

The Rediscovery of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*: An Analysis from New Historicist, Historical Reception and Feminist Perspectives

Imran Ali

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Fatima Jinnah Women University The Mall, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.
Email: imran.ali@fjwu.edu.pk

Bahramand Shah

Assistant Professor, American Literature, Area Study Center, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Abstract

A social documentary of Dreiser's milieu and own life, Sister Carrie (1900) portrays American women from multiple angles. As a genuine criticism of debased American values, the text describes women's social, personal, sexual, marital, and economic sides of contemporary American women through Carrie. Having a poor critical reception in the 1910s, the novel was rediscovered worldwide with new vigor since the mid-20th-century for its potent feminist message. Like in other countries, its importance has been felt Pakistani academia, where it is psychologically preparing the emerging woman for the forthcoming Social-Darwinist challenges. This study rediscovers Sister Carrie through the lenses of New Historicism, Historical Reception, and Feminism: why Dreiser wrote it; how the public/critics received it; how it contributed a change to the women's position; and how it could strengthen women's role in Pakistan.

Key Words:

Rediscovery, Feminism, Social-Darwinism, Dreiser, Pakistani

Introduction

The time between 1890 and 1910 is known as the Progressive Era. For the most part, it is not that much dissimilar from the rest of the late 19th century, but it appears different when viewed through the lens of women's issues. Rural women were lamenting their harsh labor and domestic duties; factory workers were complaining against the cruel conditions they were working under; and college graduates were in search of identity and a kind of job that suited their station (Ware, 2002, p. 1). In this Darwinist and individualistic struggle, women were the primary victims, whose progress in all walks of life was halted by the barriers of their sex. As a result, the Progressive Era was an important period in U.S. history for women's personal/political awakening. They focused on organization, the extension of influence into new areas and the expansion of their societies and clubs. Many of these associations were formed in this period, serving as informal educational institutions for women to learn about other women and cultures, the value of their own opinions, the objective of life, and the blessings of cooperation and respect (Woloch, 1994, p. 291).

Having surmounted the challenges of civil war and westward expansion, America emerged in the shape of a new industrialist nation. Between 1850 and 1880, industrialization quadrupled, producing many other problems in the process, including a rising awareness of the differences between classes. The economy was in the hands of a few growing business tycoons like Carnegie, Morgan, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller (Baym, 2007, p. 2-3; Vol. C). Mookerjee says, "American Capitalism, thus, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century had emerged victorious, and the philosophy behind the gospel of wealth had become the most persuasive siren in American life" (1974, p. 5). Industries like these were fueled by immigrants from across Europe, Asia, and some other parts of the world. These immigrants made the U.S. an urban, industrial, international and capitalist power that would outmatch Europe by World War II. But the price of this transformation was immense (Baym 2007, p. 2-3; Vol. C). In *Theodore Dreiser: His Thought and Social Criticism* (1974), R. N. Mookerjee elaborates:

Exorbitant charges, discrimination, and wholesale land grab by the railroads, the malpractices of Rockefeller and Carnegie in crushing competitors, the savage power with which many giant corporations beat down labor, the pocketing by the trusts of the savings that came from the science and invention . . . aroused widespread alarm and bitterness. The plight of workers, in particular, was far from satisfactory, and they had to fight for most of their rights and proper conditions for work. (1974, p. 7)

Some Americans became so rich as to attain international attention, but millions suffered under dreadful conditions in the fight to survive. The poor man was everywhere under the paws of mighty businessmen and industrialists. It is assumed only ten percent of the land offered up by the Homestead Act of 1862 went into the hands of the small, individual farmers and settlers to whom the Act was

addressed, while the rest of the land was tossed between the monopolies and business tycoons of the day (Baym, 2007; Vol. C). In his 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair equates American society to a jungle where only the mighty and powerful could survive. An oversupply of labor lowered pay and exacerbated already poor working conditions. Workers groaned under grinding poverty and were unable to protest on a massive scale (Baym, 2007, 2-3; Vol. C). Amidst all these difficulties, women who were aspiring for a better life were certainly suffering more than men.

In the 1890s, American cities like Boston, Pittsburg, Chicago, and New York provided better opportunities for young rural women. Literary characters like Alcott's heroine, Christie Devon, in *work*, and Dreiser's Carrie Meeber in *Sister Carrie* also joined in this migration to the cities (Woloch 1994, p. 232). Immigrants' daughters, like Carrie, were ready to do any kind of work for low wages to support themselves and their families. Due to low wages, a single member could not earn enough to provide for the whole family (Woloch, 1994, p. 231). Like their male counterparts, women in the Progressive Era were also affected by the contemporary individualistic and industrialist attitude of American society and longed to seek better prospects in urban settings. Mookerjee remarks, "Since the core of the philosophy was individual responsibility and freedom to rise, poverty, it held, should be for the individual a temporary phase" (1994, p. 8).

Chicago, a booming industrial city, was a natural choice for better opportunities, especially for young women from rural areas. When Jane Addams was born in Chicago in 1860, it was a small lake-port city with 100,000 residents. After the Civil War, the city was transformed by railroads, factories, immigrants' businesses, etc.; and by 1890, the city housed a million residents (Woloch, 1974, p. 259). Jane Addams personally witnessed the problems of immigrant women in Chicago, in particular those of German women, who supported their families by working in factories, sewing, cleaning, washing, and cooking (Woloch, 1974, p. 266, 220). Finding work in these big cities was not easy, and the newcomers faced numerous problems. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) was founded in Boston in 1867 to foster guidance to young ladies who were attempting to navigate these new challenges. While many young aspirants benefited from the association, many young women nonetheless fell prey to the hazards of city life as they were not aware of the nature of the newly Darwinist and overcrowded American metropolitan life. There were many predators like Drouet in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, who would push the newcomers into prostitution, degraded professions and a fallen standard of living (Evans, 1989, p. 140).

