

On the Practical Significance of “Sister Carrie”

Xiaolin Cai

Huanghe Science and Technology College
Zhengzhou, China

Abstract—The novel “Sister Carrie”, was written by Theodore Dreiser, and the story happened in the late 19th century and early 20th, when American was in a great social transformation. From the context of the novel, the social background and the character’s personality, fate all these factors share great similarities with present Chinese social reality. In this paper, we don’t simple interpret the novel from the perspective of moral criticism or new Feminism but from the perspective of existentialism to analyze Carrie’s character, decision-making and her fate. Meanwhile, this thesis will combines the analysis with Chinese present society reality in order to provide some inspirations and references for lots of “Carries” in China.

Keywords—*Sister Carrie; Chinese social reality; Inspiration*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Sister Carrie”, was written by American naturalism novelist Theodore Dreiser, and published in the early 20th century. It mainly described how the country girl Carrie tried to settle in city and how she finally became a famous star through continuous struggles and options. “Sister Carrie” lived in Chicago in the early 20th century, at that time America was in a great transformation. Then America gradually transited from free capitalism to monopoly capitalism. Capitalism developed rapidly. Chicago became a commercial, financial and cultural center. People’s traditional ideology and life style changed drastically. They began to chase political rights, personal fortune so as to realize personal values. Countrymen began to pure into the city. The city Chicago in 1889 had its unique developing environment, attracting countless adventurers to come to, even those of young girls. “The increasing business opportunities here made the city have a great reputation, which is like a giant magnetite, attracting people from all sides rushing to the place”. [1]

At present China is in a great transformation too. With the advancing and developing of industrialization and urbanization, rural people now pouring into cities, including thousands “Sister Carries”. The background of this novel and Chinese present social reality have the same social backgrounds, but different social systems. According to the similar developing order, Chinese “Sister Carries” should have a clear thought about Sister Carrie’s struggles, options, fate. Thus they may have different fates. We can analyze Sister Carrie’s struggles from the following three periods.

II. SETTING FOOT IN CITY

The rapidly development of industrialization and urbanization stimulus people’s change of ideological understanding and social structure. Like others, Sister Carrie was full of fantasies about big cities and hoping to improve her life and fate through her struggle and hard work. Therefore on the second day of her arrival in Chicago, She began to look for a job. Because of lacking of working experience, she was refused time and time again by the employers, but she insisted in her dream that she would stay and lived a better life in the city. So she even accepted a job that was only 4.5dollars a week just in order to stay in city. She fancied that the tiny income could meet her various desires. For her dream, she was brave and patient. Although she was so persistent, she was still tortured by reality. Because of a bad illness, she lost her job, losing the very support of staying in the city. She would not be taken in by her sister’s family for nothing. And she had to face the reality: go back home with dream-broken. At this very moment, she was innocent, naive, looking forward to a better life in big cities. But she wanted to get what she wanted by her diligent work, not by other means or tricks.

At present, the fast development of Chinese industrialization and urbanization makes lots of rural people purring into cities, including lots of women who are Chinese Sister Carries. They all come for their dreams. They want to stay in city like those citizens---have a warm house, a better work, even want to change the life of their whole family. But because of almost most of them lacking of working experience, lowly educated, and getting no degrees, they mostly work in toy, clothing, electrical appliance enterprises, whose places where cost lots of manual labors. Relatively speaking, the working environment they worked is bad, low-paid, unstable and lack of security guarantee. Besides, less city people are willing to do such work. In the late last century, the TV play “WAI LAI MEI”, programmed in Chinese mainland, can reflect the struggling and surviving history of Chinese Sister Carries. In this TV show five rural girls went to city with their dreams like Sister Carrie, but at the end they had five different fates, due to they had made five different choices. They were either married or going back home. The one who can stay in the city paid heavily than others. Of course she must have a strong mind, must knew what she wanted and how to get it, and be self – support, self-respect, independent.

