

SOCIAL CLASSES IN THEODORE DREISER'S *SISTER CARRIE*

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to reveal how the concept of social class appeared and how it affected the main character and her relationship with others in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. This study was made using qualitative approach. In analysing this study, the researcher used M. H. Abraham's mimetic theory. The result of this research reveal that there are three kinds of social class that the characters mainly grouped into which are the lower, middle, and upper classes. The groupings are made based on the situation of the characters jobs and income, living conditions, social circle and material wealth. Social class affected the main character by changing her point of view as she adapted to live in the late 19th century Industrialized Chicago. This affected her relationship with other people in a way that she would break off her relationship with others if they are no longer useful to her to get what she wants the most which are wealth and fame, which in the end she regretted.

Keywords: Social Class, Class distinction, Mimetic Theory, Relationships, Naturalism.

INTRODUCTION

There are many different groups of people around the world each with different characteristics. This group of people together is what made a society. According to MacIver and Page (1950) "Society is a system of usages and

procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions of human behavior and of liberties. [...] It is the web of social relationships". (Pahlevi & Sagimin, 2020, p. 2) And in this web of social relationship, there is bound to be difference in status, this is commonly known as social class.

Social class is a set of concepts in the social sciences and political theory centered on models of social stratification which occur in a class society, which can be commonly grouped into three hierarchical categories, which are the upper-class, the middle-class, and the lower-class according to Grant. J. Andrew in the book *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy* (Jones, 2001). This type of classification can be commonly found throughout our history and in our literature. One of such literature is the novel *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser. *Sister Carrie* is a novel that was made in 1900's and published in 1912. It is set in the late 1800s and ends in the early 20th century where around the time America became more prosperous and saw extraordinary growth in industry and technology. Most of this growth is possible through America's expansion of Industry in the cities, which creates jobs that attracted immigrants from around the world, and also citizens from the rural areas, who migrated to the cities.

Aside from advancements in the field of technology and industry, *Sister Carrie* also contains many elements of naturalism, which is a literary movement that was popular in the last ten years of the nineteenth century up until the turn of the twentieth century. (Strossmayer & Zvonimir Obradović, 2018) Among the naturalist authors that appear at the time, Theodore Dreiser was one of the more notable one from his time. He was a key player in the literary naturalism movement, which presents everyday life problems with upfront observation.

Sister Carrie was one example of this as it was Dreiser's first novel which reflects the time period where it was written. (Hussman, 2021) It tells the story of a young small-town girl who moved to a big city (Chicago) filled with hopes and dreams of a better life and climbed the social ladder to become a famous actress

in the end. Among other themes, his novels explore the new social problems that had arisen in a rapidly industrializing America. Though Dreiser has difficulty finding a publisher for it, which even led to its low number of sales, *Sister Carrie* would later be called the "greatest of all American urban novels" and gained worldwide popularity. (Yujie, 2021, p. 57)

Through this work in particular, we can learn about the social conditions of a different era and of a nation that is known as the world's largest national economy and leading global trader in the 19th century as Dreiser documented important changes and developments of its time in the form of a novel. This motivated the writer to examine more deeply about social class in this novel, which is why the writer chose the title, "Social Classes in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*" for this research as to gain a deeper understanding as to how social class is reflected by Dreiser in *Sister Carrie*.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this research the writer used qualitative descriptive research design to complete this research. The goal of a qualitative study is "to produce a rich description and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest, the cultural or lived experience of people in natural settings" quoted from Magilvy in a journal for specialist in pediatric nursing, and qualitative descriptive design is a research design that is limited in scope, has a philosophical tradition, and is a part of the qualitative design described above. According to Sandelowski, a "comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events" is made possible by the qualitative descriptive design. (Magilvy & Thomas, 2009)

Data Collection

In collecting the data, the researcher acted as the instrument by first reading the book to have an understanding of the story and plot of the novel *Sister Carrie*. After that, the researcher searched passages or paragraphs in the text that

reflected and described how social class is integrated in the story and how it affected the main character and her relationships with other characters that exist within the story. The researcher then compiled and arranged the data based on the limitation of the study and then analysed it using the qualitative descriptive research. Finally, the researcher made a conclusion of the social class in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*.

Data Analysis

In this research, related with the research design previously mentioned, the data was analysed using qualitative descriptive research method using M. H. Abraham's Mimetic theory.

