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An Analysis of *Sister Carrie* from the Perspective of Consumerism

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Abstract

“Sister Carrie” is a work created by Theodore Dreiser, an American realist writer, based on the American social reality in the late 19th century, reflecting the phenomenon of young people frantically chasing the American dream in their hearts. In the process of transforming from a traditional agricultural society to a modern industrial society, American society at that time was impacted by consumerism. This paper analyzes *“Sister Carrie”* from the perspective of consumerism. It first introduces consumerism and the cultural background of consumerism at that time, then analyzes the embodiment of consumerism in *“Sister Carrie”*, and then interprets the change of Carrie’s consumption view. Finally, this paper reveals the consumerism theme of *“Sister Carrie”*: it is precisely under the drive of consumerism that Carrie gradually realizes the materialistic success of her American dream, but her spiritual destiny is still swaying like a rocking chair, and she cannot control her own fate, which indicates the hidden spiritual lack behind the blind pursuit of consumerism.

Key Words: *“Sister Carrie”*; consumerism; American dream

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of Consumerism

Consumerism is the idea that increasing the consumption of goods and services purchased in the market is always a desirable goal, and that a person’s well-being and happiness depend fundamentally on obtaining consumer goods and material possessions. In common use, consumerism refers to the tendency of people living in a capitalist economy to engage in a lifestyle of excessive materialism that revolves around reflexive, wasteful, or conspicuous overconsumption (Baudrillard 68). In this sense, consumerism is widely understood to contribute to the destruction of traditional values and ways of life, consumer exploitation by big business, environmental degradation, and negative psychological effects. *Sister Carrie* is full of consumerism. Many characters in this work are in pursuit of material enjoyment and strongly desire material wealth in order to

pursue the American dream in their hearts. They hope to get satisfaction from material consumption such as high-end restaurants, luxurious houses, exquisite clothes and leisure entertainment, but their spirit is empty (Huang 38).

1.2 The Cultural Background of Consumerism

At the end of the 19th century, the United States was in the transition period from industrial capitalism to monopoly capitalism, and the ideology of consumption gradually replaced the ideology of production (Lana 39). This ideology of consumption emphasizes spending and material possession, and it reduces the traditional moral standards of thrift, temperance, and self-control. At this time, the possession of material is no longer a basic need of life, but a symbol of status. People living in that kind of society focused on materials rather than spirit and believed deeply that money was the source of happiness. That kind of society is called consumer culture society. Dreiser was influenced by consumer culture and we can see the obvious features of consumer culture in his works.

In the era of consumerism, people's pursuit of the American dream was also full of consumerism. In the materialistic social atmosphere, people fanatically pursued the distorted American dream in their hearts. However, young people whose social moral system was still in the initial formation stage were easily affected by new social trends, and many young people understood the American dream as material wealth and pleasure. In the social background of the late 19th century and the early 20th century, the American industry was extremely developed, and the modern United States rose rapidly. In the face of the sudden great contrast, the deep-rooted tradition of ideological belief and the flood of ideas under the New American movement, it was increasingly unable to explain and evaluate the performance of the existing state of society, especially the young generation was still fragile and unstable social moral value system suddenly collapsed in the tide of highly inflated economy (Kong 48).

Consumer culture is involved in many aspects such as history, psychology and economics. According to Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang (1995), consumer culture has at least five distinct connotations. They pointed out that it is a moral doctrine, a means for demarcating social status, a vehicle for economic development, a public policy, and a social movement (Yiannis 126). Consumer culture is defined here as the collection of behaviors, attitudes, and values that are associated with the consumption of material goods. Consumer culture not only affects the way of social life, but also has an important impact on literature.

The influence of consumer culture is very deep, and we can see the huge influence of consumer culture on society and human beings. At the beginning of twentieth century, American people were facing a transitional period. The whole society was filled by many kinds of products including beautiful clothes and jewels, so people bought them, exchanged them, fought for them and worked for them. Gradually, people wanted to get them not for need but for amusement and enjoyment, so people admitted this kind of form and thus the quantities of possessions of wealth became the symbol of social status. People living in this kind of society were all longing for wealth and lived for wealth. The society was both hopeful and hopeless because the social environment determined people's fates and shaped people's characteristics and constrained people's behaviors, so people couldn't control their fates. That was why Carrie couldn't feel happy after she got wealth. Dreiser was also influenced deeply by consumer culture. He grew up in a poor family and experienced realistic life of America. As a reporter, he learned about Herbert Spencer, who helped him a lot in understanding the true lives of the poor. Influenced by both Spencer's theory and experiences of his life, he wanted to represent the true life of America to people. So, in his essays and novels, there were a lot of truth and we can find many traces of consumer culture from his works.

