn; he loses his power and his public position. Similarly, Carrie's trust in him is irretrievably lost when she learns that he lied about Drouet's injury (195). Finally, when he admits to Carrie that he did not marry her, she immediately leaves him. His lack of simulation is thus proportional to his liability to the plot of decline. Accordingly, in Hurstwood, too, the naturalist discourse is occasionally only a generic pseudonym for the language of simulation. Later on, Hurstwood deceives not only Carrie but also himself. In Canada he writes to his former employer, whom he robbed, hoping in vain that he would "forgive him" and "ask him back" (210). In New York, while he is hopelessly searching for a job, Hurstwood trades his reality for the safety of his rocking chair and the warmth of a hotel lobby. Although he is almost broke, he dines in the Morton House, one of the most expensive New York hotels. He even buys a cigar and mingles with "brokers, racing people, thespians – his own flesh and blood" (268). Even his sense of time gets unreal, "There, minutes seemed to go very slowly" (254)[7]. Hurstwood's necessity to make up his real reality is present till the end, when in front of Carrie he feigns his prospects for a new job (278).

Occasionally, Dreiser is even more explicit about the power of representation over reality. He reveals that Carrie, paradoxically, does not desire after things themselves, but for the wealth and luxurious life they represent. She is attracted by Drouet, whose "rings almost spoke" (45). Later on, when she speaks to Hurstwood, "she heard, instead of his words, the voices of the things which he represented" (88). Likewise, as they are watching *Under the Gaslight*, Drouet and Hurstwood get infatuated not with Carrie's real self, but with a fiction of her self, with what she represents as "the center of interest" (137) in the play:

> Hurstwood realized that he was seeing something extraordinarily good. It was heightened for him by the applause of the audience as the curtain descended and the fact that it was Carrie. He thought now that she was

[7] Hurstwood's shift into timelessness and the unreal is stressed again when, leaving him, Carrie takes the clock (320).

> beautiful … He felt a keen delight in realizing that she was his. (135)

The public reality of the self is especially marked by such a domination of representation over reality. Very often it is only money and fame that represent one's self. When Hurstwood shows Drouet a man called Jules Wallace, supposedly a spiritualist, Drouet remarks, "'Doesn't look much like a man who sees spirits, does he?' said Drouet. /'Oh, I don't know,' returned Hurstwood 'He's got the money, all right,' and a little twinkle passed over his eyes" (36, 7). Similarly, Carrie's fame and her "good fortune made her seem more than ever worthy and delightful in the other's eyes" (332), "She had not had adulation and affectionate propositions before. Now they had come. Wherefore? She smiled to think that men should suddenly find her so much more attractive" (183). It is Carrie's looks that promote her in the chorus and make her famous (290), not her acting. She acts the silent little Quakeress, the role that consists only of frowning (325), but one of the newspapers describes her as "one of the cleverest members of the chorus" (322). Ironically, Dreiser admits that the audience "saw power where it was not" (137) thus confirming that Carrie's new self is far from real. In fact, Carrie's stage appearance is only a simulation; on stage she is a sexual object of men's desire, whereas in reality she is an asexual person who never experiences passion with her men[8].

In contemporary society the domination of appearance over reality is evident in all spheres of public life, from advertising to politics, but is perhaps best evinced by celebrities. In his ironical analysis of the humanitarian spectacle of Princess Diana, Frank maintains that the celebrities' representation is sometimes so deceitful that it even repudiates conventional morality. Although she committed adultery, divorced, craved for wealth and extravagance, and was often described as a "narcissistic" and "razor-edged" personality, Diana was worshipped by the media as an advocate of spirituality, apostle of the human rights (1, 2). In *Sister Carrie*, too, one's fame is often a camouflage for corruption, an excuse that softens the public scrutiny. When she visits Carrie, having read about her reputation, Mrs. Vance addresses her with, "why, you little sinner" (331). Still, she fawns on her to the extent that she even passes over her last meeting with Hurstwood and the fact that he was probably abandoned. As an icon, part of many men's dreams and women's ideals, Carrie perfectly demonstrates the aesthetic of today's cult of stars and the power of contemporary advertising to turn a thing into a sign. It is our media saturated society that has promoted celebrity into a myth by turning it into brand (cf. Baudrillard, *America* 56). Even today, forty years after her death, Marilyn Monroe is still "a global enterprise" whose image has been used to hawk everything from cookie jars to "Marilyn Merlot" (Roane 1). Likewise, in a 1995 BBC interview Princess Diana admitted that she saw herself "as a good product that sits on a

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[8] Significantly, Carrie's theater dressing room, filled with "nameless paraphernalia of disguise" (128) confirms this "simulating" aspect of her performance.

shelf and sells well" (Frank 1). Similarly, on stage Carrie is displayed like fancy shop-window goods attracting men's desire[9].

