

The Mystique of Carrie's Desire

A Lacanian Reading of *Sister Carrie*

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Abstract—Ever since the publication of Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie*, the mystique of Carrie's desire has been the center of critical debate. This thesis aims to provide a Lacanian reading of *Sister Carrie*, and argues that the dual images of Carrie as subject of desire and object of desire have caused the controversial readings of her desire.

Keywords—*Sister Carrie*; Jacques Lacan; desire

I. INTRODUCTION

Theodore Dreiser is one of the most influential writers in America during the twentieth century. His first novel *Sister Carrie* has been regarded as a naturalistic masterpiece. Since its publication, however, *Sister Carrie* has attracted controversial critical attention. It was accused to be immoral by conventional-minded readers and critics at home, while its subversion of the genteel tradition was applauded by European critics and American writers such as Frank Norris and H. L. Mencken. Generations of critics have held controversial views towards philosophy, style and characters of this novel, and the mystique of Carrie's desire has always been the center of critical debate.

For early critics, Carrie's desire seemed shadowy and perplexing. Some of them tended to read Carrie as an immoral social climber and gold-digger, while others held that Carrie was an essentially innocent and good-natured country-girl misled by the wiles of the big cities. Due to the influence of feminist theory developed over the past century, some critics have come to view Carrie as a new woman who is daring enough to challenge the convention. Other critics, however, insist that Carrie is portrayed as a passive, inarticulate and unintelligent woman, and her image reflects the misogyny of both Dreiser and the patriarchal world.

To analyze the mystique of Carrie's desire, the thesis will apply the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan to explore the dual images of Carrie as subject of desire and object of desire, discuss Dreiser's ambivalent attitude towards his first heroine, and point out the underlying cultural and psychological reasons that leads to generations of critics' controversial readings.

II. FORMATION OF A SUBJECT

Jacques Lacan (1901-81) is undoubtedly one of the most prominent figures in the field of psychoanalysis after Sigmund Freud. Though deeply controversial in thought and difficult in style, Lacan's works have transformed psychoanalysis and his ideas have profoundly influenced literary and film studies, women's studies, social theory and many other diverse fields. Unlike other analysts who tend to downplay the underlying presence of the repressed, unconscious and desire in our mental lives, Lacan declared the necessity of a "return to Freud". According to Lacan, before a person enters the symbolic order and becomes a desiring subject, he or she has to pass two significant phases of human development. One is the mirror stage in the imaginary order, and the other is symbolic castration signifying a subject's entry into the symbolic order.

A. Mirror Stage

The mirror phase occurs roughly between the age of 6 months and the age of 18 months, during which the infant begins to recognize his or her image in the mirror. Though the infant still has to depend on others for survival and can not control bodily movements, he or she feels this image in the mirror can be governed. The sense of completeness and mastery forms a sharp contrast to the feelings of fragmentation the infant experiences previously and gives the infant immense pleasure. Nevertheless, the image is acquired at the price of confusing the real self with the mirror image.

B. Symbolic Castration

Throughout the 1950s, Lacan was concerned with his theory of symbolic order under the influence of structuralism and Saussure's linguistic sign. Human beings are born into language which profoundly shapes their consciousness. To be fully human we are subjected to the symbolic order, the order of language and discourse. Lacan's reformulation of Freud's central concept, the Oedipus complex, is essential for our understanding of the formation of a subject of desire. Unlike Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex which is largely biological, Lacan treated it as the primary structure

which defined our symbolic and unconscious relations. The Oedipus complex represents a triangular structure that breaks the binary relationship established between the mother and child in the imaginary order and marks the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic. "The Oedipus complex is essential for the human being to be able to accede to a humanized structure of the real, [...] the Oedipus complex has to have been lived through." [1]

Through the Oedipus complex, the child realizes that the (m) other's desire is directed elsewhere. The simple dyadic relationship between the mother and child is thus intervened by a third term and turned into a triangular relationship between the child, the mother and the object of her desire. Lacan calls this third term the imaginary phallus. The Oedipus complex, for Lacan, is the process for a child to give up the identification with this imaginary phallus, and recognize that it is a signifier instead of an actual object they assume can satisfy mother's desire.

The child comes to realize the father is one who possesses the phallus which can satisfy the mother's desire. Therefore, they substitute their desire of the mother for desire of the Name-of-the-Father. Through this substitution, child enters the symbolic order as a subject of lack, or a subject of desire. In order to represent this lack the subject has two possible alternatives: "having" or "being" the phallus. While Masculinity involves the pretence of having the phallus, femininity involves the masquerade of being the phallus.

