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## Characters as Animals in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

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### Abstract

Theodore Dreiser's treatment of his characters as animals in society has been studied from various vantage points. In this study, I offer an impressionistic look at how Dreiser treats his characters in close association with animals. I argue that while characters are treated as animals in line with a deterministic view of the socio-biological world, such representation brings the metaphor of the city substituting the natural habitat of such (hum) animals. Hence, Dreiser's technique in characterization jumps over his philosophical attachment with social determinism as the energy created in his treatment of his characters as animals moves readers to a unique space in which understanding his characters fully may only be possible when their identities as animals are explored.

**Keywords:** *Theodore Dreiser; Dreiser; Naturalism; Realism*

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) broke new literary ground with its documentary style depicting the turn-of-the-century Chicago and New York, the two urban settings where economic and sociological issues were given in a detailed manner to show the forces of economic necessity, social censure, and urban anonymity (Sloane, 1992). Although such documentary-like depiction is a product of realism of Dreiser's age, such realism "in *Sister Carrie* is the literature only of exhausted desire and economic failure" (Michales, 1980, p. 385) if not an ethnographic portrayal of how people lived in the two cities that served as the settings in the novel.

Dreiser's novel is neither completely deterministic nor naturalistic, but as Christopher G. Katope (1969) argues, "Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* had a profound impact upon Dreiser's psyche" (p. 64) especially through two major concepts, namely, forces and chemism. Just by looking at Chapter I, one can see the repeated use of the term "force" and related terms including magnetism, attraction, radiating presence, drawn, current of feeling, power, and chemical reagent (p. 66).

The novel explores the life of Carrie Meeber, a poor rural woman whose naiveté and poverty make her an ideal target for the dangers of urban

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life while Carrie's desire to succeed and find security in a morally and financially compromised society lures her with its glitter (Sloane, 1992). Yoshinobu Hakutani (1967) argued that critics, following the publication of the novel, condemned Dreiser's perception for being too narrow in that for him "man is an animal subject to no human law but only the law of his own instinct, behaving as he desired, controlled only by natural forces" (p. 3).

Nature-culture dichotomy has guided western philosophy and sciences throughout centuries whose effects can be seen even at present. According to such view, what separates humans and animals is the former's reasoning skills and mental capacity that are controlled by their rationality. Animals, in contrast, live according to their desires and instincts. When Dreiser's novel is considered it can clearly be seen that setting and characterization are built on this infamous dichotomy, nature supposedly belonging to animals whereas culture belonging to humans. However, in Dreiser's case, regardless of where the characters are and what they do, they are narrated as animals who are often described in close association with animals. In many parts of the novel, characters are repeatedly likened to dogs. In Dreiser's words, "They looked at it as dumb brutes look, as dogs paw and whine and study the knob..." (p. 498) and "Look around," she said, a thought of the need that hung outside this fine restaurant like a hungry dog at her heels, passing into her eyes" (p. 60) are just a few examples to how Dreiser likens his characters to dogs.

Dogs are not the only animals that are resembled to humans in the novel although dogs and humans form the best pair as similar beings. At one point, when the winter is about to start, Dreiser notes that all beings sense the coming of this season while putting "dogs and men" into the same category:

Not poets alone, nor artists, nor that superior order of mind which arrogates to itself all refinement, feel this, but dogs and all men. These feel as much as the poet, though they have not the same power of expression. The sparrow upon the wire, the cat in the doorway, the dray horse tugging his weary load, feel the long keen breaths of winter. It strikes to the heart of all life, animate and inanimate. (p. 90)

What is the common bond that makes dogs and men very similar- or the same? Leo Bersani (1976) argues that "desire can disrupt social order" (p. 63). In that sense, it can be inferred that humans, when they act on the basis of desire, act more animal-like than human-like. Hence, it can be claimed that Dreiser's characterization is original in the sense that he plays tactfully on the roles of humans and animals in a playful way. For instance, similar to the perception held by the dominating modern psychology pioneered by

Freud among many others which perceives humans as in constant need of satisfying their desire exactly like other animals, Dreiser's characters yearn for a stage in their lives that is characterized by a state of satisfied desire:

A man's fortune or material progress is very much the same as his bodily growth. Either he is growing stronger, healthier, wiser, as the youth approaching manhood, or he is growing weaker, older, less incisive mentally, as the man approaching old age. There are no other states. (p. 338)