2. The Embodiment of Consumerism in *Sister Carrie*

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is a famous American novel in the 20th century that reflects the ups and downs of people in the modern urban commercialization society. Carrie, a clever and simple country girl, came to the big city Chicago alone with dreams and aspirations, and went through hardships and various torments from the bottom of society to become a popular star. This process can reflect the consumerism culture of material consumption, emotional consumption and physical consumption in the American commercialized society at that time.

2.1 Material Consumption

Eighteen-year-old Carrie leaves home and comes to Chicago in search of happiness. When she was looking for a job in a shop she realized in a dim way how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart (Dreiser 52). From the material point of view, clothing and housing are two aspects of her desire to be satisfied, and they are also symbols of identity and status.

It was not long before Sister Carrie met Drouet's friend Hurstwood, the manager of the hotel, for the first time. The hotel manager was dressed in a very elegant new suit of elegant material, and was very fashionable and personable. In the course of the next contact Hurstwood had an indefinable attraction for her, and Sister Carrie instinctively felt that he was superior to Drouet, whom she had a lower and lower opinion of. From this comparison in dress, Sister Carrie judged the difference in social status between the two. As Bourdieu believes, people's cultural practices in daily consumption, from food, clothing, body to appreciation of music, painting, literature, etc., all express and prove the position and rank of actors in society (Luo 32). The balance led Sister Carrie to choose to elope with Hurstwood.

On the other hand, housing is also an embodiment of consumerism.

Carrie came to her sister's house after coming from the country to Chicago. When she saw that the walls of her sister's apartment were papered with paper, she realized that they were having a hard time and did not want Drouet to come and see her. Drouet then rented three furnished rooms for her, and she began to live in a relative wealth life. But she goes where the strong desire leads (Dreiser 79). When Carrie and her neighbor went for a ride, they saw the mansions in the rich people's quarters and were envious. And when she compared it to the house she lived in, she felt it paled in comparison and could not get inner satisfaction. Desire drove her into Hurstwood's arms and into a house where her status was more evident. At last, when Sister Carrie became the most popular celebrity, she took it for granted to live in the hotel suite that marked her status and position.

The extreme expansion of Carrie's desire causes her to become obsessed with material wealth and eventually lose herself in it.

2.2 Emotional Consumption

In this profligate consumer society, when people get used to throwing away disposable goods, it means that they can throw away inherent values, inherent lifestyles and stable relationships (Xu 340). Money and profit become the criteria for interpersonal relationships. The society was filled with the ideology of money worship, and people were obsessed with and dependent on material and wealth. People's life without personal real feelings and will, everything has become consumption. In *Sister Carrie*, the relationship between people was naked money and interests, and there was no real emotion at all.

The two heroes of the novel, Hurstwood and Drouet, had been good friends. After meeting Carrie, Hurstwood wondered where Drouet had found such a beautiful woman, and from time to time invited them to the theatre.

While Drouet was away on business, Hurstwood kept seeing each other under the guise of taking care of Carrie's sister. At first, he used silence to win the confidence of his friend, then gradually he took Carrie away from Drouet and tempted her to elope with him. This shows that in Hurstwood's opinion, friendship can be betrayed in the face of interests and money.

When Carrie first came to Chicago to find a job, she started from the bottom job, and her brother-in-law only cared that her salary would increase the family income. When she fell ill and lost her job, her brother-in-law found it a burden to keep her here. This forced Carrie to leave the house. And her sister's anxiety about her disappearance was not out of sadness or worry. The kinship became cold here, and the snobbery of the brother-in-law and the coldness of the sister hastened the process of Carrie's coming to Drouet. The other family, the Hurstwood and his wife, were not in harmony, and lacked tolerance, care, and love. Hurstwood, feeling no warmth at all, turned his eyes to Carrie, with whom he eloped to New York. In this society where money and interests come first, there is no kinship at all.

When Drouet first handed her the money, Carrie felt the emotional bond between them. It was in fact an illusion. Drouet did not really love her; she was just another prey for the playboy. In fact, Carrie did not love Drouet too. When the richer Hurstwood appeared, Carrie chose him. Although Hurstwood had a wife and had no intention of actually marrying her, she decided to elope with him. After the two eloped to New York, Hurstwood's career plummeted, lost his property and social status, and became a worthless pauper from the upper class, affecting Carrie to have a more privileged life, she resolutely chose to leave. These two loves can be said to get what they need. Hurstwood and Drouet proved and showed off their spending power by possessing beautiful women. Carrie had used the so-called love in exchange for the material life and security she wanted, and mercilessly abandoned it when she did not need it or could not satisfy her own desires (Chen 83). This kind of love is only in the name of love, under the guise of love, the so-called love is just a lie.