C. Desire

Desire is a key concept in Lacan's theory. Lacan has stated the difference between need, demand and desire. Need, which is essentially a biological instinct, can be satisfied. Demand is the linguistic translation of a need, while desire is what remains when need is taken from demand. People may feel they want some actual objects, but their desire in fact lays elsewhere. Since phallus, the ultimate desired object, is forever veiled, a subject's desire can never be satisfied by any thing exclusively. Therefore, a subject is destined to be trapped in endless pursuit of potentially gratifying objects. Lacan also notices the impact of culture on a subject's choice of desired objects as he points out that desire is always the desire of the other. Ultimately, desire of a subject is manipulated by the discourses.

III. CARRIE AS SUBJECT OF DESIRE

Through the Oedipus complex, boys come to identify mother's object of desire with the father whom they assume has the phallus. Therefore, boys pretend to have the object of desire for the Other. The phallus is considered by Lacan as the single privileged signifier in the symbolic order, which is, however, always remains veiled and out of reach. The phallus is the ultimate object of desire that drives the process of symbolization. Since it is forever veiled and out of reach, desire of the subjects can never really be satisfied, and desiring subjects are thus plagued by the anxiety that their jouissance is never enough. The sense that there is always something wanted is what Lacan calls phallic jouissance

which defines the masculine structure. Though Lacan's own postulate on female subjectivity is ambivalent, and interpretation of his theory might remain controversial, Carrie Meeber, the enigmatic heroine in Theodore Dreiser's first novel, fits perfectly well into the development of Lacan's subject of desire.

A. Psychological Root of Carrie's Insatiable Desire

What distinguishes Carrie from other female characters in the literary history is undoubtedly her insatiable desire. Unlike her fictional sisters who only care for beautiful dresses, luxurious life style, admirable social status and above all, an ideal husband or lover, things assumed that can satisfy a woman's vanity, Carrie is caught in endless longings vaguely for "something better", something promises happiness, but is forever elusive. Carrie's longings for something more not only cast a mysterious light on her, but are also deemed "the closest thing to grace in the Dreiser theology". [2]

Generations of critics have debated over the nature of Carrie's longings, and the most popular understanding of them is in the sense of her material want generated either by the capitalistic order, male gaze or the spirit of the individualistic culture. Unlike most critics who interpreted Carrie's longings through sociological perspective, Thomas P. Riggio's offered a psychological reading of Carrie's acute sense of lack which is closest to my argument here. For Riggio, Carrie's longings are determined by her preexisting state of mind, her "melancholia". After meticulous examination of Carrie's moods throughout the novel, Riggio argues: "Like her creator in 1900, Carrie is pre-Freudian, and her motives remain something of a mystery to her." [3] I agree with Thomas in the sense that Carrie's, as well as Dreiser's longings, pursuits and eventual disillusion are psychologically-rooted rather than determined by some particular social order. Carrie might be more sensitive to her sense of lack than others, however, Carrie or her creator is no more pre-Freudian than other subjects of desire who futilely chase after the veiled phallus, which they assume can cover the primal loss and restore them the sense of wholeness. Carrie's "melancholia" is therefore the essential human condition characterizes the masculine structure and the futility of phallic jouissance in the symbolic order.

B. Carrie's Futile Pursuit of Phallic Desires

The novel starts "when Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago, her total outfit consisted of a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse, [...] and four dollars in money." [4] Unsatisfied with her fate in her small Mid-west hometown, Carrie sets out to try her luck in the big cities vaguely for "something better". At the end of the novel, Carrie, sitting on the rocking chair in a luxurious hotel suite in New York, has attained her original desires. Theodore Dreiser, sure enough, has never read Lacan, but his understanding of the futility of human desire has been echoed and analyzed by Lacan who established himself as one of the foremost psychoanalytic theorists half a century later. Having become a subject of desire, Carrie enters the

symbolic order and the endless chain of signification in pursuit of the veiled phallus, the primal happiness and fulfillment she can never obtain. During this process, she has been exposed to three radically different discourses coexisting in her time, though varying in influences.