M. H. Abrams (1953) stated that "nothing exists other than universe, text, author and audience, any form of theory must fit into one of these four categories. Abraham also said that mimetic theory is by far the oldest and the most 'primitive' of the four categories." (Purohit, 2013) This approach implies that nothing is unexpected because the concept of the thing being imitated is already existed, therefore the evaluation over a work is based on the quality of imitation towards the world. As a result, Mimetic theory is used to investigate past context connected to the subject of the study that was examined.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Classes in Sister Carrie

In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie discovers that the wealth spectrum is extremely broad after meeting a variety of characters from various social backgrounds, and the researcher will only be talking about three common categories of social class, which are the lower class, the middle class, and the upper class and the characters who embodies those class classifications.

Lower-Class

Lower-class is a term that is usually used to refer to the people who are below the middle class and has the lowest status in society. (Lower Class Definition & Meaning | Britannica Dictionary, n.d.)

Another term that is used to refer to them back in the industrialization era was the working-class. They are the people who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy and are unable to work at more high paying jobs usually because of their lack of skills, capitals or higher education according to Wraith (2009) in the Contemporary Class Analysis. (Oesch, 2022, p. 5)

In Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, we see this presented in the story through the lives of Carrie's older sister Minnie and her husband Sven Hanson, with their baby whom Carrie lived with in Chicago. From an economic standpoint, the Hansons cannot be said to be rich.

Following this, Carrie found had many difficulties living as she was, being expected to pay for her board means that she must get a job in order to earn money. Although the late 19th century was a revolutionary era where it is socially acceptable for women to go work jobs alongside men, finding a job that pay well was hard. People with low or none-existent education and no specialized skills usually ended up working at factories. And in those factories where many workers are needed to operate the machines, the workers are usually paid little because they were exploited by the owners of the factories that had considerable control over the workers work hours and wages. (Social Effects of the Industrial Revolution (1800-1920), 2014) As quoted from the story,

"The place smelled of the oil of the machines and the new leather—a combination which, added to the stale odours of the building, was not pleasant even in cold weather. The floor, though regularly swept every

evening, presented a littered surface. [...] The washrooms were disagreeable, crude, if not foul places, and the whole atmosphere was sordid." (Dreiser, 2009, p. 73)

This quote describes what kind of environment that factory workers in the 19th century had to endure everyday just so that they could be paid at the end of the week. At that time, there were no environmental regulations that prioritized the health of the workers, mostly because the company/business views them as replaceable due to their work not needing any particular skills whatsoever.

From a social standpoint, a noticeable trait of the lower/working class that is different from others are their way of talking and how they use language. This quote from the story where Carrie was about to have lunch and saw the interaction between the people at her workplace express it clearly, as quoted,

"As Carrie listened to this and much more of similar familiar badinage among the men and girls, she instinctively withdrew into herself. She was not used to this type, and felt that there was something hard and low about it all. She feared that the young boys about would address such remarks to her—boys who, beside Drouet, seemed uncouth and ridiculous." (Dreiser, 2009, p. 74)

Carrie feels that the language that her coworkers used was "hard and low." She compared them to Drouet, who is polite with his words which made him seem well-mannered. Even though technically speaking both Carrie's coworkers and Drouet are using the same language, the way they talked and the choice of words that they use made all the difference. This is the reason why language is a sign of class. A study done by a British sociologist Basil Bernstein (Luke & Graham, 2006) shows that people's language understanding and usage are based on their family's social standing/class.

To elaborate, it means that people on the working-class and lower than that usually used simple to understand word coupled with gestures to convey their meaning, their words would also contain some slangs that they are familiar with,

but people in the middle-class and above who undoubtedly have access to education and other learning methods talked properly and used words that sometimes are hard to understand.