Dreiser, too, sees the media as the main creators of representation. Carrie's manager promotes her only after she has been discovered by the newspapers as "one of the most delightful bits of character work ever seen on the Casino stage" (326). Consequently, her price literally rises from $30 to $50 a week (327). Hence, by creating her public spectacle, the newspapers increase Carrie's market value. In the beginning of her search for a role, one of the dramatic agents refuses her, saying, "If you could play at some local house, or had a program with your *name* on it, I might do something"[10] (275). After her newspaper fame, Carrie's *name* is invested as an advertisement to the new Wellington hotel, where she dwells at a considerably reduced price (329) and her picture is displayed on some of the outdoor advertising screens.

The newspapers are also an important agency of the internalization of the gaze. The attitude that clothes are carriers of the social message was formed by numerous daily newspapers and journals in the end of the nineteenth century.[11] Newspapers are for Carrie the main authority for measuring her success. It is only after her newspaper notices that she begins to "think the world was taking note of her" (323). At the same time, like the shop-windows, newspapers, too, define the positions of the "subject" and the "other" because they make us aware of our remoteness from the world of "Vanderbilts and their friends" (253) they convey. Photographs and newspaper articles are the only way we can approach them. Hurstwood best illustrates this "segregating" aspect of the newspapers. Whereas to Carrie the newspapers offer a new public self, for Hurstwood they become a barrier between the anonymous and public reality. After his New York social decline, he gives up on his own experiences in favor of the newspaper facts: "His difficulties vanished in the items he so well loved to read" (255). Newspaper facts also change Hurstwood's perception of reality. Although they deal with real events, the articles that he reads represent a twisted picture of the outside world. Hurstwood's recognition of the false reality of the newspaper texts occurs when he applies for a vacant position during the streetcar strike, convinced that the strikers are powerless against the companies, as he concluded from what he read. However, this adventure turns out to be a complete fiasco since he is beaten by numerous strikers. Hurstwood's failure is a direct consequence of incompatibility of the outside reality and

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[9] Carrie's deceptive image also links her with contemporary celebrities. Madonna has, for instance, throughout her career continuously reinvented her looks in order to perpetuate public interest in herself (Morgan 1). In her Marilyn Monroe biography *Blonde* Joyce Carol Oates explains her heroine's metamorphosis, which starts "when she loses her baptismal name Norma Jean, and takes on the studio name 'Marilyn Monroe.' She would also have to bleach her brown hair to platinum blond, endure some facial surgery, and dress provocatively" (3).

[10] my italics

[11] Dreiser himself worked as an editor of the *Butterick publications*, pulp magazines whose main function was the selling of dress patterns (Brooks, Lewis and Warren 1883).

that created for him by the media. When he is warned about the strikers' revenge, he repeats the media cliché, "any one who wants to run a car will be protected" (298). Thus the newspaper reality turns out to be a simulation, too, since, like the theater, it gives us something more pleasing than the reality itself. As Fisher observes, Hurstwood's job as a strike-breaker is nothing but a theater performance since the replacements should not carry passengers in their cars, but break the strike "by demonstrating to the public, via the newspapers that all of the strikers have lost their 'parts' and have been replaced in their roles by new actors, men simulating drivers" (559). The language of the hyper-real is once again injected into the text when, after the strike-breaking episode, Hurstwood reads about other people and outside events, refusing to leave his home. In this way, like most of today's celebrity fans, he prefers other people's reality to his own.

However, this divorce between appearance and reality becomes the most apparent towards the end of the novel, when Carrie becomes aware that she desired not for things, "but that which they represented", and that "time proved the representation false" (368). Finally she realizes that she has become famous for nothing: "Doing her simple part, Carrie gradually realized the meaning of the applause which was for her, and it was sweet. She felt mildly guilty of something -- perhaps unworthiness" (328). Comprehending the illusion of her own fame, for the first time in the novel Carrie abandons the consumer discourse and immerses into sentimentality again. Like Hurstwood, she shuts herself into the privacy of her room, fleeing her reality, reading and dreaming in her rocking chair. Accordingly, the so far distinct contrast between Carrie and Hurstwood entirely fades in the end. Opposite from the beginning, Carrie's desire for the public reality of the self is completely extinguished. Although some critics allow that in the end of the novel Carrie is still an "insatiable consumer" (Gelfant 191), and as desirous as in the beginning (cf. Howard 43, Kaplan 149), Carrie's shift into sentimentality and anonymous reality can be interpreted as her complete move away from the consumer language. In the end she cynically refuses the outside world, the "applause" and "publicity" (368), can "think of nothing particularly to do" (335) with her money and criticizes men for being possessed by "the common run of clothes and material success" (323). Carrie's abrupt switch from the public reality is also visible from her new perception of time. Whereas her consumer desire was characterized by constant motion and a future course, like Hurstwood before her, Carrie now gives up on the public notion of time and becomes past-oriented. Pizer ascribes Carrie's motionlessness in time to her failure to comprehend the world she has experienced, as well as herself, which makes her journey circular – returns her where she began and relativizes all her previous actions ("Nineteenth…" 546). The symbol of the window is also relativized in the end, as the world of the spectacle it represents turns out to be a complete deception. Yet, at the same time, this public reality seems to be one of the most powerful external forces in the novel since the characters are governed by the images and values imposed from the outside, which deny their private selves. As a celebrity, Carrie cannot run away from her spectacle self any more. Hurstwood, on the other hand, is haunted by his former public identity, which creeps into every sphere of

