

The Analysis of Consumer Culture Embedded in Sister Carrie

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Abstract: Sister Carrie is Theodore Dreiser's first work and a world-renowned one. This paper mainly analyzes Sister Carrie under the consumer culture perspective. Because of the second industrial revolution, America economic went through a stage of explosion and stepped into the urbanization. The development of industrial revolution caused the big difference between countryside economy and the city economy. More and more youngsters came to prosperous city in order to achieve their dream to become rich. Carrie is one of them. This paper thoroughly analyzed the demonstrations of consumer cultures exposed by the novel Sister Carrie and criticized the negative impacts of consumer culture from aspects of material consumption, emotion consumption and body consumption.

1. Introduction

Theodore Dreiser is acknowledged as a representative figure of American naturalism and he is also one of the most influencing writers in American literature. He was born into a poor family in Indiana and was the ninth child in his family. After graduating from school in Warsaw, Indiana, he attended Indiana University before dropping out. He had been a journalist for the Chicago Globe newspaper for several years which served him well in his writing career. His novels usually embodied the main characters that succeeded at their carrier in spite of the virtue and moral. Dreiser worked on his first novel *Sister Carrie* which was published in 1900 in a quiet place where he lived with his family and his friends. But it was rejected when it published because of its relentless honesty in presenting the true nature and dark side of American society. It was a deadly hit to him and he even wanted to give up his writing career. Next he wrote the *Jennie Gerhardt* which could be say that it has the same topic as *Sister Carrie*. Then he wrote the trilogy of desire which included *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914) and *The Stoic* (1914). He was left-oriented in his politic view. He visited Russia and wrote Dreiser Look at Russia in 1928. He wrote *Tragic America* in 1931. These two books all express his belief. In 1930 he was nominated to the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Sister Carrie is one of Dreiser's representative books. This book has acquired a worldwide reputation. It has been called the "greatest of all American urban novels". In his Nobel Prize lecture of 1930, Sinclair Lewis commented that "Dreiser's great first novel, *Sister Carrie*, which he dared to publish thirty long years ago and which I read twenty-five years ago, come to housebound and to our stuffy gave us the first fresh air since Mark Twain and Whitman." He gave highly praise to this novel. However, it was just sold a few at that time, but it gained a lot of different opinions from

the literary critics. Some critics did praise the book. The *London Express* exclaimed that the realism made the book appealing: “it is a cruel merciless story, intensely clever in its realism, and one that will remain impressed in the memory of the reader for many a long day.” However, there were negative opinions on this novel. A review in *life* criticized Carrie’s success, and wrote “such girl, however, as imagine that they can follow in her footsteps will probably end their days on the island or in the gutter”. They thought *Sister Carrie* is immoral and normal in which she does not have the good character that a traditional girl should have. People couldn’t accept her image at that time.

This novel was published in 1900 at the same time with America consumerism culture rising. Consumerism culture influences the society a lot, for instance, it can influence individual's social value and the social environment. In the course of this period, the social environment was dark and full of wrong social value. Individuals pursued wealth, power and fame who thought nothing better than money. They even could go against their conscience in order to achieve their America dream. Still now, the social features have not disappeared as *Sister Carrie* depicted in the book. So it has big significance to study *Sister Carrie* from the consumer culture perspective.

This paper consists of three parts. First part is a briefly introduction. In the second part, it will briefly introduce the consumer culture. Next, this paper will analyze the novel from the perspective of consumer culture. There are three main consumption ways in that period. One is material consumption, next is the emotion consumption and the last is the body consumption. Through these three ways, we can analyze people's value and the social environment under the influence of consumer culture.

2. A Brief Introduction of Consumer Culture

3. The Origin and Definition of Consumer Culture

3.1 Origin of Consumer Culture

There were a lot of disputes about the arising time of consumer culture and the specific origin place of consumer culture. In Neil Mac Kendrick’s book, consumer culture began in 18th century in England with the commercialization of fashion precipitating a mass change in taste. However, a historian, Rosalind Williams claims that the consumer revolution began in late-nineteenth-century France. At last, a historian suggests that it is not important to distinguish the origin area of consumer culture. It is important what and how causes the consumer culture to form.

Don Slater summarized these thoughts by arguing that consumer culture began with a wide penetration of consumer goods into the everyday lives of people across social states and other ways. With the economic growth, the goods become and more. People gradually formed their consumption habits, consumption value and consumption behaviors. So only the economic grows quickly and people’s material life becomes richer and richer, they will spend more money to consume and form many habits of consuming. As time goes by, it will gradually form a new culture according to the consumption level which we called consumer culture.

