

# Ethical View of Women under the Scientific Development of *Sister Carrie*

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## Abstract

In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the advent of the great industrial machine age, American consumerism encroached on Puritanism. The American people, whose virtue was labor, thrift and frugality, gradually indulge in materialism. The meaning of the American Dream also changes under the development of science and technology. Different ethical concepts collide with each other, and the female characters in *Sister Carrie* are faced with different ethical choices.

## Keywords

American Dream; Puritanism; Consumerism.

## 1. Transformation of the Meaning of American Dreams

In the seventeenth century, a group of loyal and hard-working Puritans took "May Flower" to Massachusetts in North America. Adhering to the Puritan codes and struggling to build the "City on a Hill", they spared no efforts to achieve American Dream. They worked hard and accumulated wealth for glorifying God. In "The Way to Wealth," Franklin (1985) advocates hard work and frugality, which reflects the Puritan view of labor vocation and asceticism. "Sloth, by bringing on diseases, absolutely shortens life. Sloth, like rust, consumes faster than labor wears, while the used key is always bright." Puritanism greatly influences people not only in terms of religious beliefs, but also in business practices, family life and other aspects. In the late nineteenth century, with the decline of Puritanism and the rise of consumerism and Darwinism, hardworking labor was replaced by evil behaviors and consumption. In business practices, American dream was achieved with sinister things, and people tried to grab wealth by any means, leaving morality and ethics behind, both men and women, the young and the old. In the past, people were honored with the fortune to glorify God. Instead, mass earned money for wasting. In family life, women tried to rely on marriage to maintain their status. For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, the protagonist Daisy marries a rich man for maintaining her status. This case is not unusual in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the contrary, Puritan poetess Anne Bradstreet expresses the state of being one with her husband and being faithful to each other in the poem "To My Dear and Loving Husband", which proves American Dream has also experienced a radical change in the way of realization. The meaning of American Dream has changed and been marked with various ethical concepts of different people.

*Sister Carrie* is a masterpiece of naturalism work. Theodore Dreiser draws a lifelike picture to readers. The world in his writings is evil and realistic, which is not like the past one. Dreiser clearly sees the changes of his times. In *Sister Carrie*, we can realize the new generation of Americans holds different views towards labor, consumption, marriage and sexuality. It is different from Puritan codes. Facing the great transformation, women have a radical experience.

## 2. Minnie Adhering to Puritan Tradition

For Americans, Puritanism is not only a religious belief, but also a "philosophy of life and lifestyle" in the secular sphere. It is Puritanism that has forged American mainstream values

and the basic character of American nation (Zhao, 2008). However, with the development of science and the prevalence of social Darwinism, the concept of "survival of the fittest" gradually takes root, and people seek to gain their own interests in order to obtain the best foothold for survival. In addition, the United States gradually transforms from a traditional agricultural country into an industrial country. On the one side of the watershed was primarily an "agrarian America"; on the other side was an "urbanized industrial nation" (Commager, 1950). Thus, fundamentally, the decline of traditional Puritanism "was a direct consequence of the industrialization, urbanization, and immigration of the United States" (Zhang, 2010). In the nineteenth century, when old and new values alternate, Minnie still carries on the Puritan tradition, relying on her hard work to earn money. In the prosperous and grand Chicago, she is not lost in materialistic world. Minnie's code of labor and frugality seems out of place in the age of consumerism, and she can not keep up with the main theme of the times, so she is abandoned by the times.

### 3. Carrie Addicted to Consumption but is Consumed Instead

In the past, few Americans saw leisure as a valuable thing. Instead, people equate leisure and entertainment with laziness and laches. But now, with the rapid development and more spare time, many people see leisure and fashion as a part of normal life. When Carrie sets foot on the train to Chicago, she is "full of the illusions of ignorance and youth" (Dreiser, 1981). She engages in a fantasy that demonstrates her unlimited desires. Dreiser says, when one leaves home and comes to Chicago, he will either be helped by good people or be tempted by evil society. It is obvious that Carrie belongs to the latter. "Modern cities had a blinding impact for it attracted people with its lights, shops, restaurants, theatres and once a man was exposed to the shiny city, nothing could save him" (Bel, 2014). Carrie does not want to maintain a poor life like Minnie. She goes against the puritanical norm and is captured by consumerism instead, trying to squeeze into the upper class and realizing her American dream. At the end of the 19th century, relationships between men and women are no longer as serious as in the Puritan tradition, which shows a open and casual attitude for sexual relations, so that men and women play together in public places, together in the theater and party. Gradually, the purity of sexuality disappears. Carrie is dependent on the middle-class man Drouet to gain her living expenses. After gaining initial material satisfaction, she is attracted to the upper class Hurstwood and becomes his mistress. It is clear that the concept of working hard for wealth is lost on Carrie. At the time of Hurstwood's disillusionment, Carrie does not stay with the warmth of the past and then abandons him. Carrie has been greatly supported by two men both in life and work. Without the help of men, it is impossible for her to ascend to high ladder in society. She takes use of her beauty to satisfy the vanity of Drouet, Hurstwood and theater audience. Carrie's ending is tragic because she is observed and consumed like a commodity in a male-dominated society. Finally, she can only sit in a rocking chair to lament her past life and disappointed emotions. "Such kinds of commodification, class distinction, oppressive ideologies, and consumerism are the results of capitalism" (Omran, Royanian and Shabanirad, 2016).

For women, they suffer from the double oppression. They must do the tough task when obeying the males' willing. They need to do housework in family; they have a clear social role of labor in society, and they get the lowest salary. Besides, they are sexually oppressed and unfortunately reduced to be a mistress of upper-class man to gain financial support. But Dreiser is ambiguous when expressing his feminism thoughts. At the ending of the novel, Carrie becomes a provider from a beggar while Hurstwood becomes a picaro and is looked down by others. At last, he has no money to support his family and is dependent on Carrie. Hurstwood takes the place of Carrie to fulfill the traditional role of the fallen woman as we see him abandoned by his lover. When he is unable to bear humiliation any longer, Hurstwood finally fulfills the last step in the

traditional fallen woman story: he commits suicide. To some extent, Carrie achieves her freedom and equality and becomes a new woman.

#### 4. Conclusion

The virtue of frugality and thriftiness has disappeared in the 19th century. Instead, it is easier to obtain money and status if people achieve their American dream in an immoral way. With the development of science and technology, ethical concepts of women have changed. Sadly, no matter which ethical choice women make, they cannot escape the fate of being consumed, and women are still not in charge of their own lives.

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