Middle-Class

Middle class is a term that many usually use to refer to the people in a society who, in an income-based ranking earn more than the lower/working class or but less than the upper class. According to historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and Jürgen Kocka, people who must work for a living but do so using intellectual rather than manual abilities, holding positions that call for higher levels of education, are considered to be middle class. (Oesch, 2022)

The character who fits the criteria in story is Charles H. Drouet, a travelling salesman who has, when he first met Carrie, come to Chicago for work purposes. The evident of his wealth and class can be seen from this quote,

“He visited the resort of Fitzgerald and Moy's in Adams Street, [...] There he leaned over the splendid bar and swallowed a glass of plain whiskey and purchased a couple of cigars, one of which he lighted. This to him represented in part high life—a fair sample of what the whole must be. [...] Drouet was not a drinker in excess. He was not a moneyed man.” (Dreiser, 2009, p. 78)

The quote above expressed how Drouet can afford to spend his money for other purpose than just his work and day to day necessity, which shows that he is more financially comfortable than the Hansons, and it also categorized where he fell in the social class range when the narrator described him as rich but not wealthy.

Socially speaking, Drouet enjoys being in the company of the rich and successful and longs to be a part of them. In Chicago, particularly in places where men can meet and form business connections with one another, these places are called saloons. Before that it was more known as a tavern where they provided

meals and alcohol. This drinking establishment acted as a significant hub for social and political discussion even during the colonial era. Later on the law changed and alcohol was allowed to be served in places without lodgings, and these places were then known as 'saloon', which is a popular word that was used by the general population in 1840s. (Slatta, 1987, p. 156)

Upper-Class

The criteria for belonging to the upper class, according to Piketty (2013), began with ownership of capital and later evolved into control over significant productive assets, particularly ownership of, partnership in, or a commanding position within a company, bringing together owners, employers, partners, and senior managers. (Oesch, 2022, p. 5) In the story of *Sister Carrie*, the characters that can be identified to be people that belonged to the upper-class are George W. Hurstwood and later Carrie as she became more successful in her career as an actress. The story considers George W. Hurstwood as a person who belongs in the upper class as stated in the following paragraph,

"[Hurstwood] kept a horse and neat trap, had his wife and two children, who were well established in a neat house on the North Side near Lincoln Park, and was altogether a very acceptable individual of our great American upper class—the first grade below the luxuriously rich." (Dreiser, 2009, pp. 82–83)

From this quote, it is clear that Hurstwood is someone who is very fortunate and successful. But it also informs the readers about how although he is considered to be someone in the upper-class, Hurstwood can't be said to be one of the people who is the epitome of the wealthy. That title belongs to businessmen, who put up new businesses like refining petroleum, electrical power, the oil company, manufacturers and bankers. ("Overview | Rise of Industrial America, 1876-1900," n.d.)

Socially speaking, Hurstwood is very outgoing and knows the importance of making connections with other people, as seen from the quote,

“He was shrewd and clever in many little things, and capable of creating a good impression. [...] He knew by name, and could greet personally with a “Well, old fellow,” hundreds of actors, merchants, politicians, and the general run of successful characters about town, and it was part of his success to do so.” (Dreiser, 2009, pp. 81–82)

From this quote, it is evident that Hurstwood seems to be familiar with all the important individuals in the area. In the industrial era of America, aside from wealth, having a good social disposition is also needed for someone to become successful in life. For Hurstwood, his managerial position also made it easy for him to form connections with other people aside from being a good source of income. This connection made him wield a lot of influence in society and that made him able to affect or change the course of things or events. Hurstwood used his connection to subtly help Carrie when she was going to perform at a show. The effect of Hurstwood’s help is apparent through this quote,

“By the time the 16th had arrived Hurstwood's friends had rallied like Romans to a senator's call. A well-dressed, good-natured, flatteringly-inclined audience was assured from the moment he thought of assisting Carrie.” (Dreiser, 2009, p. 309)

This “well-dressed, good-natured, flatteringly-inclined audience” had come thanks to Hurstwood informing his prominent friends and a newspaper buddy to get ads published in neighborhood publications for the show. This resulted in extremely high ticket sales, even though it is considered an amateur play. In this way, readers can understand how the city is a place where networking is vital to success—knowing people is the key.

Social Class Influence on Character and Relationship

Dreiser was a naturalist author, and this is reflected in all of his work including in *Sister Carrie*. Naturalists believe that humans are powerless to control

their drive of their nature, which prevent them from using good judgment or making the appropriate choices. They are a victim of circumstances, (Zeng, 2021, p. 1068) and Social class play a huge role in motivating the protagonist as well as other characters to follow in their desire rather than logic or reasoning both individually and relationship wise.