The first discourse is the so called Horatio Alger Myth. After Carrie has arrived Chicago, life of the Hansons in their gloomy flat serves as the first blow to Carrie's dream of a better life in the city. Acting as the first father figure in Carrie's adventure in the city, Mr. Hanson is apparently created by Dreiser as the hero of the popular Horatio Alger stories which have profoundly influenced the writer himself at an early age, who has learned that "industry, frugality, and saving the boss's daughter from a runaway horse were the routes to modest prosperity." [5] Disillusioned by the cruel social reality which ruthlessly defied the myth of such legendary success stories, Dreiser treats Mr. Hanson mockingly as the figure who embodies the puritanical tradition which has long been emptied its moral core. Religious piety of former idealists has been replaced by zealous worship of bitch-Goddess of money, and such virtues praised and promoted by Benjamin Franklin which had given hope and strength to generations of Americans have become dark, dull and dreary traits of the Hansons in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and were further bitterly satirized by Fitzgerald, an admirer of Dreiser, in his influence work *The Great Gatsby*.

Carrie soon finds out that the Hansons' way of living, which is both emotionally suffocating and materially strait, has nothing for her to desire. According to Cather Jurca's observation, the commercial origins of both the Hansons' meager flat and later Hurstwood's much more affluent apartment suggest the emotional detachment of their inhabitants. [6] Sensitive to affectional atmospheres, Carrie immediately feels that she can not rely on the Hansons for either emotional support or material comfort.

If Carrie's original desire to lead a decent life by honest labor is firstly mocked by the Hansons' indifference, her job searching and dehumanized working condition provides her no salvation. No matter how honest and virtuous she is, poor and shabby in appearance, Carrie is simply invisible in the city which values only wealth, fashion, and ease. Her short stay in the factory has profoundly subverted the plot of the popular "working girl" romances in which the "sentimentalists show poor but honest farm girls and working girls discovered by upper-class lovers and rescued from their poverty." [7] Besides the nauseating mechanical movement which inflicts physical pains, her male coworker's lustful eyes and uncouth propositions, as well as her female companions vulgarity and coarseness add to her sense of shame and unworthiness. It seems that at best she can find a husband like Mr. Hanson in such an environment and settle down into a dull and insipid life of "hard work and no play" like her elder sister Minnie. Nevertheless, even this chance of a proper marriage and virtuous life has been deprived by an unexpected cold which leaves her jobless and penniless. Ironically, it is Drouet the good-hearted but irresponsible salesman who rescues Carrie out of the plight, and her fall has led to her later rise.

The second discourse is the rampant materialism. For many critics, the strength of the novel lies in Dreiser's vivid and profound portrait of a world obsessed with material, which is inseparable from the writer's own experience. Having grown up in an impoverished family marginalized by the community, young Dreiser was sensitive to both the acute material want of his own family and the gaze of better-off neighbors. Like Carrie, the coldness of winter and the sight of poverty always managed to fill the little boy with oppressive dread. [8] Though Dreiser ironically states at the beginning of the novel that "to be sure there was always the next station, where one might descend and return." [9] Carrie's journey to the city (the symbolic order) is actually of no return. Seduction of the big city begins the very moment Drouet, personification of the raw force of nascent materialism, whispers to her ear. In Chicago, Carrie continues to see, hear and then imitate the language of consumer capitalism. Even during her despairing job-hunting, she can not help stopping at a department stop and having a look at each individual bit of finery, the earrings, the bracelets, the pins, the chains, and above all the jackets, and her heart is warmed with desire for them. Being an "apt student of fortune's ways", Carrie then starts imitating the art of woman under the guidance of Drouet and Mrs. Hale, and later Mrs. Vance in New York. Through close observation and arduous practice, she soon masters the art of woman. When Carrie magically rises to stardom in New York, her blazing life-size billboard image announces that she has eventually become the master of "fortune's ways" and is able to kindle desires in others.

In her endless pursuit of material comforts, Carrie's desire has never really been satisfied. When she meets Drouet at her most desperate moment, the radiant drummer's generosity and good humor immediately warms "the cockles of her heart". Warmth emanated from Drouet, embodiment of material wealth, forms a sharp contrast to the coldness of winter implying poverty, fear and death. In the famous restaurant scene in which Carrie is eventually seduced by the two soft, green, handsome ten-dollar bills, Dreiser gives an elaborate picture of how Carrie's desire is aroused by the language behind the sumptuous meal which satisfies not only her physical hunger. The same scene is nearly duplicated later in a much better restaurant Sherry's in New York. Though comfortably settled in a pretty little flat with Hurstwood, Carrie nevertheless feels inferior at the sight of greater wealth displayed by her neighbors and the rich who spend money like water. The lights and reflection of their glow seem to have created a dreamy atmosphere, which gives Carrie the illusion that she has eventually been admitted within the land of eternal happiness. Like her experience with Drouet in Chicago, however, this feeling of satisfaction and wonder is just transient. Carrie soon feels she remains the outsider of the privileged circle. After the dinner is over, she has to go back to her little flat, sit on the rocking chair and keep on longing. After her fabulous success at Broadway, Carrie seems to have come ever closer to her dreamed happiness. Her pay is raised to one hundred and fifty dollars. A luxurious hotel suite is offered to her at moderate rate and even a millionaire proposes to her. Carrie's intoxication with her hardly won success does not

