



# American Naturalism and its Presentation in *Sister Carrie*

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## Abstract

The dozens of studies on naturalism have been done around the globe, but the study focusing on American naturalism and its embodiment in *Sister Carrie* is limited. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the intension of social contradictions and the quick development of science and technology, pessimistic fateful naturalism literature came into being under the mutual influence of local literature of Europe and the United States and gradually gained its popularity in American novel writing and drew people's attention. Theodore Dreiser is worldwide considered the pioneer of the American literary naturalism and his masterpiece, *Sister Carrie*, is the representative of naturalism but it is also criticized most. This paper, through the method of literature analysis, aims to analyze the characteristics of American naturalism, discusses its connotation, and analyzes its presentation in *Sister Carrie* as well as its influence on the contemporaries, hoping to make contributions to further exploration of humanity.

## Keywords

American naturalism, *Sister Carrie*, presentation

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Brief Introduction of the Characteristics of American Naturalism

Naturalism, originating in the 19th century, is a special kind of realism. It stressed the objectiveness and fairness, science, nature and determinism of environment and instinct. Its representative works are all full of pessimism and fatalism. As the America's industrialization and the formation of the post-industrial society, the American naturalism trend occurred in the history of literature and occupied an important position. Its features are: firstly, the American naturalist writers describe the truth of the society and humanity, like the doctors' diagnoses. Their goal is to obtain scientific regularity by analyzing multiple facts. This leads the reader put the focus on the plot and what happens to the character, rather than the characters themselves; secondly, naturalist writers are skeptical towards, or downright hostile to, the notions of bourgeois individualism. They often choose low class people as protagonist, to reveal that the rabble is weak not because they are under the influence of genetic factors, but environmental victims; thirdly, the American naturalism writers emphasize the life consciousness and depict roles of some animal instincts, like fear, hunger and sexual desire, to weaken the influence of ethics of life and social; fourthly, the American naturalism writers use common characters' language; fifthly, works are colored with pessimism. Pessimism is shown by which one or more characters will continue to repeat things that tend to have a pessimistic connotation, sometimes emphasizing the inevitability of death; and lastly is determinism which is basically the opposite of the notion of free will. For determinism, the idea that individual characters have a direct influence on the course of their lives is supplanted by a focus on nature or fate. Often, a naturalist author will lead the reader to believe a character's fate has been pre-determined, usually by environmental factors, and that s/he can do nothing about it. There tends to be in naturalist novels and stories a strong sense that nature

is indifferent to human struggle.

## 1.2 Brief Introduction of *Sister Carrie*

*Sister Carrie* is the masterpiece of American famous novelist, Theodore Dreiser. Caroline Meeber, an 18-year-old girl, known as Carrie, leaves for Chicago, where her elder sister Minnie and her husband Sven Hanson live, for she is not very satisfied with her rural life. On the train, she meets Charles Drouet, a traveling salesman, who is attracted to her because of her simple beauty and unspoiled manner and she is also interested in him due to his fine clothing and manners.

She finds employment in a shoe factory. Before long, she falls ill from the cold. Ready to return home, she encounters Drouet on a downtown street and accepts his offer and moves in with Drouet.

Their relationship goes well until Drouet introduces Carrie to George Hurstwood, the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's, a respectable bar, who is far more refined and elegant than Drouet.

Drouet is asked to find a girl to perform in his Mason's lodge play and asks Carrie to do it. The night of the production, both men are moved to even greater affection by Carrie's stunning performance.

Drouet has finally discovered he has been cuckolded and angrily walks out on Carrie. Carrie also learns that Hurstwood is married. Hurstwood's wife realizes what is going on and files for divorce, hires a detective, and locks him out of the house.

After a night of drinking, Hurstwood stumbles upon a large amount of cash in the unlocked safe in his workplace. He can't resist and pull out over ten thousand dollars and accidentally locks the safe before he can put it back. He lures Carrie to Canada with a lie of Drouet's sudden illness. Hurstwood mollifies Carrie by agreeing to marry her, and they move to New York City.