While organizations like the YWCA helped newcomers adjust to their new urban environments, writers in the period provided less tangible but equally profound support to these vulnerable young women by effectively giving them a voice in an environment in which they were all but powerless. Theodore Dreiser, who was himself the eyewitness and victim of such transformations, addressed these issues throughout his writing career, in particular, in his bestselling novel, *Sister Carrie*.

This study explores *Sister Carrie's* role in reflecting on women's socio-economic, marital and extra-marital issues in the late 19th and earlier 20th century and surveys how it could help the emerging women's struggle through its strong themes and characters. Going for the historical evidence, the study throws light on the readers' response and the feminist role that the novel has played over the years. Being an American classic, the novel bears the potential to blow a new spirit of strength in our local woman activists and literary and non-literary writers to speak more vehemently for the women's cause in Pakistan.

Methodology

For the major direction of the project, the study hinges upon Transformative Learning (TL) theory, which precisely fits the project's broader theoretical objectives (Hooks 1994; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1997). TL defined as "question[ing] all taken-for-granted values, ideas, norms, and beliefs of experiences that comprise their dominant social paradigm" (Sagris, 2008, p. 1), is a useful theoretical foundation for the study of women's involvement in gender justice and violence prevention work. Derived from liberatory or critical pedagogy, TL centers on the promotion of critical thinking and critical action towards addressing injustice and oppression (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1989; Shor, 1992). TL includes "deep reflection on positionality, oppression, and related social conditions, with personal transformation as a cornerstone of learning, reflection, and action" (Lorenzetti & Walsh, 2014, p. 55) (Ali).

For the text's literary interpretation, the study applies a trilateral theoretical research design of New Historicism, Reader Response and American Feminism theories to explore the reasons behind the novel's composition, the depiction of actual contemporary milieu, the reader's response, and contribution to women's status. For unearthing the historical impact on the novel, the study relies on New Historicism through Stephen Greenblatt's text, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004). Through Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), which is one of the primary texts of Reader Response Theory, the study explores and gauges the readers' contemporary response to the text. Finally, for the depiction of actual women's issues and

contribution to women's position in society, the study relies on Judith Fetterly's *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1977) (Ali).

Being qualitative-interpretive research, the study interprets and codifies the target data through close reading in order to meticulously direct the study to be reliable and valid analysis and findings. The study draws upon late 19th-century American literary criticism, historical accounts, and the text itself. For an authentic depiction of the contemporary position of Pakistani women, the study hinges upon articles, books, surveys, and interviews. For the successful conduction of interviews, the study uses Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI) to explore the unexplored aspects of women's life in Pakistan which are not documented yet. CNI is a means of exploring lived experience (Josselson & Lieblich 1993; Lieblich et al., 1998), making sense (Bruner, 1990), communication (Fisher, 1984), and the interplay of individual and social, cultural and discursal factors (Frank, 2010; Plummer, 1995) (Ali).

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)

Mookerjee explains, "Born in the gilded age of millionaires, [Theodore Herman Albert] Dreiser could taste only poverty and hardships and wistfully looked at the splendor and luxury of the wealthy" (1974, p. 10). His father, John Dreiser, left Germany to escape military service. He came to the new land with a dream of prosperity that he had never had before. However, his economic condition constantly fell from bad to worse. Two years before Theodore Dreiser's birth, his father lost his wool factory in a fire, and John Dreiser was not able to support his large family. Consequently, the children went in diverse directions to earn their bread. Economically wretched and frustrated, John Dreiser tried to impose rigid discipline and conventional Catholic ideas on his children, who openly rebelled against them. Paul Dreiser chose music, and Rome Dreiser got involved in gambling. Comparatively economically stable, Paul often helped the family in hard times and provided considerable help to Theodore and Emma in their desperate struggle for survival (Sloane, 1992, p. 23). Meanwhile, the daughters entangled themselves in romantic affairs, resulting in two of them getting pregnant. John Dreiser banished them from the house, but they were sheltered by their merciful mother, Sara Schanab (Mookerjee, 1974, p. 10, 13). This combination of economic hardship and strict family discipline paralyzed young Theodore: "He worked, ate, played, slept and dreamed religion" (Mookerjee, 1974, p. 14). In response, Dreiser developed a devotion to all the things he was denied: "My body was blazing with sex as well as with a desire for material and social supremacy—to have wealth" (Mookerjee, 1974, p. 18).

But the gospel of wealth and the dream of easy success were beyond the reach of poor immigrants like Dreiser, who were unable to afford a basic standard of living and were concerned with their survival (Mookerjee, 1974, p. 8). However, some glimmers of opportunity did present themselves to Dreiser. With a teacher's help, he spent a year at Indiana University, but this brief stint in academia was not enough to grant him economic independence. A stroke of luck hit him when he found a job with the *Chicago Globe*, which slowly paved his way to his literary career (Baym, 2007, p. 939; Vol. C).

During the ups and downs of his early career, Dreiser received up-close views of urban reality that shattered his early traditional views of religion and society. Instead, he came to see nearly every human institution as meaningless, allowing him to embrace scientific explanations about the origins of humanity and society (Mookerjee, 1974, p. 20). The French realist Honoré de Balzac deeply influenced his ideas when he came across his novels, *The Wild Ass's Skin* and *A Great Man of Provinces in Paris* in the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh. In Balzac's works, he found grounding for his own questions about the society of haves and have-nots. Dreiser's taste for French realism was married to its American strain through his reading of Stephen Crane and Henry B. F. Fuller, whom he considered the father of American realism. The resulting hybridized form played a key role in Dreiser's unique brand of American naturalism, whose origin is generally traced to Émile Zola and his novels like *Nana* (1880) and his essay, "Le Roman Experimental" (Mookerjee, 1974, p. 36).