2.3 Physical Consumption

Consumption culture not only directly affects people's way of life, but also makes the whole modern culture drift to the hedonic culture. So, play and sex become the content of this hedonistic culture. Therefore, it is easier for women in consumer society to obtain survival security by consuming their beauty or by selling their bodies. It was with beauty and melancholy that Carrie lived with Drouet and then Hurstwood. Coming to Chicago for the first time, the simple and simple Sister Carrie just wanted to live a little better than before. But with trouble and illness, "she left the countryside and saw herself thrown into the chaos of Chicago. She can be promoted, can get luxury clothes and luxury enjoyment, can do what she likes, can show her feelings. But this can only be achieved through a sinful path (Jiang 143). She began accepting \$20 from Drouet, and then reluctantly became his live-in girlfriend to ensure that she would remain in the big city. And when Hurstwood was able to lead her on a more respectable path to a higher life, she became Hurstwood's consumer goods instead. By selling her body as a commodity, Carrie gained a rise in class and a good life. In the bustling city, Carrie gradually lost herself, she put her desire for material life on the man. In the end, she attached herself to men with money and status at the cost of her body and became one of the consumer goods of men.

3. Changes in Carrie's View of Consumption

At the end of this novel, Ames says that the world is full of desirable situations, but, unfortunately, we can occupy but one at a time. It doesn't do us any good to wring our hands over the far-off things (Dreiser 1108). Carrie's whole life is a quest for consumption, and she craves the material pleasures it brings her. She chooses between men and richer men, and she relies on her beauty to eventually gain great wealth. In Carrie's pursuit of consumption, her consumerism goes through stages of awakening, expansion, and ultimately disillusionment.

3.1 The Awakening of Consumption Consciousness

Carrie boarded a train to Chicago because she longed for the bustling life of the big city. While on the train, Carrie's mind was filled with dreams of material things. She met Drouet, a salesman on the train, and it was this salesman's description of the city that built in Carrie's mind a Chicago full of temptation and material possessions. The salesman's bulging wallet, his shiny shoes, and brand-new clothes made Carrie long for city life. A picture of rich city life has been vaguely constructed in her mind.

Carrie was looking for work in a department store and saw all kinds of fine ornaments. By this time Carrie had realized that each ornament appealed to her greatly, the elaborate slippers and stockings, the beautifully ruffled blouses and petticoats, the hairbrushes, the purses, all of which aroused her personal desires. She could not help being jealous in her heart. She was dimly aware of the many fascinating mysteries of the big city-wealth, fashion, ease, and women's dress in all its variety. Her heart was filled with a desire to dress and look beautiful. By this time, Carrie has begun to realize that the amount of goods one owns is indicative of one's social status. The sparkle of a buckle, the hue of a jewel, the faintest color of a rippled silk can indicate a person's status.

After Carrie's repeated failures to find a job, she was desperate and decided to return home to the countryside, when she met Drouet, who has flirted with her on the train. This is a turning point in Carrie's life. Carrie must make an agonizing choice between returning to the countryside and staying in the city. When Drouet offered to move in with her, she can't resist the material temptation and falls into his arms. He invited her to dine at the Grand Hotel, bought her new clothes, took her to the theater, and promised that they will have a new car. Carrie began to wander back and forth between the dazzling displays at the mall. She stopped for a moment at the heels of each gorgeous garment, whereas on the last occasion she had hurried past without looking. Her woman's heart was already burning with the desire to possess it all (Pei 28).

While she was shopping for clothes in the department store, "Carrie turn herself back and forth in front of the mirror, and can not help but look at her own figure with great pleasure. Her cheeks are immediately red (Dreiser 174)." She also used the money he gave her to buy some piecemeal cosmetics. Until the end Carrie looked utterly different. At this time, Carrie's consciousness of consumption gradually grew, and consumption brought her not only material satisfaction, but also satisfaction for her vanity. She felt that she looked completely different when she put on the new clothes. Consumption immediately distinguished Carrie from the women who had previously worked together in the shoe-factory. Carrie gave this distinction a consumptive significance. In her opinion, commodity consumption can bring her identity, and her consumption consciousness was thus awakened.

3.2 The Expansion of Consumption Desire

While in New York, Hurstwood invests in a bar in partnership with a local businessman. At the same time, Carrie meets several luxurious and expansive neighbors and sees the extreme luxury of life in the metropolis. Hurstwood falls into decline, returning most of the money he stole, losing his business, losing his job, and becoming more and more lazy. Even when Hurstwood's business was booming, Sister Carrie felt that he no longer had the grace and talent he had in New York City, where the rich abounded. The novelty of her surroundings had worn off, and the apartment house, comfortable as it was, was no longer remarkable: the great city of New York had lost its charm for her. At this point Hurstwood is no longer able to maintain her luxurious lifestyle, so Carrie decides to leave him.