In New York, Hurstwood and Carrie live as George and Carrie Wheeler. He has sent back most of the money he stole while in Montreal to avoid prosecution, keeping only thirteen hundred to establish his own business. But he soon fails and has little money left. As Hurstwood lounges about, overwhelmed by gambling, Carrie turns to New York's theatres for employment. She begins to rise in the stage.

Drouet moves to New York and tries to reestablish his relationship with Carrie, but she brushes him off. Hurstwood ultimately joins the homeless of New York and finally becoming a beggar and commits suicide. Carrie achieves stardom, but finds that money and fame do not satisfy her longings or bring her happiness and that nothing will.

## 1.3 The Present Research Situation at Home and Abroad of American Naturalism and *Sister Carrie*

Many scholars abroad have done much research on American naturalism, but their research on American naturalism and its embodiment in *Sister Carrie* is still limited. For instance, Abraham H. Maslow studied the novel from the perspective of motivation and personality (Maslow, 1970), Blanche H. Gelfant from consumer viewpoint (Gelfant, 2000), Ralston Holmes from environmental influence (Holmes, 2004) and Ruth Lister from feminist perspectives (Lister, 1997).

Theodore Dreiser, along with his work *Sister Carrie*, published in 1900, has already been very familiar among Chinese readers, but Chinese researches on Theodore Dreiser and his works started late and were stuck for a long time. In 1992, a paper entitled *A Review of Ethical Concept in Scarlet Letter and in Sister Carrie* written by Gao Xingsheng and published on the Foreign Language Institute Journal of Liberation Army, pointed out that *Sister Carrie* put emphasis on exposing the hypocrisy of traditional bourgeois moral concept (Gao, 1992). Jiang Daochao gave the novel new interpretation from the prospect of consumer culture (Jiang, 2000). Wang Ganghua made psychological analysis of Carrie under Jacques Lacan's new psychoanalytic theory, from her meeting basic physiological needs and concerns, to the shape of her ideal self and last to her endless desires (Wang, 2002). Chen Shiwang studied the novel from the angle of feminist literary criticism, using novel aesthetics and narratology, revealing the interpretation of Carrie's runaway twice, which in essence is the inevitable result of rebelling against patriarchy oppression (Chen, 2004). But domestic exploration of naturalism in *Sister Carrie* and the practical significance of studying this novel are still not thorough.

Most of the above researches focus on feminist, environmental impact, consuming women and ethical concept, but the study of American naturalism and its presentation is not enough, at which this paper will direct. Through the method of literature analysis, this paper aims at the characteristics and connotation of American naturalism, typical embodiment in *Sister Carrie* and far-reaching significance of study on it and the novel *Sister Carrie*.

## 1.4 The Research Method Applied in This Paper

Literary analysis is also known as literary criticism. It is the study, evaluation and interpretation of literature. Modern literary criticism is usually informed by literary theory, which is a philosophical discussion of its various goals and me-

thods. There are many viewpoints like cultural studies, psychoanalytic criticism, structuralism semiotics, feminist criticism, new historicism and postcolonial studies.

The value of literary analysis has been questioned by some prominent artists. However, with new theory and from different viewpoints, the study of classic works can be very inspiring and thought-provoking. New vitality coruscates.

First of all, the author reads the novel for at least 4 times and reviews the study done by others. Based on the information, the author thinks about viewpoints which need improving and are worthy focusing on. Then start research. Papers in literary analysis require the help of secondary materials, the help of online journals, literary criticism and various other resources. Take down notes and keep a regular track if necessary.

This paper makes great efforts to study the novel and American naturalism through the method of literature analysis, specifically, from analysis of the characters in the novel, the environment which has great influence on the characters and the American dream under the theory of psychoanalytic criticism and cultural criticism.