3.2 Definition of Consumerism

Consumerism means the sum of consume principle, consume ways, consume actives and consume environment. It refers to reckless possession and consumption of the material life and natural resources and emphasis on consume and material life. But consumer culture has differences with consumerism. Culture is a social phenomenon just like the historical phenomenon. It gradually formed in our daily life. Consumer culture refers to in a certain historical stage the sum of consumption concept, consumption mode, and consumption behavior and consumption

environment in the production, consumption activities and life. Among them, the country's political system, economic system, the level of economic development, people's values, customs and habits, and the overall quality of the residents have a significant impact on it. From Wikipedia, the definition of consumer culture theory is the study of consumption choices and behaviors from a social and cultural point of view, as opposed to an economic or psychological one. It does not offer a grand unifying theory but “refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings.” The two conceptions all mean that consumerism culture which studies not only in consumerism and materialist perspective, but also studies in many other aspects, such as communication, theology discipline, sociology, marketing and cultural studies. Consumerism culture needs to think about the consumption phenomenon from social background and many other factors. And culture has opposite influence power, it will gradually change people’s life value and consumption behaviors.

4. The Consumer Culture in *Sister Carrie*

In the late nineteenth Century and early twentieth Century, the United States was in a period of social transition from a production-based society to a consumption-based one. With the second industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, the economic in America has achieved a higher place, the pace of urbanization has been accelerated and the spiritual life of American had also undergone a shift time. People met their basic life need, so they changed their social value. Before this time, people just had the basic desire for daily necessities. After the economic rapidly grew, many kinds of goods appeared, so they began to chase for the things which can satisfy their spirit and their inner heart. The satisfaction of material demand has promoted people's consumption consciousness.

Sister Carrie is written by Dreiser in the beginning of 20th century which tells a story about the growth of a country girl Carrie who became a famous actress at last. She came to Chicago and wanted to change her poor life. In order to get rid of poverty, she succumbed to life and became two men’s mistress. Then, she gradually left the two men all because they couldn’t give her the life she wanted. On the way to achieve her goal, she gradually lost herself in the prosperous city and fell into the desire sea, but she won the fame and money and lived the life that she desired at the end. This novel was just created during a period that America was going through a great change. Because the economic developed quickly in city, it caused the big differences between country people’s life level and city people’s life level. More and more Americans wanted to go into the higher class and live a rich life. They would like to try anything to reach it. This novel discloses the chaotic social situation and people’s “distorted” social value behind the booming economy and the rich material life. It also reflects people’s big desire for money, fame and other things which can satisfy their vanity. But behind the hypocritical social environment, there are many consume behaviors and consume concepts which can reflect the consumer culture in that period.

5. Representative Consumer Culture Plots in *Sister Carrie*

Consumer culture can reflects the social background in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in America. With the economic growth, the society was materialized and industrializes with lots of kinds of products, people’s need changed a lot. They weren’t satisfy with the normal material needs so that they began to pursue some expensive and valuable things. Because their possessions became a symbol of their social status, class. Gradually, people consumed not only for the use of the goods but also for its value of showing off. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser depicted many characters with different desires. They all show the influence of consumerism culture to them. This part will analyze the consumer culture in *Sister Carrie* from three aspects. First one is material consumption, we can find the main character all have different desires for

material goods. Next, the emotional consumption is also a topic to be discussed. The last one is body consumption. Consumer culture is not only influences people's life style, but also make the modern culture more tend to hedonism. People did not suppress their desire, so play and sex also became the things that they consumed.

5.1 Material Consumption

An-eighteen-girl Carrie comes Chicago alone to pursue her dream life. In her eyes, the symbol words of Chicago are wealth, fashion clothes, comfortable and relax. If you have a lot of money you can buy any beautiful clothes and enjoy a superior life. This thought leads her only cares about money, fame and fashion clothes. She needs these material goods to give her the sense of safety. From material perspective, clothes and house are the things that she still pursues for and they are the symbol of her social statue and life standard.