last long. Soon she realizes the gap between reality and her dream. To recover the feeling of wholeness, to enjoy the absolute phallic jouissance, she needs more money. Happiness is just elusive behind her successive objects of desire in the form of material.

The third discourse that has influenced Carrie is idealism. Though having been lured by materialism, Carrie's embrace of it is not absolute. Ames, supposedly based on Thomas Edison, the renowned inventor in Dreiser's time, has been a focus of critical attention though he appears only briefly at the end of the novel. Most critics read him as the writer's opposition to the rampant materialism; some regarded him as Carrie's, or even the degenerating capitalistic world's spiritual leader and savior; still a group of others found his widely praised superiority dubious. They jeered that Ames could only preach to Carrie the true meaning of happiness after "the supply of food warmed up his sympathies." [10] Nevertheless, they all pointed out that Ames had shown Carrie something beyond the glitter of worldly success. Ames is so different from people in Carrie's circle that in their first meeting Carrie immediately feels this man is not only far ahead of her, but also wiser than Hurstwood, and saner and brighter than Drouet. Then Carrie realizes the inferiority of her pursuits. The detached young scientist symbolizes a purer sort of light, and therefore, a higher order that has outshined both the warmth of Drouet and the radiance of Hurstwood. In their later meetings, Ames becomes more enthusiastic in forwarding his advice concerning Carrie and her career. Though he has succeeded in "[stirring] her up" emotionally by commenting on the insatiable longings of Carrie betrayed by her facial features, the sort of longings Carrie always feels but is never able to articulate, he fails to communicate with her intellectually and the effect of his words is like "roiling helpless waters", which leaves Carrie troubling over it in her rocking chair for days. Though aspiring to be a better person who would be approved by Ames, Carrie nevertheless did nothing instead of grieving.

At the end of the novel, in her lush chamber Carrie is reading *Père Goriot* recommended by Ames and has "caught nearly the full sympathetic significance" (if not the philosophic one) of the novel. Ironically, her old lover Hurstwood is on his way to the grave when Carrie's sympathy towards the world is at its strongest, which alludes to both the absurdity of Ames's ideals in face of reality and the impossibility for Carrie to fuse into the eternal light (the wholeness promised by the phallus, which is the intellectual pursuit and altruism embodied by Ames, the third father figure in Carrie's life.)

IV. CARRIE AS OBJECT OF DESIRE

If a woman wants to have a place in the symbolic order, Lacan suggests, she has to "be" the phallus for her lovers in the realm of Demand. Being what the phallus signifies, that is, a substitute for the mother and an object of desire for men, is the only way she can obtain a kind of identity and gain a share in male power. In order to be the object of desire for men, women are forced to live their life as a masquerade, and what the patriarchal society assumes to be natural

"feminine" behaviors are merely male fantasies. Though Dreiser consciously or unconsciously modeled Carrie on his own desires and frustration, and created her as a desiring subject, he clearly understood that Carrie was a woman, whose pattern of success was destined to be quite different from that of men at his time. In fact, Dreiser was keenly aware of the role Carrie's femininity, which was favored by the patriarchal world, played in her magic rise. From a plain-dressed, artless country girl to a much adored beautiful Broadway actress, Carrie's development as a subject is ironically coupled with her evolution as a "real woman" in the patriarchal world's esteem.