## 2. Presentation of American Naturalism in *Sister Carrie*

### 2.1 Through the Creation of the Characters

#### 2.1.1 The Development of Pessimism of *Carrie*

Dreiser's novel originates in the early years of 19<sup>th</sup> century; it is the key stage of stepping into monopoly capitalism of America's capitalism. In this stage, domestic production and capital highly centralize and monopolize in a few capitalist financial group of organizational form which control national lifeblood of economy. It is a handful of luxurious life and the poor masses, social labor struggling at the verge of starvation. Dreiser showed the U.S.A. realistic society and performed human's tragedy. It is based on his own experience, the result of what is seen and heard, and social investigation.

Carrie begins from one daughter of a rural worker, relying on angst, climbed to the upper class step by step successively, and becoming a popular star finally. It seems that her dream comes true, and she will be satisfied. But a fundamental analysis reveals that she remains a successful tragic personage. She realizes the boss of the theater gives her so much money, only for that she is the boss' cash cow; while she has no happiness of her own in mental.

In this novel, Dreiser tells his reader that when a young girl leaves her home, one of two things can happen, either the girl will be saved by someone and become "better", or the girl will fall into the "cosmopolitan virtues" and become worse. This remark is almost immediately followed by Carrie's first test, i.e., her encounter with Drouet. Drouet approaches her from behind and talks into her ear. This is analogous to the devil, whispering from behind, but seducing nonetheless. Thus, Dreiser, no sooner gets down describing what two paths a woman in Carrie's position can take than he immediately pushes her down the path of vices, or "cosmopolitan virtues". Carrie's decision to trade addresses is not brought about because she likes Drouet, but rather because his clothes impress her. Indeed, *Sister Carrie* is largely a novel about materialism and taking advantage of what is offered. In many ways the novel can be understood as an attack on the materialism in society that causes a young girl to choose Drouet instead of hard work as a means of advancement. The men in the factory present a class group when compared to Drouet. Carrie has really only met three types of men. Thus for: the smooth, carefully Drouet, the hardworking but suspicious Sven Hanson, and the crass working men in the shore factory. What is the most interesting is that both crass men and Drouet "hit" on her, but in entirely different ways. She is clearly seduced by the manner in which Drouet approached her. In her choice of men, Carrie can be seen choosing one lifestyle over another, the upscale, mobile lifestyle represented by Drouet over the seemingly solid, but boring lifestyle of the working classes. Dreiser then proceeds to give a very good explanation of money. Central to his observation is that if a character has money, it must be spent. Both Carrie and Drouet fall into this category. Further, those that do not have money needs to steal it or beg for it. Thus everyone in the novel depends on money to define who he or she is and what he or she can do.

Social status is contingent on money, but is also presented in the novel through two series. For example, Carrie initially rides in a train, then a streetcar, and finally she is forced to walk. This chain marks the gradual cowering of Carrie's status within the society until she reaches the nadir, a point where she not only has no job but is also forced to walk around the city. Carrie is cognizant of this decline, especially while in the restaurant with Drouet. She not only observes that he can afford to ride in trains, but when he mentions that she will have to return home if she defines his offer, she only notices a wealthy stagecoach passing by on the street. This serves as a visual reminder that only in the Chicago can she hope to live that well, and it is key to making her accept Drouet's proposal.

The introduction of Hurstwood is eloquent yet parallels the introduction of Drouet. Hurstwood is described as being like Drouet only much better. This parallel persists throughout the evening, with Hurstwood first sitting behind Carrie to help her win at cards, and then suggesting that he take them to the theater, his exact pattern of seduction.

Carrie drives her desires to make a comparison to other women, most notably Mrs. Hale. She is thus introduced to the

fine mansion and the buggies, the source of the dissatisfaction that she acknowledges to Hurstwood. The theme of social place as defined by form of nobility is also revisited in the contrast between the buggy and the carriage. Carrie realizes that in order to move to a higher social position, the finer carriage must replace the buggy.