Dreiser stepped into actual literary writing at the age of twenty-eight, composing four stories, which "were published in 1901 and later collected in *Free and Other Stories* in 1918" (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays*, p. 4-5). "McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers" and "Nigger Jeff" are the most heartrending stories, containing the themes that Dreiser would advocate throughout his literary career. McEwen looks at the struggle of warring ants, while Davies, a young newspaperman who witnesses Jeff's lynching, responds to the powerful feeling aroused by the events. In both stories, the protagonists come to comprehend the true meaning of life in the light of their experiences. Through McEwen and Davies, Dreiser positions his readers to view the reality of life as it is rather than as it ought to be. Anchoring the theme of his literary career on naturalist explanations, Dreiser accepted Henry's (the editor of the *Toledo Blade*, who became his friend after working with him briefly) plan to write a novel upon their return to New York. When he arrived in New York in October 1899, he materialized the idea, "writing *Sister Carrie* at the top of a leaf of small [ream of] yellow sheets" (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays* p. 4-5).

Sister Carrie, "which reflects the author's life and career from his birth in 1870 to the publication of the book in 1900," is considered a memoir of Dreiser and his family's dire struggle in industrialized urban America (Mookerjee, 1974). Dreiser's autobiography, *Dawn* (1931), details that in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser tells the story of his early economic impediments as well as that of his own sisters—particularly his elder sister, Emma—whose wayward lives and illegitimate children furnished him with the ideas he would write about (Pizer, 1981 *New Essays*, p. 5). Richard W. Dowell, in "A Note on Carrie's Hometown," finds links to Dreiser's actual hometown, Columbia City, Wisconsin (from fall 1884 to spring 1887), "which lingered in his memory throughout his literary career" (p. 27). In an interview in 1907, Dreiser said, "the book was not done. The narrative, I felt, was finished, but not completed The story had to stop, and yet I wanted in the final picture to suggest the continuation of Carrie's fate along the lines of established truths" (Pizer, 1981 *New Essays* p. 7).

Carrie Meeber, the central character of the novel, comes from Wisconsin to Chicago to support herself like other young women of the time. In keeping with the rule of the day, her exploitation starts on the very train she travels on:

The train was just pulling out of Waukesha. For some time, she had been conscious of a man behind. She felt him observing her mass of hair. He had been fidgeting, and with a natural intuition, she felt a certain interest growing in that quarter. (Dreiser, 1970, p. 2)

In Chicago, she falls prey to Charles Drouet, who made acquaintance with her on the train, and George Hurstwood. The manager of Fitzgerald and Moy, Hurstwood, is a married man with two children. After stealing ten thousand dollars from his employer's saloon, Hurstwood tricks Carrie into fleeing with him to New York. On being discovered, he returns the money but slips into hard times and finally becomes homeless. Dreiser describes how far Hurstwood had fallen: "At . . . two charities, during the severe winter, which was now on, Hurstwood was a frequent visitor. On one occasion, it was peculiarly cold and finding no comfort in begging about the streets; he waited until noon seeking this free offering to the poor" (Dreiser, 1970, p. 359). Later on, unbeknownst to Carrie, Hurstwood commits suicide.

In contrast to Hurstwood's downward spiral, Carrie rises in her stage career, not hesitating to give out sexual favors to make her dream of becoming a celebrity come true. In his essay, "A Star is Born: 'Celebrity' in *Sister Carrie*," Gerber argues that the modern meaning of "celebrity" was refined by Dreiser in *Sister Carrie*, where he uses the word for the publicized notables who frequently visit saloons, restaurants, and theatres. Toward the end of the novel, the word is defined more categorically: what Carrie becomes is called a celebrity, a subject of newspaper discussion (p. 1992, p. 2). Pizer relates that the respective rags-to-riches and riches-to-rags trajectories of Carrie and Hurstwood embody Dreiser's own aspirations and fears from his struggling days. He yearned to become Carrie and feared he would become Hurstwood. In other words, Pizer tries to put Dreiser's excitements and fears with respect to the American Dream more precisely through Carrie and Hurstwood's acquired positions at the end of the novel (1992, p. 6).

The theme of naturalistic explanation, which Dreiser pioneered in his early short stories, is found in nearly all his novels—from *Sister Carrie* to *An American Tragedy*. *Sister Carrie* could be considered the beginning of American Naturalism's mirroring of the naked realities of late 19th-century American society more comprehensively than any other literary piece of the time (Baym, 2007, p. 939). Before Dreiser, no major American writer illuminated such issues so intensively. George J. Becker calls Dreiser "the American Emile Zola" for his ability to describe life accurately in works like *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser calls the novel "a picture of conditions within the urban struggle for survival and a blunt portrayal of desire" (Baym 2007, p. 927; Vol. C). Critic Philip Geber notes that Carrie is an immigrant, who seeks her American Dream in Chicago and pays whatever price her dream demands (Baym, 2007, p. 927; Vol. C).

Critical Reception

Some revolutionary works that fulfilled their authors' literary ambitions were critical and commercial disappointments at the time of their publication, as with Chopin's *The Awakening* and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Because the novel drew on Dreiser's own experience of his sister's elopement and it did not promote the social Darwinian narrative of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, it became a particular target of critical scorn (McQuade, 1987). The novel's poor reception began with its publishers. Upon *Sister Carrie's* completion, both Henry and Dreiser thought it was too long—680 print pages—and worked together to cut it down to 557 (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays* 12-13). After this revision, the novel was submitted to Harper and Brothers, who rejected it for its wild subject matter. Encouraged by the publication of Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899), Dreiser submitted the novel to Doubleday, Page, and Company, which was formed in 1900 after the dissolution of Doubleday and McCulture. After the publication of his novel, "Frank Norris was serving with Frank Doubleday as a part-time

manuscript reader. Norris was assigned to read *Sister Carrie* (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays*, p. 12-13). He wrote to Dreiser that the book had pleased him, and he would recommend it for publication.