his New York life and controls all his actions. Accordingly, as a barrier between the two realities of the self, the window is mocked at again. According to Pizer, the naturalistic symbol usually has an ironic function ("Nineteenth…" 545), which discloses "how the naturalistic novel stands on the threshold of the modern novel" (547). Through such a distorted symbolism of the window the languages of naturalism and simulation completely amalgamate in the end. Both of these languages witness to a morally indifferent outside reality, whose mechanisms predetermine our sense of self, control our desires and the scope of our actions. Thus Hurstwood's final fatalistic cry, "What's the use" (367) reaches across the naturalistic doctrine and contemporary philosophy of the self. Although it reappears in the end, the language of sentimentality, too, ironically undermines itself. It does not bring about any comfort or meaningful closure, but, instead, becomes a signpost of uncertainty and relativity, a tool for the definition of the modern self. This concluding subversion of the sentimental genre highlights its dialogic function once again, as for Bakhtin the dialogue refuses to furnish the plot with finality and closure (qtd. in Bauer 10).

Because of its subtle interplay of literary, cultural and ideological languages, *Sister Carrie*'s dialogic panorama exhibits what Bakhtin calls processes of "centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification" ("Discourse" 199). Although his novel was criticized for its abandonment of traditional categories of sentimental morality, Dreiser's departure from the sentimental language is not entirely radical. In fact, in the beginning Carrie's characterization contains numerous sentimental elements. Yet, Carrie's sentimental development is constantly interrupted by naturalistic strategies. Outside forces, as well as Drouet's and Hurstwood's betrayal, induce her shift into the public sphere resulting in a new polyphonic constellation. Whereas languages of naturalism and sentimentality, the characters' past orientation and social passivity generically border the anonymous reality, the public reality announces new discourses of the consumer culture, representation and simulation. By stimulating constant future-orientation and the mobility of the self, these discourses completely annihilate traditional language of sentimental morality. As public systems of value imposed from the outside, the new media, advertising screens, theater and the newspapers, design public opinion and one's sense of self. Because of such power to precede reality, the language of representation also justifies Carrie's moral fall. As a celebrity, an icon, Carrie reveals the power of the image to obscure everything, even traditional morality. In this sense, the answer to the question how Dreiser excused his heroine for rising by falling lies, paradoxically, in the question itself: by making her rise. However, Dreiser's numerous naturalistic intrusions into the consumer discourse apologize for her, as well. Carrie's consumer desire is simultaneously encoded as a powerful drive and an instinct for protection. Combined with the language of representation, this is also a dominating seductive force that infiltrates the self and controls it. Simulation, on the other hand, can also be conceived as a form of public survival. Finally, the novel's heterogeneous nature is also visible from its two-fold plot structure, built upon the contrast between Carrie and Hurstwood. Although he, too, is subject to the languages of simulation and

representation, unlike Carrie, Hurstwood is never future-oriented. Thereupon, in Hurstwood there is no compromise between the naturalistic language and the consumer lack of guilt, like in Carrie. This contrast opens up Dreiser's novel for feminist reading, too, as Hurstwood's final shift into domesticity and sentimentality resists the traditional division of sexual roles. Accordingly, following the metonymic strategies of observation, Dreiser testified to the emerging female voice and how it was nourished by cultural contradictions of his time, but also caught the first glimpses of the power of representation and the loss of the real. In that way, his naturalist documenting credo brought him far beyond naturalism. Today *Sister Carrie* is undoubtedly not as provocative as it was one hundred years ago, but it nevertheless challenges our concept of ourselves and our society which is no less deterministic, and certainly not less contradictory and prone to illusions than it was in Dreiser's time.

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