It is noteworthy that Carrie's thoughts during her second seduction never hint at material lust. Instead, she appears almost innocent and kind, falling for Hurstwood because he invokes her pity. This is an unexpected approach to winning Carrie. At the end of the play, a beggar approaches the trio and asks for money and only Drouet feels enough compassion to help the man. This is a moment of redemption for him because for the first time Drouet is shown being a kinder man than Hurstwood. This hearkens back to the seduction of Carrie where Drouet is compared to a man giving her clothes and money the way he would to a beggar. Hurstwood, by contrast, has yet to give her anything of substance. It is worth nothing Carrie's opinions towards the working people. She pities them, and feels sorrow for all the hard work they do. The reasons for her pity are unclear, although her previous experience of working in the factory would make her more sympathetic. This is also a case of Carrie being able to imitate the best qualities of others. Drouet is the only man who gives money to a beggar. And there it appears as if Carrie has emulates his feelings towards the poor. She also will pick up traits from Hurstwood and improve on them as the novel progress.

At last, Hurstwood, even though he is losing money, is able to still blame the loss on external factors (the cards) rather than take the blame himself. As the money disappears, he realizes that Carrie will have to do something very soon. The fact that Hurstwood becomes a scab lets he face his reality and go to work against the desires of thousands of other men. This, while we watch Carrie progress we are being for-warned that her life will likely be similar to that of Hurstwood in the end and his life is the latter stage of her own. In many people's opinion, it is a good ending for *Sister Carrie*. She owned all the things she had dreamed of, reaching the upper-crust society. However, if we think about the intricate of the winter in the end of the novel, we may realize that it is still a tragedy. Carrie does not realize her dream really. She is only a victim of the "money is all mighty society." At the end of the novel, the author remarked: "And it must be remembered that reason had little part in this. Chicago dawning, she saw the city offering more of loneliness than she had ever known, and instinctively, by force of her moods alone, clung to it. In fine raiment and elegant surroundings, men seemed to be contented. Hence, she drew near to these things. Chicago, New York; Drouet, Hurstwood; the world of fashion and the world of stage-these were but incidents. Not them, but that which they represented, she longed for. Time proved the representation false." Although Dreiser does not show his opinion about *Sister Carrie* very clearly, we can see it is a tragedy.

### 2.1.2 Determinism of Carrie's Behavior

As a naturalistic writer, Dreiser stressed determinism in his novels which deal with everyday life, often with its sordid side. Carrie is unable to assert her will against natural and economic forces. She is more like a moth drawn to flame than lord of creation. She is pathetic in her inability to escape her fate. Dreiser held that people are not entirely to blame for what they are and what they do. They are not responsible for rising or falling in a world so fully shaped by circumstance and disposition.

Dreiser combines both the biological determinism of Darwin and the concept of blind fate in *Sister Carrie*. Severely handicapped by her innocence and poverty, Carrie appears to be caught in an inevitable spiral of disappointment and poverty, were it not for a series of circumstances and coincidences that lift her out of her condition. If Carrie had not met Drouet accidentally on the street after she lost her job, she would have returned home to Columbia City. If the safe door had not by unaccountable chance closed as Hurstwood stood by with his employers' money in his hands, Carrie would not have gotten to New York or become a famous actress. In such a world each one must take advantage of what little opportunity he has, even though it means abandoning or injuring others.

But Dreiser neither condemns Carrie nor praises her. Just as naturalists' beliefs human behavior is determined; it cannot be judged in terms of right or wrong, good or bad. By studying naturalism in *Sister Carrie*, one can criticize its limitations and find solution to those universal social problems so as to provide some valuable experience for our socialistic constructions: the youth should be self-respected, self-confident and self-dependent and try to overcome the disadvantageous environmental factors and hereditary factors to become the master of one's own fate.

### 2.1.3 Hurstwood's Personal Tragedy

Let's first see Hurstwood's family, including his seventeen-year-old daughter Jessica, his twenty-year-old son George, Jr. and his wife Julia. The family lives in a ten-room house but is clearly not a part of the upper classes. Mrs. Hurstwood, we are told is relying on her children to become part of the elite upper classes and provide her with great social status. Hurstwood falls into the traditional suitor mode in that he feels compelled to write to Carrie every day. Hurstwood's family situation is deteriorating rather quickly. Mrs. Hurstwood is also becoming very upset with him and the lack of affection he shows her. At last, later that evening, Hurstwood returns home in good spirits having just met with Carrie. His wife is furious with him and determined to gain the upper hand that he has lost not only his wife and children, but

also his home, especially his wife. As a result, we know this is why his ex-wife and daughter went to have a travel in Rome, where Carrie lives comfortably and luxuriously in her house, while Hurstwood had to commit suicide to end his unfortunate life.