A. *The Making of a Lady*

When Carrie boards a Chicago-bound train to begin her adventures, she is still an artless country girl. Carrie at this stage is not only crude in appearance, but also in her manners. In face of Charles Drouet's bold advancement, she does show some suspicion, but her "maidenly reserve" soon gives way to the drummer's display of wealth. Lawrence E. Hussman's study of *Sister Carrie* in context can help us to fully grasp Carrie's deviation from proper behavior required of a late Victorian young woman. According to advice books in the Victorian period, while encountering a forward man like Drouet, a virtuous young woman should "have an instinct — God's word in your own souls — that tells you when a man takes the first wrong steps toward you; and if you do not repel that step [...], do you suppose that anything I could say to you would do you any good?"[11] Instead of listening to the "God's words" of her culture, Carrie has only her instinct of self-protection to guard her. Carrie not only looks Drouet in the eyes steadily, she even takes the initiative to write him a letter. Carrie's inexperience undoubtedly gives Drouet full confidence in his seduction, while lowers his estimation for this daring, awkward country girl. Considering her an easy prey, Drouet doesn't answer Carrie's letter and lays aside all thoughts of her for the time being. In his later chat with Hurstwood in Chicago, he frivolously refers to Carrie as "a little peach" as well as "a little dandy". If it is not for the accidental meeting in the street, Drouet will soon forget his little flirtation with Carrie the pretty country girl on the train.

During her frustrating job searching in Chicago, Carrie notices the differences between herself and the fine ladies who form a mirror in which she sees her individual shortcomings of dress and that shadow of manner. Carrie's education of femininity formally starts under the hearty guidance of Drouet, who represents the omnipresent male gaze of the patriarchal world. Carrie comes to understand the significance of appearance to a woman. To secure Drouet's favor, she longs to be what he desires, and Drouet, the vulgar drummer, desires nothing but the physical charms of women. When Carrie understands the little tricks of women, the masquerade of femininity can captivate Drouet who saves her out of her plight and offers her a rather comfortable existence, Carrie soon gathers the logic of it and tries hard to imitate the affectations of women Drouet admires. Though Carrie's masquerade, at its initial stage, has won her admiration from Drouet and even attracts attention of

Hurstwood, the prominent manager, she secretly doubts and rebels at her heart. Having realized she is but just one of Drouet's objects of desire, Carrie sees Drouet's weakness. Being naturally more sensitive than Drouet, Carrie feels Drouet can not be sympathetic with her. She understands that she is nothing but a plaything for Drouet.

B. The Lure of Feminine Virtues

If Drouet only cares for Carrie's sexuality and physical charms, Hurstwood is touched by some mysterious elements in Carrie that shine under her masquerade as a graceful and fashionable lady of the world.

The first thing in Carrie that touches Hurstwood is her natural sweetness. Besides dress and manner refined under the guidance of Drouet which make her pretty and graceful, it is Carrie's timidity born of uncertainty and something childlike in her large eyes which captures the fancy of Hurstwood. Carrie's freshness and youth has rekindled Hurstwood's primitive longing for nature and secretly reminds him what he has long lost in the symbolic order. For a man who has been deeply immersed in the rational world and come to be the personification of its law, Carrie's rustic appeal seems irresistible. Carrie's charm to Hurstwood can be seen in many natural images Theodore uses to portray Carrie's beauty in the eye of Hurstwood. Presence of Carrie makes Hurstwood feel "the bloom and the youth. He picked her as he would the fresh fruit of a tree. He felt as fresh in her presence as one who is taken out of the flash of summer to the first cool breath of spring." [12]

It is by no means accidental that Hurstwood so frequently compares Carrie's mystic charm to the beauty of nature, for "the ideal of Nature is so deeply engrained in Western culture and its language as a feminine agent with volition and purpose." [13] Maternal nature is a dominant trope in western civilization. Due to their special control over reproduction and secondary status in society, women in myths, folklores and literature have always been associated with nature, material and the irrational, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture, reason and the abstract. Both woman and nature are desired objects to be conquered, governed and exploited by the male-centered world, and the beauty of woman, like the beauty of nature, provides the perfect resort for men when they are exhausted by the worldly affairs. Hurstwood's own aspiring wife and vain daughter, who have whole-heartedly identified with the material culture and even become the conspirators of the law which Hurstwood unconsciously finds so suffocating, prove inadequate to comfort him like Carrie does.