The rich and attentive Hurstwood was once Carrie's ideal object of desire, but when he was poor and downtrodden, he was in fact no different from the vulgar workers in the factory, and living a hard life with the destitute Hurstwood naturally could not support her consumer consciousness of creating herself and building her identity through purchasing and consumption. The resulting resentment and dissatisfaction build up inside

her, and she realizes that she is not dressed well enough - not nearly as well as her fancy-dressed neighbors. Carrie felt she needed to add some nice clothes to match her fashionable neighbor. Nowadays, whoever sees the two of them favors their neighbor because of her style of dress. At this point, Carrie gives her own pleasure and distress by giving her merchandise a unique symbolic meaning according to her own wishes.

Her concept of consumption reflects the evolution of consumer culture in the United States in the twentieth century, that is, the amount of goods people own represents their status in society, and people's status can be determined by the ability to buy goods. That is to say, according to the guidance of consumer ideology, consumers can create themselves and construct their identities through the goods they choose. Personal identity is largely determined by what distinguishes a person from others. In the dazzling and colorful world of commodities, choosing commodities that are different from others can easily show one's difference and thus one's identity. Hurstwood's poverty and destitution make Carrie lag behind others in consumption level, which causes the decline of her social status and her identity, and supports the destruction of her inner sense of self-superiority, all of which contributes to the inevitability of her leaving Hurstwood. In the end, when Hurstwood can no longer provide for her, she once again begins to run for her livelihood, and at this time she is very much like the first time she came to Chicago when she was worried about her life, the difference is that in the past she failed, and now she succeeds; the difference is that in the past a limited number of items can easily satisfy her, but now with the formation of her ideal self, with the step by step towards the pinnacle of the career, her desires have become infinite.

3.3 The Disillusionment of Consumption

In the final chapter of the novel, Hurstwood commits suicide in a cheap hotel, while Carrie sits in her rocking chair, looking out the window and dreaming of finer luxuries. At the end of the novel, the narrator of the story says this to Carrie: "In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel (Dreiser 1151)." She felt immensely alone, as if she had been desperately, isolatedly fighting for her life. At the moment, her whole body and mind were too agitated to be quiet. She had become the melancholy Carrie of old, the Carrie of lust, the Carrie who always felt unsatisfied. Why did Carrie, who was so successful and well-fed, feel lonely, despairing, and unsatisfied? Why does Carrie, who has already gained great wealth, still have a fate as uncertain as a rocking chair? Dreiser does not seem to answer this question directly. But in relation to the context of the times, one can easily find that it is attributed to the sense of disillusionment brought by the consumer culture of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Consumption has brought people not the material satisfaction of the past, but the satisfaction of their vanity, and people have become shopping for the sake of shopping. What people buy is not only the object itself, but the illusion it symbolizes. Consumerism has made it impossible for people to think any longer about the meaning of life and living, about the highest values of the world: truth, goodness, virtue and knowledge, and to have that peace and contentment. For at this point the meaning of leisure has been distorted by an ever-expanding commercial and consumer culture. The historical sense of freedom for leisure has given way to a consumer culture; leisure is no longer used for personal growth and spiritual rest. In addition, by emphasizing indulgence, people become devoid of self-control and a sense of service. The advertisements and propaganda of the consumer society attempt to incite desire and convince us that buying something will fulfill that desire. And as a society, we should not follow our desires completely; the consequences would be unimaginable. Carrie, overlooking the Broadway street scene and talking to Lola, says "I don't know how I feel alone. Where am I going to go? (Dreiser 1150)" And it is Carrie's feeling of disillusionment with consumption that leads to this sentiment.

4. Conclusion

Driven by consumerism, Carrie gradually realizes the materialistic success of her American dream, but her spirit is nihilistic. Her consumption is to prove her social status and identity, as well as the prestige and honor that comes with that status. The purpose of her consumption is no longer to meet the actual needs, but to constantly pursue the satisfaction of desire. It is precisely for her personal desire that Sister Carrie completes her illusory satisfaction through various kinds of consumption again and again. It can be said that she is a leader in the consumer society and a loyal supporter of consumer culture, but she eventually falls victim to consumerism. Strong consumer desire guides the direction of her life, and to some extent determines her final fate: she can only sit in the rocking chair in loneliness and desolation looking forward to the illusory happiness. Blind consumerism will only lead to disillusionment.

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