At the time of the book's signing, Doubleday himself was away in Europe; therefore, Walter H. Page, the firm's junior partner, met with Dreiser to inform him that the firm would publish the book. On his return, Doubleday took the book home, where his wife read it and was appalled by the theme. She convinced her husband that the firm should never publish it. Having already contracted with Dreiser to publish the book, they could not legally reject it; as a result, Page tried to persuade Dreiser to withdraw it. Knowing his legal stance, Dreiser resisted both the withdrawal and the drastic changes that Doubleday suggested. Finally, the book was published by Doubleday, Page and Company on November 8, 1900, with only four hundred and fifty-six copies, which brought a total royalty of \$68.40 (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays*, p. 12-13).

About one hundred copies were sent for reviews, and approximately twenty-six reviews had been published in American magazines and newspapers by March of 1901. The critical response was mixed: some reviewers found the novel gloomy, unhealthful and unpleasant, while others appreciated the book for its stark treatment of the realities of urban American life. Many critics found Carrie's portrait "problematic both in meaning and effect, while Hurstwood's decline was praised for its grim truth" (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays*, p. 12). Objections were also raised about Dreiser's style and blunders in English (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays*, p. 12). The reviews were not immensely unfavorable, but Doubleday's lack of interest doomed the novel in its early days.

In "The Critical Recognition of 'Sister Carrie,' 1900-1907," Jack Salzman remarks that "both the puritanical publishers and the equally puritanical reviewers tried to prevent the 'immoral' *Sister Carrie* from coming before the American public" (123). Dreiser himself said that having consulted the law, Doubleday Page and Company published the book but threw it into the cellar (Salzman, 1969, p. 123). Stephen Stepanchev lists some of the myths surrounding the first edition of *Sister Carrie*:

- (1) it was suppressed by the censors.
- (2) it was withdrawn from publication at the insistence of Mrs Frank Doubleday.
- (3) it was locked up in the publisher's cellars.
- (4) it was withdrawn from public sale because of an outraged public and poor reviews; and
- (5) it was issued privately to literary critics and, on their advice, buried in the Doubleday cellar. (Salzman, 1969, p. 124)

Salzman explains that all of these scenarios are exaggerations of the truth:

However, there is no evidence to support such contentions as that of Irene and Allen Cleaton that the protest against *Sister Carrie* was so vehement that the publishers voluntarily withdrew it . . . Indeed, the totally negative reviews were actually few in number; and, for the most part, the critics restricted their objections to the novel's gloomy picture of life. (1969, p. 124)

One such review appeared in the *Indianapolis News*, which considers both the book's positive and negative aspects. The reviewer acknowledges "that *Sister Carrie* was true to an unhappy side of life and told of a common experience", but he nevertheless objects to the fact that it was "unrelieved by a single ray of sunshine." The reviewer concludes with the note that "*Sister Carrie* leaves a bad taste" (Salzman 124). Similarly, the *Toledo Blade* (8 December 1900) commends the novel for its depth of characterization and representation of the actual conditions of American urban life in the late 19th century. *The Minneapolis Journal* (22 January 1901) remarks that it took Dreiser 550 pages to tell a common story. Incidents like these happened to most of the young girls in the late 19th century who sought better lives in urban America. *The Churchman* (29 December 1900) finds the novel to some extent "disappointing" but praises it for its effective depictions of industrial circumstances (Salzman, 1969, p. 125). However, not all reviewers focused on their inability to find in the text what they themselves were looking for. Contrary to the book's reputation, the majority of the reviews that the book received for its first edition in America were favorable. The critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* (30 December 1900) asserts that despite some reservations, the novel was praised by many critics for its genuine strength and universal appeal (Salzman, 1969, p. 126). Perhaps more significantly, the reviewer for the *Louisville Courier* (23 February 1901) commends the book for advocating the cause of women's equality and liberty amid the harsh new Social Darwinism of contemporary American urbanity:

Sister Carrie is an effort to set out clearly the social feminine vagrant of American life, she who goes on and up and achieves without the handicapping of family, conventional ties or an undue regard for others. There is no question of morality aroused by the story. It is a study, and a very strong one, of the development of a soul that seeks the unattainable, whose goal flies before it. (Salzman, 1969, p. 126)

The novel's luck turned when William Heinemann picked up an interest in it. On the sixth of May 1901, Doubleday, Page, and Co. let Dreiser know that William Heinemann, the British publisher, had decided to issue

Sister Carrie in his Dollar Library. William Heinemann was interested in the works of emerging American writers. At his request, Dreiser and Arthur shortened the book, and it was published in England on July 3. Within five months, 1,161 copies were sold—more than twice as many as the first American edition—earning favorable reviews and many royalties, which altered the novel's image in the mind of American critics (Salzman, 1969, p 128). On September 10, 1901, William Heinemann congratulated Dreiser on the favorable reception of the book in England. There were a few unfavourable reviews, too, but William Heinemann failed to mention them (Salzman, 1969, p 129).

As some of the American critics, the reviewer of *London Daily Mail* (8 September 1901) was more impressed by the character of Hurstwood than Carrie. The reviewer further details that in drawing the character of Hurstwood, Dreiser had created a masterpiece. Exactly the same account is forwarded by the reviewer of the *Eversham Journal* (Salzman 129). *The Spectator's Review* (24 August 1901) bestows the central role of the novel on Hurstwood, terming him the most influential character of the story:

Unless we are greatly mistaken, the most successful and remarkable study in *Sister Carrie* is a figure which was not intended to occupy the central place . . .