Social Class Influence on Carrie

The influence of naturalism can be found mostly in personality of the characters, and in the story, social class was made to be the driving force behind many actions of which the characters took, and this of course includes the behavior of the main character, Carrie. Social Class had a huge influence on Carrie as she views rising in the social hierarchy as a mean to get better and more comfortable life that she desired. Early on, the narrator described Carrie as a "bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth." (Dreiser, 2009, p. 7) and this is evident in the way that she presents herself.

Carrie was full of fantasies about big cities and hoping to improve her life and fate through her struggle and hard work, although that expectation was later crushed when she saw her sister and how she is living. Carrie's constant yearning for wealth and status became reason why Carrie wants to move up in the social ladder. It made her develop a sense of pride to look good in the eye of others. As Xiaolin Chai said, "It [Industrial development] gradually weakened traditional consumption idea, that is, Managing one's household with industry and thrift. They [people] were chasing self-style, being into famous brands, seeking a life of pleasure." (Cai, 2015, p. 177) and that was exactly what Carrie did as it was what she desired most.

Society and class also affected Carrie with her moral views that she holds. At first, when she just moved in with Drouet and improved her living conditions, she feels conflicted with her new situation. As quoted, "She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror

prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse." (p. 169) This is the point where Carrie had to choose between convenience and morals. Although because of Drouet her living situation and appearance have improved, she is aware that society does not condone kept-women. Carrie staying with Drouet demonstrates that she had, to some point, compromise her value to survive and keep her dreams alive. Industrial America was filled with the wrong social value and difficult social environment for people that do not have money. (Yujie, 2021, p. 58)

Thankfully this viewpoint didn't stick permanently in Carrie's way of life as she learned from Bob Ames, who shows that unlike what Carrie had always thought the connection between wealth and class isn't always a positive one and that sometimes being too fancy and flaunting can also be seen as a desperate means to stand out and make people think of a sign of being lower class. Ames also helped Carrie redevelop her love to be on a stage again as she thinks that "If she were a fine actress, such men as he would approve of her." (p. 574) Carrie is starting to realize that money is not everything, thus Ames is the first person she finds amazing for reasons unrelated to wealth.

While Carrie's perception of wealth and class shifts as she moves between different cities and social groups, her ultimate goal is to be of a higher class in addition to being wealthy so that she may associate with intellectuals like Ames. Although that the end of Carrie's journey learning about wealth and class, in the end Carrie was still lonely. Even after achieving success as an actress she still ends up alone.

Social Class Influences on Carrie's Relationship

- *Carrie's familial relationship*

The first relationship that was affected by social class was Carrie's relationship with her sister and her sister's family, Minnie and Sven Hanson. Carrie was a newcomer to the town of Chicago and was filled with curiosity at her new

surroundings, but that thought wasn't appreciated by the Hansons. This is apparent when Carrie was telling them about her new job and mentioned about how she would like to see the theater at dinner. As quoted,

"At her suggestion of going to the theatre, the unspoken shade of disapproval to the doing of those things which involved the expenditure of money—shades of feeling which arose in the mind of Hanson and then in Minnie—slightly affected the atmosphere of the table." (Dreiser, 2009, pp. 57–58)

It is clear from the quote above that Minnie and Hanson did not like spending money on activities like watching theatre, mostly because until now they have led a frugal life. Because of their status as lower class people who did not earn much, they have the mind-set of money saving rather than spending. Carrie did not share the same sentiment. They both are already used to the way society works in the city, especially for people of their status, but Carrie was not. Because of this clash in their way of living, and the fact that Carrie lost her job after sickness, she ended up agreeing to be Drouet's mistress as she didn't want to be sent back home to Coloumbia.

- *Carrie's romantic relationships*

The next relationship was Carrie's relationship with Drouet. When she first met Drouet at the train, he appeared to Carrie to be an ideal example of how a person can live comfortably. Carrie adored Drouet because he had everything that she herself lacked, like money, stylish clothing and more. As quoted, "Drouet must be fortunate. He rode on trains, dressed in such nice clothes, was so strong, and ate in these fine places." (p. 111) Carrie starts to realized that Drouet is not as great as a person she thought him to be, and this was revealed in this quote, "She really was not enamoured of Drouet. She was more clever than he. In a dim way, she was beginning to see where he lacked." (p. 176) from here it is clear that Carrie doesn't love Drouet all that much. Carrie observed Drouet and concluded

that he wasn't a good marriage partner, but even so she still wants to marry Drouet so that she can keep up the lifestyle that she had with Drouet.