Before meeting Carrie, Hurstwood leads a cozy life with a loving home in spite of his increasing dislike of his wife. He is respected, has good reputation and high social status. He declines rapidly, however, after he knows Carrie. He couldn't control his love for Carrie, more accurate, his desires. And his desires for Carrie drive him to the dead end. Hurstwood accidentally discovers that the safe is not locked with lots of money inside. After hesitating, by the drive of desire for money and stay with Carrie, he finally steals the money and escapes with Carrie.

Hurstwood in Chicago is a popular man. Nevertheless, in New York, he just likes a drop in the ocean. His business is not making money. Their living standard is worse than in Chicago. He can't find the feeling of being concerned and gradually become financially in trouble. So his desire for money becomes stronger and stronger and the failures become to bring him into fear and anxiety. Until she gets the fame, Hurstwood is still nobody. He is ragged and starved in a pitiful situation, so he begins to dream his luxurious life. Here his preference is to close his eyes and dream of other days, a habit that grows upon him. He dreams himself in the gate of his office with nice cloth, talking the investment with his collages. After Carrie left him, his situation gets worse and worse and life ends in tragedy.

## 2.2 Through the Designing of the Competitive Society

During Carrie's time- the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the production technology was increasingly excellent day by day, the degree of mechanization was getting more and more high, the difference between the rich and the poor was becoming bigger and bigger, especially in big cities. Because of its peculiar qualification of growth, many commercial opportunities made it a giant magnet to attract people from all directions, even country girls like Carrie. Comparing the two big cities where were the centers of politics and economy- Chicago, a city of promise, luck, rise and New York, a city of lies, fall, and impersonal isolation of walled city, surviving was much more difficult in New York than in Chicago. During that period of time, the capitalism was speeding up. As the center of agriculture and trade, finance and culture, Chicago was the city that most people of middle class and western Americans dreamed of going to. There were colorful theaters, restaurants, supermarkets and dancing rooms there where people could hardly reject these charming temptations. Carrie was among those people, who sought for happiness in Chicago and New York.

This novel shows the life of the poor people and their hard work, and depicts a few fortunes' favorite, like Carrie. The city has its all variety of magic: the noisy sound of crowds, the jollification of life and the rows upon rows of buildings, they are all fatal temptations. So it is easily understood that she lost her direction on the crossroad. If she didn't live in this society, or not penniless, she might never become other's mistress, or elope with a married man. This exactly acts as a good demonstration of naturalism, which believes that people are dominated by their environment or heredity. American naturists emphasizes that world is amoral that men and women have no free will, that their lives are controlled by heredity and the environment, that religious "truths" are illusory, and that the destiny of humanity is misery in life and oblivion in death. And when Carrie first looked for a job, we can see how hard it was for her to find a position and to live for it. The pessimism and deterministic ideas of naturalism pervade in this novel.

After Carrie finds a job, she could have led a relatively easy life; however, Dreiser lets his heroine of the novel ill. In that competitive society, a vacancy should never wait and everyday there are many people hunting for a job. Carrie loses her job because of her illness. Her sister and brother-in-law make her uncomfortable due to joblessness. Her dissatisfaction of her birthplace, the cruel and indifferent society, her desire for better life without much effort and the accidental meeting with Drouet lead her to mistress of Drouet. After acquaintance with Hurstwood, Carrie makes a natural comparison between Drouet and Hurstwood and she chooses the better one with higher social status, Hurstwood, to face the fierce competition. All the descriptions of Dreiser show us an indifferent, cruel and competitive society.