When she took the train to Chicago, she met Drouet. Drouet weared a fashionable brown coat and the sleeves of the coat fasten with large, gold plate buttons and on his wrist dangled a neat gold watch chain. His whole suit was tight and fitting and his heavy-soled tan shoes are highly polished. How couldn't Carrie have a perfect impression to Drouet. How couldn't she be attracted by him. However, Carrie looked at herself, she felt awkward immediately. The blue dress and the shoes all looked old and shabby. She still refused Drouet's invitation because she had a sister whom she can rely on in this strange city. In the train station, she met her sister Minnie. Without the warm welcome, Carrie felt indifferent of her sister and her sister's family. When she came to her sister's home, she felt a little sadness because the walls were made of papers and the grass put on the floor. She realized that the life in her sister's home must be difficult. It was not the scene she had imagined. And her sister's husband didn't care about Caroline. He just hoped Carrie can find a job as soon as possible to reduce the burden of the family and earn money for the family . He thought only have plenty of money, they can have a wonderful life and get rid of poverty. Living with her sister, Caroline gradually changed her value, she wasn't the pure girl before. She began to chase for money and thought only money is everything in Chicago.

After being fired by the shoe factory, she met Dreiser again. And Dreiser bought beautiful clothes and rent a furnished room which has three rooms for her. She decided to leave her sister's home and turned into the embrace of Drouet, in order to get rid of the poor situation. With the money support by Drouet, she looked quite like another maiden. She first realized the magic of money. In the novel, it described "She caught her little lip with her teeth and felt her first thrill of power Drouet was good." She knew the meaning of accept Dreiser's help. It was immortal and ignominance. But without Dreiser's help, she could not buy the beautiful clothes and live in a comfortable room or we could say she could not exist in Chicago. When she taste the money, she gradually fell into the material consumption.

After then, Carrie met Drouet's friend Hurstwood. When she met Hurstwood, Hurstwood wear fashionable clothes. It writes in the book like "His clothes were particularly new and rich in appearance. The coat lapels stood out with that medium tidiness which excellent cloth possesses." (Drouet, 104) Although Carrie didn't know the price and brand of the clothes, she could see the quality and style of the materials. It showed Hurstwood's wealth and statue. And Carrie felt that Hurstwood was more clever and richer than Drouet. And Hurstwood promised to let Carrie became his wife. Comparing the Drouet with the Hurstwood, she decided to run away with Hurstwood because he could give her a family and help her to improve her social statue. When she and Hurstwood came to New York, they lived a period of happy time. But Hurstwood could not find a job and his money gradually used up. He cannot afford Carrie's consumption. However, he asked money from Carrie. Carrie cannot accept the huge change in life, she could not stand the poor life

with Hurstwood anymore. Therefore, she left him.

5.2 Emotion Consumption

5.2.1 Kinship

In this novel, it mainly talks about two family relationships. One is Carrie and her sister, the other is Hurstwood and his family. As Dreiser depicted in *Sister Carrie*, America was in a great change at that time. People were not only focuses on the daily necessities, they turned to pursue the expensive life style and better, luxury things which can represent their social statue and identity. More and more people became hypocrisy and vainglorious. What was the real situation of family relationship under the consumer culture in the beginning of 20th century?

First, Carrie left her small hometown and went to Chicago alone by train. She met Drouet on the train. Although he invited Carrie, she refused because she has a sister in Chicago. However, the life in Chicago was not as she expected. Her sister picked her in the train station without a fiery welcome, but a cold hug. When she came to her sister's home, her sister just thought what she could for the family. And her sister's husband didn't care about her. He only cared about Carrie's salary which can release the family's heavy burden. He ordered Carrie to find a job and Carrie should give all her salary to her sister. When Carrie was sicked and fired by the shoe factory, Hanson thought Carrie became the burden of the family. So under such consumer culture, Carrie could not feel love and always felt lonely. Even "When Minnie found the note next morning, after a night of mingled wonder and anxiety, which was not exactly touched by yearning, sorrow, or love, she exclaimed....."(Dreiser, 81) her sister just informed her huaband without any emotion just like nothing happened. It shows there is no humanity and money and benefit are the most important. Family relationship is not worth mentioning at all.

Another family, Hurstwood and his wife have two kids, one is a son, and the other is a daughter. It seems that they live a happy and sweet life. He is a manager in a theatre and they live in a beautiful building which has three stories and have ten room. They live a type of middle class life. But Hurstwood doesn't get on well with his wife. She just pursues the material goods. "She liked nice clothes and urged for them constantly." (Dreiser, 91) She acknowledges the life just through her friends in the middle class. She doesn't care about Hurstwood, so Hurstwood can't feel the warm of family. He turned to chase for Carrie, a beautiful girl, a girl who would like to listen to his heart.

