

# From Carrie to Jennie: An Analysis of Dreiser's Female Characters from the Perspective of environmental sociology

Chen Zixiu

2171600964@qq.com

Student, Department of English, Nanjing Forestry University, 210037, 159 Longpan Road, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

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## Abstract

Dreiser's two famous novels, *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, describe the life experiences of young women in big cities from lower-middle class during the social transformation of the United States in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Both novels have a strong tendency of naturalism, emphasizing the influence of environment on the personages' destiny. This article compares "new women" and "real women", inspecting the reasons for the two heroines' completely different personalities and fates from the perspective of environmental sociology and peeping at the changes of average women.

**Keywords:** the female sex; identity cognition; environmental sociology; characteristics of femininity; change

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## 1. Introduction

In the late 19th century, with the industrialization of the United States, the field of men's talents was expanded, while the field of women's activities became narrower. Bao Xiaolan put it this way in *the Review of Western Feminist Studies*: "The society thinks that real women should be pious, pure, obedient, skilled at home and secluded, and imposes this definition on women" (1995:82). It can be seen that the concept of family became the core of the "characteristics of femininity" at that time, and women could only realize their value in the relationship with men.

While the "real women" (also known as "family angels") were highly respected in American society, the first wave of the feminist movement put the "new women" on the stage of history. Contrary to "real women", "new women" mostly had a strong sense of self and relatively independent personality, and have received certain education, with relatively free and open sexual ideas (Guihua, 2021). Simultaneously, they broke away from the traditional family and patriarchal society, and were active in the public sphere which usually belonged to the male domain. From the perspective of environmental sociology, the rise of the "new women" was a challenge to the mainstream ideology of the 19th century, that the "characteristics of femininity" was defined by the word "family", which has brought profound influence on social gender relations. Theodore Dreiser's two famous novels, *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, tell two heroines who have completely different lives. They are the representatives of the "real women" and the "new women" respectively. It is not difficult to see Dreiser's different interpretations of the "characteristics of femininity". From "Carrie" to "Jennie", Dreiser can also be said to be influenced by the social environment of "real women" in mainstream culture.

## 2. A "new woman"—a grower with independent spirit and self-awareness

Carrie, as the representative of “new women”, had a distinct character. The development track in her characterization was from a country girl, who was at the mercy of men, to a “new woman” who was self-sufficient and economically independent. This process was essentially a rewriting of the traditional “characteristics of femininity”.

### ***2.1 Financially separating from the family***

As Dreiser wrote in his book, “It is the nature of a woman to want protection, support, sympathy. Coupled with many feelings and feelings, often make women difficult to refuse. It makes them think they are in love.” Carrie, who began to place her desire for material prosperity in men, had once regarded the “kindness and favour” of Drouet and Hurstwood as “shields” against external threats and “love” between men and women. The “characteristics of femininity” in a specific environment and society created stereotypes in women's minds, thus suppressing women's own power. Carrie discovered her dramatic talent by chance, but she was so accustomed to a comfortable life under the male wing that she refused to see where her strength lay, so her gifts were not fully revealed until her expectations of men were thwarted, and the novel had two such ambivalence depictions.

Firstly, when she knew of Hurstwood's deception and Drouet's double whammy of leaving her, she didn't believe that she was really facing the problem of fending for herself again for the first few days. However, she later realized that she could legally acquire what she needed, without requiring an additional “gift” by the male. She intended to be able to fend for herself. This determination showed that Carrie realized that she can be paid for her hard work in society on the same basis as men, instead of being attached to men. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1998) pointed out: “When a man becomes a provider and protector of women, correspondingly, women no longer support themselves and defend themselves... When a man becomes the most direct and important social contact of a woman, she gradually adapts and is defined by this influence.” She also realized her shallowness in the past, and now the blatant slapping won't make her lose her mind. She decided to maintain a distant relationship with men after experiencing deception from men.

Carrie's second attempt was when Hurstwood was destitute. Although Hurstwood repeatedly stressed to Carrie from the patriarchal environmental and social perspective, “If I were you, I wouldn't want to act. It's not the right career for a girl”, however, Carrie chose to act again. Although the experience of looking for a job was as difficult as the previous two times, Carrie's tenacity and courage finally led her to a choir position, and her talent was quickly recognized. The author's description of Carrie's rising advancement in work showed that women had financial independence far away from traditional society.

### ***2.2 Ideologically detaching from the tradition***

At a time when most Americans were moving to the big cities to realize their “American dream,” Carrie was moving to her sister's family too, but she noticed a great change in her sister Minnie Hanson after marriage: “She was only twenty-seven years old, and though still strong, she was a thin woman, whose view of life, of happiness and duty, had been narrowed by her husband's influence”. Her family constituted the whole of her life and identity. Besides, her thoughts were rigid, following the rules of the environment, and being emotionally attached to her husband.