The really powerful study is the figure of Hurstwood, Carrie's second lover. The picture of the sapping of the man's whole nature by the inertia, which attacks him in his weary search for work is most subtly and strongly drawn. (Salzman, 1969, p 129)

Distinguished journals like the *Spectator* and the *Athenaeum* hailed *Sister Carrie* as a great literary masterpiece and published detailed reviews on it, exploring the novel from many critical angles. Theodore Watts-Dunton's review in the *Athenaeum* (7 September 1901) pronounces:

Between its covers no single note of unreality is struck. It is untrammelled by any single concession to convention or tradition, literary or social. . . . Readers there are who, having perused the three hundred and odd pages which go to the making of *Sister Carrie*, will find a permanent place upon their shelves for the book besides M. Zola's *Nana*. (Salzman, 1969, p 130)

Watts-Dunton's appreciation, in particular, played a great role in changing American critics' perception of *Sister Carrie*. Although a single British review could not alone change the reputation of an already doomed novel, the esteem in which the American literary world held British opinion allowed a single British review to revive a novel that had been written off in its own country (Salzman, 1969, p 130).

The novel's favorable reception among the English blew new life into the popularity of *Sister Carrie* in the U.S. William Heinemann, who knew the story of Frank Doubleday's attempt to suppress *Sister Carrie*, sent a letter to Doubleday with many favorable English reviews, ironically congratulating him for introducing Dreiser to the literary world. Without a single comment, Doubleday silently forwarded the letter to Dreiser and sold the novel's remaining copies and publication rights to J. F. Taylor and Co. (Salzman, 1969, p 131).

After his recovery from a nervous breakdown in 1907, Dreiser was determined to "republish *Sister Carrie*, and the novel was at last reissued in 1907 by B. W. Dodge, a firm in which Dreiser had an interest" (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays* p. 14). The Dodge firm trumpeted the new volume as the "Triumphant Vindication of a Suppressed Novel" (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays* p. 11). The success was the result of a fierce battle that Dreiser (who would later come to gloss over Henry's key early role in the novel's creation) and Norris fought in favor of art against philistinism—Mrs. Doubleday's oppressive American middle-class moralism. *Sister Carrie's* victory was remarkable for artistic freedom in America. Prior to the novel's rediscovery, many authors lost such struggles to the so-called moralism, abandoning attempts toward realist-naturalist depictions of society (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays*, p.12).

After its reissue, *Sister Carrie* succeeded in attracting the public attention it deserved, ultimately exerting enormous influence over American ways of life (McQuade, 1987, p. 999). The book sparked a fresh interest among American critics, and for the first time, it was reviewed by *The Forum*, *North American Review*, *Current Literature*, and *The New York Times*, as well as by the influential *Bookman*. Despite all this newfound American interest, however, the reviewer of *The Louisville Times* (19 June 1907) remained so swayed by the attention the book received in the U.K. that s/he began her/his review by alleging mistakenly that "[*Sister Carrie*] was first printed in England, where the critics have treated it with flattering attention. . ." (Salzman 1969, p. 131-132).

Harris Merton Lyon lauds *Sister Carrie* for its direct and simple depiction of late 19th-century America with its brutal conditions for unprivileged and poor workers. A distinguished work of literary criticism of twentieth-century American Literature, F. O. Matthiessen's "A Picture of Conditions" is considered the most influential and comprehensive literary study of *Sister Carrie*. The essay praises the novel for its straightforward portrayal of contemporary America in "Balzac's direct way of presenting solid slabs of the continuous picture—it is not intended as a piece of literary craftsmanship, but as a picture of conditions done as simply and effectively as the English language will permit" (1969, p. 169).

The artistry of Dreiser's portrayal of his characters in an authentic way is also commended by quite a few critics. Elis Vivas highly praises Dreiser's narrative, deeming it the basis of his strength as a novelist (Pizer, 1981,

New Essays, p. 17). Barbara Hochman extols Dreiser's craftsmanship in genuine characterization, which is clearly found in the reality of Carrie's rising and Hurstwood's falling. Both Carrie and Hurstwood illustrate every desire and anguish that are part of the actual world (p. 43). Thomas P. Riggio turns to psychological insight in "Carrie's Blues," charting Dreiser's skill in portraying the inner life of his characters. And yet, this skill can be overlooked because it does not conform to generic norms. Instead, Dreiser presents his characters as real human beings in flesh and blood in their respective settings and with their actual problems. Riggio further explains, "Dreiser's insistence on the psychological determinants of mental states and his habit of building a narrative around characters' responses to environmental stimuli have led to assumptions of psychological naivete" (1991, p. 24).

Likewise, Richard Lehan supplements Riggio's psychological rationale with a naturalist reading. Dreiser's philosophical essay, "The Prophet," and the novel, *Sister Carrie*, suggest that Dreiser was deeply influenced by Herbert Spencer, who he had read in the summer of 1894. Works like *Sister Carrie's* advocate for the view that individual lives are determined by external forces in an immense natural design where an individual's existence is completely insignificant. The "city" is Dreiser's stage, where individuals like Carrie and Hurstwood rise and fall in the Darwinian struggle of life, whose psychological perceptions are revealed through the author's art of narration (1991, p. 65).

Reframing the conflict of the narrative, Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr. argues that "desire" is the protagonist of *Sister Carrie* and the "city" is the seducer of that desire. Carrie, Hurstwood, and Drouet all have desires that form the basis of their despair (p. 18). Pulling the discussion to the more pessimistic side, in *Theodore Dreiser Revisited*, Philip Gerber believes that *Sister Carrie* views life as a tragedy in which material forces are inevitable, which prompts Dreiser to emphasize innate cruelty in human lives. Carrie and Hurstwood are equally the victims of the inhuman American system. Both of them pay a huge price for their existence, but Carrie's demise is abstract and mental, unlike Hurstwood's (1992, p. 21).