From the family relationships of two families in this novel, there is no doubt that kinship is the needless under the consumer culture influence. The links of the whole family is profit and money. People deeply rely on the material and life.

5.2.2 Love

In this novel, Dreiser writes more about the love affairs between Carrie and two men. But in the love relationship, Carrie appears more like their lover not the wife. And they don't have real feeling of love. Although Carrie thought love bosund their together, it is her misleading. Their love affairs just like a consumption that the two men give Carrie what she want, and Carrie sells her beauty and youth to them.

When Drouet buys beautiful clothes and rents an apartment for her, she thinks Drouet loves her. He also promised that will marry to her. But gradually Carrie finds it is a lie. Drouet doesn't want to marry to her, he just like beautiful girls. In this love affair, Drouet is like the hunter of love, and Carrie is the prey. But Carrie also doesn't like Drouet, she just depends on his money to satisfy her desire. When she meets a men with higher statue and the stronger economic power appear, she gives

up the love relationship with Drouet, although she knows Hurstwood has wife. When they elope to New York, Hurstwood fails in his career and become a pauper from an upper class gentleman. It severely influences Carrie's blue print to privileged life, so she chooses to leave Hurstwood.

These two love affairs could be say each takes what he needs. Drouet and Hurstwood show off their consumption ability through occupying the beautiful lady. Carrie is just like a beautiful product to be sold. Carrie also uses her so-called "love" to meet her need in material aspect. When she does not need the support or it can't satisfy her desire, she will leave without hesitation. So this love is not the real love, it is a consume activity in the name of love. The essence of their love is money and benefit.

5.2.3 Friendship

Hurstwood and Drouet have been good friends in life and business. When Hurstwood come to Drouet's home, he meets Carrie and is attracted by Carrie. After that, he often invites them to the theatre together. Drouet is a salesman so that he usually is not at home. When Drouet is on a business trip, Hurstwood will date with Carrie in the name of taking care of Carrie. He does not care the friendship between him and Drouet. When it badly affects his desire and benefit, he does not mind to deceive his friends and betray their friendship. What behind of their friendship is just the benefit.

5.3 Body Consumption

With the abundance of material life, America people began to chase for consuming on the spiritual aspect. Gradually, it went to a wrong direction and people pursue sensualism. Under the consumer culture, it is a good way for beautiful girls to get the rich material life and go into the upper class through list their body price.

When Carrie first comes in Chicago, she works a lot and just earned a little in the shoe factory. It makes her feel sad and despair. When she meet Dreiser again, she accepts his twenty dollars at first and gradually lives with him. She knows it is wrong to live with a strange man, but she has no choice. It is the easiest way for her to stay in the prosperous city. When she meets Hurstwood who is more successful than Drouet, she sells herself again. Through these two deals, she succeeds in squeezing into the upper class and living a rich material life. Finally, she becomes a good for men and lost her value in the world where is full of material desire.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that *Sister Carrie* is a significant book which left great influence to the modern society. We can find the social environment which depicts in *Sister Carrie* still exists , not only in today's China but also in many other countries. The rapid growth of America economic, the change of people's conception value, their conception activities, the social environment and other factors all form the consumer culture. And the consumer culture influences the society a lot, such as the people's value, the social environment and the consumption ways.

Under such consumer culture, more and youngsters lose them in the society, people would like to do anything by any means in order to succeed. Carrie, at first is a pure and shy girl, who has a sweet dream to Chicago. However, in order to live easier, she gives up her virtue and keeps an immoral relationship with Drouet. Because Drouet can give support to her material consumption, she can wear beautiful clothes and live in a furnished house. When she meets Hurstwood, a man who has more money and an independent building, she decided to run away with him. Carrie is always attracted by the material consumption and gradually falls into the sea of lure. Besides Carrie, many

people all desire for different things which are all related to money and materialism. Girls are pursuing for beautiful clothes and luxury life style. Men are pursuing for benefit, beautiful girls and higher statue to show off. The social environment is dark and the social value is disordered.

At that time, even the emotion and body can become a kind of products. People just care of themselves, they do not care anyone. Kinship, friendship and love are all full of the smell of money and benefit. People are hypocritical and selfish. As long as there is an interest conflict between their relationships, they will choose to give up the relationship without hesitation. Carrie sold her love to two men she does not love and exchange the material goods and better life. Two men buy Carrie's body because she is young and beautiful. She also can become the product that they could show off and represent their social statue. All the society is in a twisted consumption condition. *Sister Carrie* is a mirror which clearly shows the consumer culture in twentieth century.

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