## 2.3 Through the Description of Realization of Carrie's Dream

### 2.3.1 Carrie's Expectation of a Bright Future

Carrie is a poor countryside girl of 18, impoverished not only physically, but also spiritually. Having just reached adulthood, she is full of lofty dreams of youth. Since never having had many beautiful things in her life, she moves to the city of Chicago, hoping to get a better economic situation. Carrie hopes that this adventure will fill her spiritual need for excitement. Being young, she is susceptible to the attitudes of society, equating material happiness with self-fulfillment. Like many of other poor people of that time, Carrie desires to accumulate as many signs of higher social status as she can. One of the prominent signs of the upper class is being owner of a vast fortune. Carrie thinks that once she has acquired enough earthly possessions, she will live a happy and fulfilled life. Yet since Carrie doesn't seem to know what true happiness is upon reaching Chicago, her search for contentment in possessions is misguided. She hopes to fill her spiritual emptiness with fleeting fancies of materialism. She has brought into the capitalistic attitude of

her time, that is to say, the thought of working for wages and spending her money which she tries her best to make on frivolities, such as plays and clothes, which excites her mind. She plans to stay with her sister and brother-in-law in the city and find a well-paying job to help her maintain her ideal cosmopolitan lifestyle.

### **2.3.2 Carrie's Pursuit of Wealth and High Social Position**

How to become a rich person? Especially for a girl like Carrie, who on the one hand is weak and won't like to do rough work, and on the other hand is not well educated, and has no skills. How could she get money? Fortunately, she finally gets a job in a shoe factory. But when her white-collar-like job turns out to be a woman labor in the gloomy and smelly shoe work house, she falls into pieces and gets sick after several weeks of hard work. She has no clothes, loses job and is disregarded by her brother-in-law, so she feels so despaired. Then she meets Drouet again who she met in the train. He offers to take care of her and she accepts because she doesn't like staying in Minnie's small, gloomy and badly furnished house. Carrie would have done better if she had not got a job before she had seen more of the city. "One of her order mind would have been content to be cast away upon a desert island with a bundle of money" (Dreiser, 2009). So the poor girl thrills as she walks away from Drouet. She feels ashamed in part because she has been weak enough to take it, but her need is so dire and she is still glad. "In Carrie-as in how many of our wordings do them not?-Instinct and reason, desire and understanding, were at war for mastery. She followed whither craving led, she was as yet more drawn than she drew" (Dreiser, 2009). In effect, circumstances have driven her into the hands of Drouet. She leaves her sister's flat to set up her own house at Drouet's insurances. Although it is only a few days when she has been enduring a city life in Chicago, she realizes that she doesn't like the simple life and in her view, her sister and brother-in-law live a boring life. Being young and curious woman, she yearns for more than what she has got.

With the help of Drouet, Carrie is offered a role in a play, which is greatly appreciated by all. From her relationship with Drouet, she manages to gain the experience and social skills to pursue American Dream. Of course, Drouet helps her change her economic status. With Drouet's help, she is able to cast off her poor fate, and begins to live a rich life. In this way, she gets a chance to know Hurstwood, who brings her an even better life. She is a woman that will never stop purchasing. She aims at a better living condition. She is driven by her desire, her endless desire. She always has plans and goals in her mind. Though she hasn't received much education, and is not able to think about life as Drouet and Hurstwood. She will not feel content with her present life and the things that she has got. Once she has won Drouet's heart, she sees his shortcomings and compares them with Hurstwood's advantages. She, then, wins Hurstwood's heart, but later realizes that he won't marry her. Because of the financial reasons, she remains with Hurstwood and they live together for three more years in New York. Hurstwood loses all he has and doesn't go out to find or keep a job. Hurstwood's financial decline forces Carrie to apply for a job in the theater and she becomes successful as one of the Broadway's stars.