Unlike the reviews, the majority of the literary essays produced about the book over the years have looked more at the positive aspects of the novel. A great number of critics take the novel as a socio-economic and historical picture of late 19th-century America informed by the firsthand understanding of the author. But some critics have failed to see anything extraordinary in either Dreiser or his view of life.

Social Equality

As a male writer, Theodore Dreiser did not face the same problem of social inequality as women did, but he was affected by the social constraints that his sisters faced. Besides John Dreiser's rigid gender expectations at home, the broader social milieu was still in the clutches of the Victorian code and failed to permit the same social freedom to women that is provided to men. Throughout the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, women's struggle for equality was surging across the nation. Examples of social inequality for women are frequently found in *Sister Carrie*. The stage is set with Carrie's arrival in Chicago, when Hanson, her brother-in-law, indirectly opposes her intention to walk alone:

"I am going up the street for a walk," she said after supper.

"Not alone, are you?" asked Hanson.

"Yes," returned Carrie. . . .

"What is the matter with her?" asked Hanson when she went into the room to get her hat. (Dreiser, 1970, p. 42)

The social constraints of a Victorian woman are further exposed when she feels bound to Hurstwood: "She began to look upon Hurstwood wholly as a man, and not as a lover or husband. She felt thoroughly bound to him as a wife and that her lot was cast with this, whatever it might be" (Dreiser, 1970, p. 243). In the end, she grows allergic even to the name of marriage: "Carrie was ashamed to say that she was married" (Dreiser, 1970, p. 289).

Sexual Equality/Harassment

Theodore Dreiser's advocacy of sexual equality was triggered by his sisters' liberal ways of life and his own passionate and unsuccessful infatuation with Thelma Cudlipp, who inspired his novel, *The Genius* (1915). In *Sister Carrie* (1900), Carrie's frequent use of sex embodies the struggle of Dreiser's elder sister, Emma Wilhelmina, in particular, and other late-19th-century young women in general. Most of the young girls like Carrie, who sought better futures in America's urban centres, were sexually exploited (Ware, 2002, p. 62).

Emma Wilhelmina, like Carrie made her way to Chicago for a better future, where she lived with an architect and then with L. A. Hopkins, unbeknownst to his wife and children. Hopkins, who is represented by George Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*, worked for Chapin and Gore—"a firm which owned a number of prominent Chicago saloons" (Pizer, 1981, p. 5). His intensifying relationship with Emma created a rift between him and his wife, whose suspicions drove her to hire a detective. After finding the location of Emma's apartment, the detective took Mrs

Hopkins with him, where they caught Hopkins red-handed with Emma in bed. A news reporter details Hopkins' bewilderment—"My God! ma, is that you?" (Pizer, 1981, p. 5). After this scene, the relation between husband and wife further deteriorated. Stealing \$3500 from his employer, Hopkins eloped with Emma to Canada via New York. On being discovered by a detective, Hopkins returned all the money willingly, and they were "permitted to continue to New York without further police action" (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays* p. 5). In 1894, when Dreiser arrived in New York, Emma and Hopkins were going through hard times. Dreiser "played a major role in the ruse which permitted Emma to leave Hopkins" (Pizer, 1981 *New Essays* p. 5). Hopkins was not seen again after Emma's desertion, while Emma married and became a silent housewife until her death (Pizer, 1981, *New Essays* p. 5). Like Emma, Carrie first resides with Drouet and then with Hurstwood for survival:

"Use everything and abuse me and then walk off. That's just like a woman. I take you when you when haven't got anything, and then when someone else comes along, why I am not good. I always thought it'd come out that way." (Dreiser, 1970, p. 165)

After Drouet, she lives with Hurstwood, who tricks her into eloping:

Be my wife from today on. . . . She kept a servant and developed rapidly in household tactics and information. For the first time in her life, she felt settled and somewhat justified in the eyes of society as she conceived of it. (Dreiser, 1970, p. 205, 220)

Though there are no explicit instances of Carrie's sexual harassment at workplaces, glimpses of sexual harassment at public spaces are commonly cited during the course of Carrie's hunt for work to survive in the city: As she passed out along the hall after getting her hat, a young machine hand attracted by her looks, made bold to jest with her. "Say Maggie," he called. "If you wait, I will walk with you."

It was thrown so straight in her direction that she knew who was meant, but never turned to look back One young man waiting on the walk outside for the appearance of another, grinned at her as she passed. . . . She was slightly taken aback at the overtures of a well-dressed man of thirty, who in passing looked at her, reduced his pace, turned back, and said, "Out for a little stroll, are you, this evening?" Carrie looked at him in amazement and then summoned sufficient thought to reply: "Why, I don't know you," backing away as she did so. (Dreiser 1970, p. 31, 41)

Through such descriptions, Dreiser denotes the ubiquity of sexual harassment of the late 19th century's American women in public and workspaces.

Economic Equality

David E. E. Sloane asserts that Dreiser's treatment of economic issues was triggered by his humble background and childhood sufferings. He belonged to an extremely poor family that many times found itself on the verge of starvation. His brother, Paul, who was a bit more economically sound, saved the family many times (1992, p. 23). Dreiser's mother "took all kinds of jobs from washing clothes to operating a lodging house to keep the family kitchen running—with her children stealing coal from the railroad wagons" (Mookerjee 1974, p. 10). In *Sister Carrie*, both Carrie and Hurstwood's struggle for economic stability reflects Dreiser's own fight for survival in Darwinist urban America:

The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately filled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, hair combs, purses all touched her with individual desire, and she felt keenly the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purse. She was a work-seeker, an outcast without employment, one whom the average employee could tell at a glance was poor and in need of a situation. (Dreiser, 1970, p. 13, 17, 20)