After Drouet, Carrie next relationship was with Hurstwood, who she really liked at first when she saw that compared to Drouet, he seems to be of a higher class and was more sensitive to her feelings than Drouet. Although her feeling of love are not necessarily the same amount as Hurstwood's, as she feels that his feelings are "a delightful background to her own achievement." Her success at the fundraising play made her feel like she has more power in their relationship, as she had moved "out of the ranks of the suppliants into the lines of the dispensers of charity." (p. 350) Readers can infer from this that Carrie values her advancement in the social circle above her relationship with her partner.

Hurstwood initially enjoy spending his time with Carrie, in New York though he finds that his interest in her lessened. He keeps daydreaming about his life back in Chicago and he realized that running away to New York with Carrie was a mistake. Their financial situation was improving by the year but their relationship was not. Hurstwood prioritized himself over Carrie and he began to neglect her as he began to spend less money and time with her. But Carrie was still someone who is attracted to luxury in the end, and she became depressed about her own situation after watching a Broadway show. It is expressed by the quote,

"That night the pretty little flat seemed a commonplace thing. It was not what the rest of the world was enjoying. [...] There were places in which she could even do better." (Dreiser, 2009, p. 554)

Seeing the show which displays luxury that she didn't have, Carrie became dissatisfied with her life with Hurstwood, similar to how she once became dissatisfied with her life with Drouet after her outing in Chicago with Mrs. Hale. This dissatisfaction only grew as more years gone by and after Hurstwood's business failed and he gave up on trying. After her meeting with Amesh, Carrie realized the truth that even with having a high social status in society, it doesn't

automatically mean that people are truly an upright kind of people. The Hurswood now doesn't seem that admirable to her anymore, even though before in Chicago he seems so impressive.

Carrie eventually found work as a chorus girl to help with their financial situation and was able to become successful on her own which made her have another realization that she doesn't really need to rely on a man, which made her leave Hurswood, ending their relationship, even if that doesn't really align with the view of society. Delli Sabudu also remarked on how Carrie unconsciously used both Drouet and Hurswood for their money and status even if she didn't really realize it at the time, that what she was doing is both wrong and immoral. (Sabudu, 2009, p. 828)

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION

Conclusion

After conducting the analysis, the researcher found that the researcher concluded that there are mainly three kinds of social class that people can be grouped into and they are the lower, middle, and upper class. The lower class is the class is least wealthy. People in this class are the individuals who do manual labour or other low income jobs for a living. They have limited access to resources and often lack the opportunities and privileges that come with wealth and status. Middle-class people, meanwhile are people who usually have a decent job with decent pay that are able to fulfill their daily need and also some more for any spare time activities that they wish to partake in. Although not as wealthy as the upper-class, they live relatively comfortable lifestyle. The upper-class are people who stands at the top of the social hierarchy. Dreiser's depicted them as wealthy people that although hold many high or important position at their job, wealthy

and socially well connected with others, they are still people who are flawed and prone to moral corruption.

Aside from the kinds of social class it can also be seen that social class as a concept have an impact on people and their relationship with others, which can be seen from the way Carrie's behaviour changed throughout the story. Carrie moved to the city to find work, but the harsh environment and living requirements for people to actually thrive in the city made her chose the easy way to survive even it is offered to her, even if it came at the cost of compromising her moral belief.

Naturalism also had a hand in this as not matter what lesson Carrie had learned she never stopped desiring for the next best thing, even after she became a successful actress or how Drouet and Hurswood actions was entirely motivated by their sexual desire for Carrie. Of course, her desire for wealth and status had also cost her many of her relationships, as it was what made her disagree with the Hansons and later with both of her lovers to which at the end she left behind, both her family and romance.

Suggestion

First, The novel *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser is an interesting read that provides many insights on the social conditions of the America in the Gilded Age, along with other associated themes that's worth to study more and discussed. Secondly, the writer encouraged future researcher to consider using Mimetic Theory in their research, as mimetic theory approach is useful in portraying how well the literary work conveys universal truths and teaches the reader positive moral values and modes of personal conducts.

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