Carrie, on the other hand, was quite different from her sister. In a society full of desire and money, environment influenced human choices and society reflected human behavior. Seeing the dazzling city life, Carrie quickly changed her world view. She no longer believed in such beliefs as “women's responsibility is

to bear and raise children” and “women are born to be good materials for motherhood”. On the contrary, she convinced that she should make herself beautiful and sexy, enjoying her life. Then she was seduced by Drouet and Hurstwood, and suffered a series of misfortunes of her own. It was this external social environment that made Carrie's character gradually change and gradually degenerate. More importantly, what was hidden was the awakening of the female consciousness. She gradually knew that women can only rely on their own to find happiness and meaning. The certainty and independent spirit of her own identity made Carrie a real “new woman” completely.

Modica Marcos (1960) said in “*What is a Bildungsroman*”, “the protagonists in Bildungsromans either change their original worldview, change their own personality, or both... This change will have a permanent impact”. Carrie's growth story was a microcosm of the trial and error, self-rescue, and self-realization of young girls who have just entered society. It told us that we should always have a pure heart, always be sincere, never satisfied, and always pursue our dreams. On a deeper level, it also had a special significance: in a society dominated by patriarchy, Carrie gradually developed a sense of gender resistance, and with the pursuit of a better life and dreams, through work, she finally got rid of the situation of being dependent on men's survival and life, achieving dual liberation and independence in both economic and spiritual aspects.

### **3. A “real woman” —a product of serving to a patriarchal society**

Jennie was a “real woman” (Ning, 1994) who represented the bottom society oppressed by traditional society. As a symbol of all women living in this level, she undoubtedly had no access to escape the common tragic fate wherever they lived and whatever lifestyle they chose. They always blindly sacrificed themselves for men and families, lacking self - awareness and rebellious spirit. Therefore, their fate tragedy had a certain inevitability.

#### ***3.1 Sacrificing herself for the man and the family***

In order to acquire the plight of the family, she chose to sacrifice herself many times. There were three main sacrifices -- giving up to Brander for his brother's ransom, abandoning her own happiness for the sake of Brad's son, proactively breaking up for Lester to help him get his fortune. At that time, in the United States, when the trend of “real women--centered on family” was advocated, Jennie received a patriarchal education, so she was willing to sacrifice herself in order that her family could live a comfortable life. Moreover, the environmental social structure of the United States was a consumerist culture that emphasized sensory satisfaction. And men began to consume women who gave them pleasure; In their minds, women, such as Jennie, were objects which can be entertained.

In the novel, Jennie felt irresistible when confronted with Lester. “She feels his superiority, his impulsive strength, and though she never wants to give in, she has to.” As the Lester's mistress, she chose to be submissive, obedient, and a parasite of men. All in all, she was a so-called “real woman”, who was devoted to men and family all the time. Jennie was doomed to become a victim of men and society.

#### ***3.2 Losing the sense of self and courage***

Jennie's final result was to be angrily reprimanded by her father and thrown out of the house, be despised by society and be estranged from siblings; and she lost her love. And there was no denying the fact that her destiny was a result of no self-awareness and resistance. Unlike Carrie, Dreiser instilled traditional female characteristics into the heroine Jenny; he endowed her with kind qualities, and the characteristics of a “real

woman” in the American society at that time -- accepting suffering silently and paying for her family. She lacked self-awareness and freedom from her family and her men, as a result that she never gained financial and spiritual independence all her life. This tragedy was caused by the social environment. For Jennie, paying for others was not a mistake; what was wrong was the loss of the real female characteristic and identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the case of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser's moral attitude fluctuated between two poles in the face of Carrie's “all choices” just as Carrie's observation of herself. When Carrie looked in the mirror, she saw the most beautiful Carrie that she had ever seen, but when she looked in her mind--the mirror of her own heart and public opinion, she saw a fallen Carrie. After *Sister Carrie*'s publication, the United States once ostracized this novel. In fact, from the perspective of environmental sociology, the reason was that the description of the “characteristics” of the “new women” in *Sister Carrie* violated the orthodox male chauvinism under the social structure at that time. Therefore, Dreiser resolutely reversed the script in his next work, *Jennie Gerhardt*, and created an ideal woman. Like Carrie, Jennie took mistresses for the rich and powerful, but Dreiser gave her a “valid” reason: the good girl made a sacrifice to help her poor family out of trouble. Both Carrie and Jennie finally left the man with whom they have lived. Dreiser, however, treated Jennie's behavior as yet another self-sacrifice by women for the benefit of men. As the embodiment of goodness and beauty, Jennie was the “family angel” who was praised by the society and maintained the “family myth” of the bourgeoisie. Of course, the creation of this image undoubtedly represented the writer who has suffered from failure and made a compromise to the mainstream ideology.

To sum up, at that time, Carrie was the representative of the “new women” being whipped, while Jennie was the symbol of the “real women” being advocated. The change of female image reflects the transformation of environmental and social structure, which still has research significance for the current era. And if you look at the current social structure of the environment, it's clear that the real “feminine” is Carrie.

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