When the plot gets reversed, Hurstwood replaces Carrie's former economic condition, and she rises to his:

Now he had only five hundred dollars left . . . he decided to wear some old clothes he had. This came first with the bad days . . . Also, he had been wont to pay fifteen cents for a shave and a tip of ten cents. In his first distress, he cut down the tip to five, then to nothing. Later he tried a ten-cent barber shop . . . Later still, he put off shaving to every other day, then to every third, and so on, until once a week became the rule. . . . Of course, as his own self-respect vanished, it perished for him in Carrie. . . . "Could you give me something to do for a few days," he said. "I am in a position where I have to get something at once." . . . "I come here," explained Hurstwood, nervously, "because I've been a manager myself in my day. I've had bad luck in a way, but I am not here to tell you that. I want something to do only for a week." (Dreiser, 1970, p. 260-1; 313-14; 338)

Job Opportunities

There were specific job opportunities for different classes and sexes. For poor immigrants' daughters like Carrie working in factories, serving in houses, sewing, cleaning, washing, and cooking were common types of paid work

(Woloch, 1994, p. 220). Like her author, Carrie was desperately looking for a job in her early days in Chicago and takes her start at a shoe factory:

It was with weak knees and a slight catch in her breathing that she came up to the great shoe company at Adams and Fifth Avenue and entered the elevator. . . . Presently Mr Brown came up. . . . He led the way through dark, box-lined aisles which had the smell of new shoes, until they came to an iron door which opened into the factory proper. (Dreiser, 1970, p. 27- 28)

Low Pay

Life in late 19th-century industrial America was divided into two extremes. For poor workers, daily existence was a nightmare, while for the rich, the period was a high time of corruption, tax evasion, and exploitation. Class consciousness and the conflict between capital and labor were on the increase. A subgroup of capitalists subscribed to a philosophy of wanton accumulation and consumption in utter disregard of the principles of fair play and the rights of other individuals (Mookerjee, 1974, p.7). Dreiser himself records in his autobiography that "'indescribable poverty' existed and was expected to exist, alongside 'indescribable wealth'" (Mookerjee, 1974, p.6). Dreiser dreamt of success and wealth, but this dream was shattered by his low pay and failures at five successive jobs. Dreiser mirrors situations like these in *Sister Carrie* with Carrie and Hurstwood's desperate struggle for survival on their meager earnings. Carrie's early days at her sister's home, and Hurstwood's economic wretchedness, reflect Dreiser's own worries:

"So you want something to do" said Mr. Brown. . . . "Well, I don't know as I have anything for you. Would work for four and a half a week?" Carrie was so worn by defeat that it was considerable. She had not expected that he would offer less than six. . . . As on the previous morning, Carrie walked down town, for she began to realize now that her four-fifty would not even allow her car fare after she paid her board. (Dreiser, 1970, p. 21, 40)

Working Conditions

As many historical accounts attest, working conditions in late 19th-century America were dreadful. Workers toiled for long hours in unhygienic and inhuman conditions with no labor rights. Jacob A. Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) offers a historical account of these poor immigrants—the way they lived and worked. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser throws light on awful working conditions in Chicago through Carrie's working experience in a shoe factory:

[T]he room was not very light. It had a thick odor of fresh leather. . . . As the morning wore on, the room became hotter. She felt the need of a breath of fresh air and a drink of water but did not venture to stir She stood up from her stool and worked that way for a while, but it was a more difficult position. Her neck and shoulder ached in bending over Carrie, at last, could scarcely sit there. Her legs began to tire and she wanted to get up and stretch . . . her eyes were tired Her hands began to ache at the wrists and then in the fingers, and towards the last she seemed one mass of dull, complaining muscles, fixed in an actual position She knew that out in Chicago this very day the same factory chamber was full of poor homely-clad girls working in long lines at clattering machines; that at noon they would eat a miserable lunch in a half-hour (Dreiser, 1970, p. 28-29-334)

Through this description Dreiser captures the excruciating drudgery of low-paid labor, which was very common for women in particular in late 19th century American cities.

Hiring and Firing

Owing to widespread poverty and the availability of workers in large numbers, a constant cycle of hiring and firing—in particular for women—was the rule of the day. There was no surety about how long a person could hold his/her job. The workers were used like machines; in case of illness, or any other mild failure, they were shown the door. The fear of losing a job was so intense that the workers failed to assert their labor rights. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser describes such a situation with Carrie's firing from the shoe factory when she falls ill:

She came out of the warm shop at six and shivered as the wind struck her. In the morning she was sneezing, and going down made it worse. That day her bones ached and she felt light-headed. Towards evening she felt very ill, and when she reached home was not hungry The next morning she was feverish

When she got up after three days, it was taken for granted that her position was lost. (Dreiser, 1970, p. 43)

Social Darwinism

The rise of naturalism coincided with a transition in American society away from moral and ethical imperatives and towards more materialistic and utilitarian structures of thought. Dreiser touches upon the issue throughout his literary career, including *Sister Carrie*, but he deals with it at greatest length in *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914), which crucially depict the Darwinian and utilitarian struggle of the American business world (Mookerjee,

1974, p. 38). In *Sister Carrie*, such elements are found when Carrie arrives at Minni's and later on when Hurstwood is living with Carrie:

She began to see that they looked upon her complaint as unwarranted and that she was supposed to work on and say nothing She would need to save part of the twenty to pay her fare home. She did not want to borrow of Minni for that When Hanson came home he wore the same inscrutable demeanor. . . .The strain of her plans was considerable, and the feeling that she was not welcome here was strong. (Dreiser, 1970, p. 38, 50, 55)

Keeping in view the contemporary Darwinian and materialistic rat-race in mind, Hanson's treatment of Carrie could be termed justified. She replicates the same utilitarian attitude with Hurstwood, who is dependent on her in his hard days that Hanson directed toward her in her early days in the city:

"I will not give him the rest of my money," said Carrie . . .