According to Dreiser, as Hakutani argued (1967) “the male of the species is characterized by his greed for material gains and his desire for the opposite sex. The female is, then, a weaker, vain, pleasure-seeking creature who cannot resist the flattery of the male” (p. 3). This depiction, first and foremost, places the male and female similar to animals in heat, the male member stalking the female while, sooner or later, the female surrenders to the desire of the male. Reading the novel resembles watching a wild-life documentary in which the voice over narrates the story of a pair of animals who, following their mating season show behavioral change. In Hakutani's (1967) words, “Hurstwood and Carrie move to a cheaper and shabbier apartment, and he loses his tidiness. He now shaves once every other day, every two days, once a week; his dress changes from a new suit to an old jacket and finally to rags. Eventually Carrie leaves him and secures a better position on the stage, while Hurstwood floats into beggar” (p. 8). Portraying characters as animals can be seen in the novel as Dreiser openly remarks, in Mrs. Hurstwood's case, who “turned upon him animal-like, able to strike an effectual second blow” (p. 220).

Although the major setting is Chicago, one of the most urban areas of the US towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dreiser makes it obvious that characters, at least Carrie, prefers to be in more natural spaces such as parks. Lincoln Park, for Carrie, is a fascinating place because:

There was always something to see there—the flowers, the animals, the lake, and she flattered herself that on Monday she would be up betimes and searching. Besides, many things might happen between now and Monday. (p. 249)

We must remember that it may not be a knowledge of right, for no knowledge of right is predicated of the animal's instinctive recoil at evil. Men are still led by instincts before they are regulated by knowledge. It is instinct which recalls the criminal—it is instinct, (where highly organized reasoning

is absent), which gives the criminal his feeling of danger, his fear of wrong. (p. 269)

Depictions of humans in the novel resemble a band of animals against strolling in their natural habitat while opposing each other when nature calls. Interestingly, human language is missing in this social picture as characters remain silent while communication is handled like animals who do not use human language but other sign systems such as seeing and performing an “outward demeanor” rather than like humans who are supposed to use verbal exchanges:

Those who had been waiting before him, but farther away, now drew near and by a certain stolidity of demeanor, no words being spoken, indicated that they were first. Seeing the opposition to his action he looked sullenly along the line and then moved out, taking his place at the foot. When order had been restored, the animal feeling of opposition relaxed. (p. 490)

Refraining from verbal exchange and tending to communicate through demeanors to pass the message across is also supported by employing other senses that are rather perceived as animal qualities. Apart from using their eyes and demeanors, characters use their olfactory skills in a way to sense what is happening around them: “Mrs. Hurstwood felt something, she knew not what, sniffing change as animals do danger, afar off” (p. 211). Here, it is obvious that Mrs. Hurstwood is portrayed as a character without “knowing” but “sensing” as she feels and sniffs without knowing. Such portrayals strip these human characters from human qualities such as knowing, thus, making the reader accept these characters as animals rather than humans.

Not only social relations with rather negative connotations, but also loving and caring human-human relationships are portrayed in terms of how animals behave in their child-rearing processes.

Carrie's little soldier friend, Miss Osborne, seeing her succeeding, had become a sort of satellite. Little Osborne could never of herself amount to anything. She seemed to realize it in a sort of pussy-like way, and instinctively concluded to cling with her soft little claws to Carrie. (p. 432)

### **Conclusion**

Dreiser's treatment of characters in *Sister Carrie* demonstrates “his rigid adherence to the deterministic philosophy” (Hakutani, 1967, p. 9) guided by “a theory of animal behavior” (4) although “Dreiser nowhere even theorized about the possibility of treating his characters as animals” (p. 4).

However, the influence of Spencer's ideas on evolution is obvious as stated by Kanope (1969):

In their eagerness to stress Dreiser the artist, critics have tended to denigrate Dreiser the "philosopher." As a consequence, much effort has been expended on showing that Dreiser was not really a complete mechanist or a determinist or a naturalist. But if art is an imitation of nature, Dreiser's art is inseparable from his view of reality; and that view while Dreiser was composing *Sister Carrie* was markedly influenced by the "laws" of nature which Herbert Spencer described in his *First Principles*. (p. 75)

The effect of ideas on evolution on Dreiser's work is obvious. One thing that must be underlined is that resembling humans to animals in various parts of the novel is of course both literal (that some human behaviors resemble those of animals) and metaphorical (that humans in that specific setting and milieu are dehumanized).

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