## **3. Significance of the Research of Sister Carrie**

### **3.1 The Reflection of the American Society in the Early 20th Century**

*Sister Carrie* reveals the American society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Carrie, a typical figure in the novel, is struggling for her own hopeless life. Thus, she leaves her rural home to seek work in Chicago. In Chicago, she lives with her sister, and works for a time in a shoe factory. Meager income and terrible working condition oppresses her imaginative spirit. After a period of unemployment and loneliness, she accepts Drouet's offer and finds a short-cut, in which she can lead to a much comfortable life. During Drouet's absence, she falls in love with Drouet's friend Hurstwood and elopes with him. Then she becomes successful and mature in intellect and emotion while Hurstwood steadily declines. At last, she leaves him and leads a comfortable but unhappy life.

Carrie, in order to meet her desires, follows her instincts and does whatever she can without thinking of whether it is moral and worthwhile or not. This kind of life is the vivid depiction of the reality. At that time, America is undergoing the industrial revolution, which pushes the economy and social reformation to a high speed developing rate. Though it is in an era of prosperity, it is impossible for everyone in America to become wealthy. America practices capitalism, and thus the prosperity only benefits the capitalists, while the working class still lives a very poor life. As a result, the rich collects more and more money, and lives a luxurious life. In the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the disparity between the rich and the poor becomes more serious. This makes people become easier to receive all kinds of debased values, and money-making has been the central pursuit. Most values encourage people to earn money without considering morals or consequences. What's more, wealth and power are the only two standards to classify the people into classes. The lowest working class cannot even keep body and soul together and they are working hard, struggling to survive in society.

### 3.2 The Reflection of the Side Effect of the American Dream

When Carrie meets Drouet on the train, she feels ashamed and overshadowed by the well-dressed salesman. And later, when in Chicago, she pursues beautiful clothes. She does everything she can to become successful. Seeking money, sense of vanity and egoism are anything but positive effects. The tragic results of all the characters warn us to make every choice right.

The American Dream, existing in American culture for a long time, used to be a positive value to inspire people to develop their lives. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of American Dream is prevalent and it has become a pure pursuit of better materialistic lives and higher social positions, regardless of morals and consequences, which brings great hazards to the American society. People are in hot pursuit of vanity and wealth. Many people hold this value as belief, and use all kinds of schemes to chase wealth and high social position, neglecting the kindness, honesty, loyalty and even love. Driven by this value, most people lose the shining merits of humanity. Moreover, money worship becomes more and more serious in society and money becomes more and more important in American's opinion. The upper class lives a luxurious life, for they have much money. As a result, the poor have such an idea that when they get enough money, they can improve not only their material lives, but also their social positions. They totally become money-slavers. Besides, egoism is overflowing. Encouraged by this sort of thinking, Americans become more and more zealous in chasing material wealth and social positions, for which can satisfy their own desire for pleasure. In order to fulfill their ambitions, they neglect others' feelings and even risk ruining others' lives.

### 4. Conclusion

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is a remarkable work which tells a story of a rudderless but pretty small-town girl who comes to the big city filled with vague ambitions and finally becomes a successful Broadway actress, living a care-free but unhappy life.

*Sister Carrie* is the first masterpiece of the American naturalistic movement in its factual presentation of the vagaries of urban life and in its ingenuous heroine who goes unpunished for her transgression against conventional sexual morality. It well displays the ideas of American naturalism, especially pessimism and determinism. Study of American naturalism and the novel *Sister Carrie* has great significance. It well reflects the American society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially the side effects brought about by the debased values and American Dream and warns us that we should take a proper attitude towards material and social status. Existence namely is reasonable and everything has two sides. We should not whine and see things from all aspects and make best of what we have obtained to make right decisions.

Surely this paper has limitations firstly because of time limit, length restrictions of the paper, lack of understanding of domestic and foreign findings and the limited materials the author has got. Besides, the opinion is based on the author's finite knowledge and this paper doesn't dig the greater significance and just focus on one aspect. What's more, the author couldn't avoid vague expressions and biased or even wrong opinions. In the future, the author hopes more research on the novel *Sister Carrie* can be done. Especially from new perspectives, one can study naturalism and this novel in a more Chinese way, maybe from Chinese traditional values if possible.

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