"I will not do it," she said, remembering her necessity.

"I don't use the flat. I am not going to give up my money this time. I will move" (Dreiser, 1970, p. 290, 317).

Here Dreiser pictures the invisible forces of social Darwinism in American society through Carrie's behavior to Hurstwood, with Carrie ironically duplicating the very stingy disapproval that was so painful for her to receive. Rather than empathize, she judges. Carrie has learned to view her social relationships through the lens of Darwinian struggle ("survival of the fittest"), and can only see helping Hurstwood as hurting herself. Of course, this tendency ties into a larger trend toward corruption and greed in the surrounding social milieu.

Conclusion

Being the last of the 19th and the first of the 20th century, the novel both realistically and naturalistically mirrors its milieu, creator's life, and the contemporary literary trends. Enlisting most of the contemporary issues, the text serves as a social criticism of the debased American values. Starting from the author's own family, the novel unfolds its biting criticism that touches on nearly every element of American life, in particular, the socio-economic, personal, marital, and extramarital restrained position of American women. Being American Emile Zola, Dreiser systematically, through Carrie, enlists all the hazards that women faced at that time. Though the novel had poor critical reception at the time of publication, critics understood its weight with the passage of time. Finally, it has ended as one of the iconic American classics which, to date, advocates for socio-economic justice, especially gender equality, across the world, including Pakistan.

References

- Baym, Nina, Jeanne C. R and Arnold K, eds. (2007). *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: Norton & Company, Vol. C, Seventh Edition.
- Baym, Nina, Robert S. Livine, eds. (2012). *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Julia, R. New York: Norton and Company, Vol. B, 8th edition
- Donald P (1977). New York: *Cambridge University Press*. 23-42.
- Dowell, R. W. (Spring 1990). "The Power of Historical Narrative: A Note on Carrie's Hometown." *DreiserStudies*, 21(1), pp. 42-43.
- Dowell, R. W. (1988). "A Note on Carrie's Hometown." *Dreiser Studies*, 19(2), pp. 27.
- Dowell, R. W. (Fall 1992). "Sister Carrie: A Novel About Failure." *Dreiser Studies*, 23(2), pp. 45-46.
- Dreiser, T. (1970). Sister, C. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: *Norton and Co.*
- Elias, R. H. (1970). Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature. Ithaca: *Cornell University Press*.
- Evans, Sara M. (1989). Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America. New York: *Collier Macmillan Publishers*.
- Hochman, B. (1991). "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Actress: The Rewards of Representation in Sister Carrie." *New Essays on Sister Carrie*. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: *Cambridge University Press*. 43-64.
- Hussman, Jr. Lawrence E. (1983). Dreiser and His Fiction: A Twentieth-Century Quest. Philadelphia: *University of Pennsylvania Press*.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: *Prentice Hall*.
- Lehan, R. (1946). Theodore Dreiser: His World and his Novels. Carbondale, Illinois: *Southern Illinois University Press*.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: *Sage*.
- Lyon, Harris, M. (1981). "Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*." *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Boston: *G.K Hall & Co.* 162-65.
- Markels, J. (1981). "Dreiser and the Plotting of Inarticulate Experience." *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Boston: *G.K Hall & Co.* 186-99.
- Matthiessen, F.O. (1968). *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. London: *Oxford University Press*. (originally published in 1941).
- Matthiessen, F.O. (1981). "A Picture of Conditions." *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Boston: *G.K Hall & Co.* 169-85.
- McAlleer, J. J. (1968). Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation. New York: *Barnes and Noble*.
- McQuade, Donald, ed. (1987). *The Harper American Literature*. New York: *Harper & Row Publishers*, 2.
- McWhirter, D. (2010). Henry James in Context. New York: *Cambridge University Press*.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74 (5). doi: 10.1002/ace.7401
- Mookerjee, R.N. (1974). Theodore Dreiser: His Thought and Social Criticism. Delhi: *National Publishing House*.
- Morelli-White, N. "The Finesse of Dreiser.(1981)." *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Boston: G.K Hall & Co. 200-208.
- Morelli-White, N. (1992). "When Waters Engulf Us We Reach for a Star: Psychomachic Struggle in Dreiser's *Sister*." *Dreiser Studies*, 23(2), pp.13-27.
- Mukherjee, A. P. (1990). "Sister Carrie at Ninety: An Indian Response." *Dreiser Studies*, 21(2), pp. 27-39.
- Perriere, De la E. (1990). "*Sister Carrie*, Sisters in Sable Skin, and Gestures of Exclusion." *Dreiser Studies*, 21(2), pp. 19-26.
- Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling Sexual Stories*. London: *Routledge*.
- Reedy, W.M. (1981). "Sister Carrie: A Strangely Strong Novel in a Queer Milieu." *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Boston: *G.K Hall & Co.* 157-59.
- Riggio, T. P. (1991). "Carrie's Blue." *New Essays on Sister Carrie*. Ed.
- Sagris, J. (2008). Liberatory education for democracy. *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, 4(3), 1-4.
- Salzman, J. (1969). "The Critical Recognition of *Sister Carrie*, 1900-1907." *Journal of American Studies*, 3(1), pp.123-13. Cambridge University Press on behalf of the British Association for American Studies. jstor.org. Web. 14 June 2015.
- Shulman, R. (1989). *Social Criticism and the Nineteenth Century American Fiction*. Missouri: *University of Missouri*.
- Sloane, David E. *Sister C.* (1992). Theodore Dreiser's Sociological Tragedy. New York: *Twayne Publishers*.
- Ware, S. (2002). *Modern American Women: A Documentary History*. New York: *McGraw Hill Publisher*.
- Woloch, N. (1994). *Women and the American Experience*. New York: *Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.*