III. DEPENDING ON MAN

Sister Carrie had to leave the city which carried her dream, because of her illness and losing job. But inside, she was extremely unwilling. She loved the city very much and was tempted by its potential chances and countless material pleasures. The streets, lamps, wonderful windows, theaters, dances halls, etc. They had a deadly temptation to her. She didn't want to leave there. While she was entangling, wavering, Drouet appeared. He not only kept her at the city, but also generously took her to the high-class restaurant; bought her new clothes, jewels; gave her pretty and comfortable apartment to live in. At this moment, Carrie needn't to work hard to get what she previously wanted. She couldn't refuse to be a mistress of Drouet because through this way she can get what she didn't have before. But she still wasn't content with this. Furthermore she wanted to be Drouet's wife. She wanted to be a real citizen. But her hope went up in smoke. She was just a part in Drouet's love games. So she easily got through and wanted to find a better man to marry at this time. She didn't want to find a job by her own effort just like before and she didn't want to make a living alone. What she wanted was a rich, handsome and generous man who she could rely on all her life. When the big manager Hurstwood - a richer, gentler man showed up, Carrie threw herself into his arms without any hesitation. Even when she knew that Hurstwood had been married, she still eloped with him to New York. Why Carrie made such choice? On the one hand, she was under the pressure of life circumstances; on the other hand, the surging consumerism tide had a great influence on traditional moral outlook. The industrial development, economic prosperity and abundant offering of materials greatly provoked people's consumption which stressed on deficit spending and consumer-credit. It gradually weakened traditional consumption idea, that is, Managing one's household with industry and thrift. People's consumption level and consumption structure had a great change. They were chasing self-style, being into famous brands, seeking a life of pleasure. Carrie, a country girl who was vain, uneducated but had dreams in her mind, lived in such an acquisitive enjoyment, excessive consumption, materialistic environment. Her changes and choices were self-evident. Meanwhile, social unfairness was also a factor that can't be neglected. It made Carrie feel helpless and empty, which pushed her on the moral brink.

At present, our economy develops fast. People's sense of consumption makes an enormous progress, many country women want to lead a life of pleasure as the downtown people do. On the one hand, they are under the pressure from the city; they admire the higher quality life condition in the city. Many of the women have no technical capabilities, working experience. What they may have are youth and out beauty. To them, the simplest and easiest way to succeed is to rely on men-those of rich and powerful ones. Traditional morality was under serious attack. The idea that "to do well inferior to marry well" is widely accepted. Even those girls who are well-educated also want to get success by exchange something with men. In such a consuming society, anything can be consumed. "Women are eager to get the top grade

goods by selling some parts of their own. "women are the consumer first following by goods." [2]

IV. GETTING RID OF MAN, MOVING TOWARDS TO INDEPENDENCE

Sister Carrie stayed in city with the help of men and led a relatively comfortable life than before. But when she eloped with Hurstwood to New York, their life quality was from bad to worse because of Hurstwood's bankrupt. Carrie couldn't bear the wandering life and be in poverty again. She hoped her life was going to be better and better. When she found that she couldn't rely on men, she lost hopes for all the men. She decided to find another way out by herself and looked for a job again. Although she was cheated by the men, they did give her a wonderful and colorful time. So she missed the days they were together sometimes. Therefore, she became more confident when she looked for a job again. At this time she was kind of an experienced woman. Though relentless efforts, she finally got a job in a theater. She didn't attached to men anymore and became an independent, self-reliance lady. "My future must be assured if I can always get work this way." [3] This is the word when she first get her paid. It was an independent manifesto. Through her hard work she succeeded, in other words, she realized her original dream when she first came to this city. She became a famous Broadway star with prettily costumed dress, fat wallet and luxurious room. She got lost while she was rich. She felt empty in her heart. "She felt that Many people were trying to get close to her, indulging in sensual pleasures. They all lacked of warmth, sympathy and friendship" [1]. Carrie thought that money, reputation and status couldn't give her happiness. She seemed to be far away from her happy dream. After realizing her material dream, her mental became empty. The miserable part was that she was far from her happiness. This was her tragedy and also was her progress. It was comfortable that she finally began to pursue the spiritual content. It was the spiritual progress.

The same facts go to the Chinese "Sister Carries". Many of their lives are no better than what they thought they were when they rely on men. They have no freedom, no status, no final guarantee. This process is not only a self-lost process but also a self-finding one. During the process, they begin to reflect on their lives and choices and keep eyes on the society. Then they gradually find out what they really need and want. At this moment most of them will break away from the attachment to men and go to the independence. Under great strike, people's ideological thoughts are changed drastically. "On the commercialization of material, spiritual emptiness and hometown alienation, the city ecological condition makes many rural girls become the goods in the city waiting for the right price to sell. They become the hollow women without morals and souls" [4]. Sister Carrie, as one girl from rural to seek a new life in city, suffered a lot from morals and beliefs. It was a warning for us to re-examine women issues. During the progress of the rapid urbanization, especially women from the rural coming to cities, we should pay more attention to their natural instincts and spiritual world.

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