If Carrie's wholesome rural innocence and natural sweetness has rendered her a nurturing mother for Hurstwood, who has been dried up by culture and urban existence, her seemingly passivity, docility and tenderness, virtues attributed to women in the western civilization, which forms a sharp contrast to Mrs. Hurstwood's aggressiveness, self-assurance and independence Hurstwood finds increasingly intolerable, further secures Hurstwood's affection. Appearing as a docile daughter in need of protection, Carrie has made herself more desirable by

making Hurstwood feel stronger, wiser and more powerful. The nineteenth century witnessed the first wave of the women's rights movement. Women on both sides of the Atlantic were challenging the foundations of a patriarchal society. Questioning or even attacking the role assigned to women by patriarchal culture, Victorian domestic angels were turning to "woman red in tooth and claw". Pestered and appalled by his wife's increasing indolence and self-automation as well as his daughter's coldness and rebellion at home, Hurstwood finds Carrie a perfect combination of ideal mother and daughter. Resembling Virgin Mary, the ultimate desired woman in the collective unconscious of men, Carrie's femininity acquired a religious luster which makes her extremely desirable and fuels Hurstwood's passion until it was no longer colored with reason. If Carrie is immediately accessible to Hurstwood, that moment of passion may soon pass with his union with Carrie the real woman. Hurstwood's social status and the force of convention, however, prevents him from approaching Carrie the desired object, and therefore enables Carrie to be "the Lady" in the courtly love, the impossibly idealized woman image, whom Hurstwood can only break the Law to win, and his deviation leads to his eventual destruction.

C. The Appeal of the Inaccessible

Undoubtedly, Carrie's legendary rise in the theatrical world is largely due to chance, which is a key element in Theodore's naturalistic philosophy. If Drouet has not persuaded Carrie to accept the role in the amateur play in Chicago, she might never have discovered her ability to act. If Hurstwood can maintain his role as a male provider in New York, Carrie will not be forced to support herself by being a professional actress. Carrie's success, however, is also inseparable from the larger social context. For an uneducated country girl who aspires to secure a place in a big city, Carrie has only her hands or beauty to trade. Having known the hardship of labor in the Chicago shoe factory, and encouraged by her glamorous hit made on stage, Carrie is convinced that the flourishing entertainment industry at her time is the better way out. On this new "stage" of her life, however, her survival and success is decided by whether she can appeal to the collective fantasy of the patriarchal audience instead of individual patrons like Drouet or Hurstwood.

Interestingly enough, Carrie's rise in the theatrical world in New York duplicates her economic rise in Chicago. Carrie starts her career at the bottom of the ladder as a chorus girl, and she is lucky enough to be accepted. Carrie soon finds the pay is meager. After having seen the leading ladies and gentlemen, she realizes that she is nothing at all comparing with them. How Carrie, as a chorus girl, manages to win the favor of the audience has attracted much critical attention. There is no denying that both chance and her own efforts have played a part in bringing in her success, but it is her femininity and sexual appeal subtly conveyed by her unique disposition, has distinguished her from the others.

Her later success too, is due to her beauty rather than her talent or spirit. Because Carrie is pretty, her photo has been selected with others to illustrate the announcement. Because

she is very pretty, her photo has been highlighted. In her part of a silent little Quakeress, Carrie conquers the audience even though not a line is assigned to her. Carrie is nothing but a “delicious little morsel” under the male gaze. It is her frowning which the gentlemen love to force away with kisses that has made her “capital”. Carrie’s success has elevated her status as an object of male desire. Her success as the object of desire of the patriarchal world is crowned by her blazing portrait at Broadway. Though Carrie’s image is life-size and seems so true and vivid, the real Carrie disappears behind the radiated fire. Her femininity and most important of all, her absence, has made her the veiled phallus which all men chase after. Dreiser understood and emphasized this irony by paralleling the death of desperate Hurstwood with the most glamorous moment of Carrie’s success. If in Chicago, Hurstwood used to be the light under which Carrie brightens, then in the dark, snowy winter night, the blazing image of Carrie which keeps on inciting desires in others seems to be the cold mockery of Hurstwood’s helpless pose as the wise, strong, omnipotent male figure in his culture.

V. CONCLUSION

Theodore Dreiser the writer’s failure to transcend the cultural and psychological paradigm of the patriarchal world resulted in the “shadowy” Carrie, an awkward combination of a masculine subject of desire and feminine object of desire. Jacques Lacan, the postmodernist psychoanalyst who denied the sense of a unified self and pointed out all meanings and identities based on the meaning of the phallus were false, seemed to have demystified the image of woman, the empty signifier, projection of male lack. His attitude, however, remains ambivalent as his words. Some feel that he acknowledged that women could also have desires and subjectivity just like men, while others accused him of denying women’s entry to the symbolic order and therefore condemning them to silence. In face of the gap both in the text of Dreiser and the social context, generations of critics have got confused and Carrie in their controversial readings, which mirror the ever-changing theories concerning woman’s nature, gets lost.

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