

The Quest for Haven in *Sister Carrie*

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This essay analyses Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* through the lens of cultural studies, examining the portrayal of domesticity and the quest for an ideal home in late-nineteenth-century America. It explores the complex relationships between the main characters, Carrie and Hurstwood, and their families, as well as their struggles with materialism and alienation. Through close analysis of societal context, the characters' familial backgrounds and emotional yearnings, the essay delves into the characters' longing for stability and belonging and their journey toward understanding the true essence of dwelling amidst the changing urban landscape. It argues that Dreiser's novel critiques the superficial pursuit of material comforts and highlights the importance of introspection and self-discovery in finding lasting happiness amidst societal turmoil. Ultimately, through the prism of domesticity, the essay delves into broader themes of identity, belonging, and existential fulfillment in a heartless society marked by materialism and alienation.

Keywords: Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, home, domesticity, belonging

Introduction

From the tenement to the flat to the popular house, domestic spaces can be both comforting and constricting, homely and suffocating, hints of the past and expectation of a promising future. In an indifferent society, the hero and heroine of *Sister Carrie*¹ (1900) tries to build a boundary between the individual and the society through a warm home so as to have a sense of belonging, security and happiness. In *Sister Carrie*, as a former journalist who documented the physical details of his time, Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) demonstrates the precariousness of failed domesticity, the stabilizing force of a proper "home atmosphere" and the essence of an ideal home.

This essay traces the domesticity in *Sister Carrie* from the following three aspects: the imprint of it leaving on the two main characters, Carrie and Hurstwood, and its contribution to their personal transformation as well as their longings to an ideal home. Such longings, however, would never come to fruition because, on one level, in their respective family, Carrie and Hurstwood get few care and love from other family members and thus are deficient in the capability to maintain intimate relationships with others and, on another, from a societal perspective, materialism and consumerism has saturated every hole and corner in the city and Carrie, with Hurstwood and other characters, are deeply alienated by modern society, which fundamentally leads to their failure in the pursuit of an ideal home. Like protagonists in this novel, in American bustling metropolis of the late nineteenth century, people's concept of family were eroded by materialism, alienated from their families, and

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¹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*. Bantam Classics, 1992. All further page references for quotations from *Sister Carrie* are given in text. Quotes from the novel are from this version.

became homeless to some extent. Luckily, Dreiser tends to delineate Carrie's attempt to think about the nature of the home as a homeless at the end of this novel, which probably is the only way to ideal home for people in this alienated world.

Sister Carrie was published in 1900, a time when the United States was in the process of being changed into a modern society, in which material goods, population, vehicles and so on are all moved in speeds as never before. In a world marked by ubiquitous mobility, the relation between man and place, especially the home was changed thoroughly. As migrants flocked to cities, apartments, tenements, boarding houses, and hotels became primary residences, reshaping the notion of home as haven. Traditionally, apart from residence, the rural home primarily functioned as an economic unit before the era of mass production, engaging in activities like cultivating crops, making textiles, and preserving food. It was during the Industrial Revolution, when factories became the center of economic activity, that the role of the home transformed into a space focused on emotions and subjectivity and became the essence for human existence to a much greater extent, as Edward Relph points out: "...home places are indeed foundations of man's existence, providing not only the context for all human activity, but also security and identity for individuals and groups" (Relph, 1976, p. 41). Thus, despite the result of expanding mobility in the modern cities, which is, as Yi-Fu Tuan says, "Modern man is so mobile that he has not the time to establish roots; his experience and appreciation of place is superficial" (Tuan, 1977, p. 183). The role of home in personal life in the nineteenth-century has become much more important than before. According to Family historian Stephanie Coontz, by the late nineteenth century, the nuclear family had become idealized as the cradle for emotions and subjectivity precisely because market principles and extreme individualism had come to structure public life. Likewise, Christopher Lasch, a cultural commentator, characterizes the idealized family as a "haven in a heartless world" (Lasch, 1995, p. 292), serving as a safe place to cultivate subjectivity and emotions. Dreiser, who experienced firsthand the shift occurring during this transitional period, populates *Sister Carrie* with characters who seek the haven that the changed society made people crave but their families actually did not always provide it for them.

Unmoored and Adrift: Carrie's City Life Amidst Familial Echoes

In this novel, through the heroine Carrie Meeber, Dreiser explores what happens to feelings when the family cannot serve as a haven for her. The first chapter offers a glimpse at the moment she leaves her home at eighteen:

A gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss, a touch in her throat when the cars clacked by the flour mill where her father worked by the day, a pathetic sigh as the familiar green environs of the village passed in review. (Dreiser, 1992, p. 1)

These verbal snapshots of Carrie's family and hometown leave us with a general impression of her background: a country girl whose father toils in a flour mill. And Dreiser indicates that her departure indicates that "the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 1). To some extent, Dreiser goes for understatement here, and the threads bound Carrie to girlhood and her home are not necessarily irreparable broken. From a factual standpoint, Carrie will no longer get the instructions and care as a young girl from her family, which are components of the "threads", while on a psychological level, the effects of Carrie's family on her psyche are indelible. Being a part of "the threads", these effects are rooted in her heart and have a lasting impact on her life in the city.

Cherishing the longing for the city, Carrie settles in Chicago with her sister Minnie and brother-in-law Hanson, only to find that she is taken in mainly for financial relief, which can be seen through the portrait of the Hansons after Carrie's arrival. When Minnie greets her newly arrived sister, she offers only "a perfunctory embrace of welcome" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 8) And to Hanson, "the presence or absence of his wife's sister was a matter of indifference" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 9). When Carrie suggests to go to the theater, the Hansons, who see Carrie less as a beloved relative than as a paying boarder, worry that if she insists on spending money, "how was her coming to the city to profit them?" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 26). Obviously, instead of providing a haven from the heartless world, the Hansons' flat lies on a continuum with the workplace and brings the values of the marketplace into the home. As a country girl away from home, Carrie joined in the tide of mobility in the American society yet suffered the indifference and detachment from her home, Minnie's family and people in Chicago. These subtle feelings of indifference spread in Carrie's heart, and she gradually bred a desire to be protected and carefully cared for in the city.

Apart from the indifference, Carrie also felt the drag of a lean and narrow life at the Hansons. "The walls of the rooms were discordantly papered. The floors were covered with matting and the hall laid with a thin rag carpet... the furniture was of that poor, hurriedly patched together quality sold by the instalment (sic) houses" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 10). The interior decoration also exerts a psychological impact on Carrie and the Hansons, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote in 1904, human character is modified by the conditions of home life, for good or ill (Gilman, 1904, pp. 162-163). This is the case with the Hansons. Carrie interpreted the general idea of life in the Hansons' home from the interior decoration of their home, she reads from the whole atmosphere of the flat "a settled opposition to anything save a conservative round of toil" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 11) and soon realizes that her brother-in-law's "morbid turn of character" saturates the entire atmosphere of the flat. Living in this suffocating home, for Carrie, who is naturally inclined to amusement in life, is "like meeting with opposition at every turn to find no one here to call forth or respond to her feelings" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 41). Carrie tends to be reserved and afraid of revealing her inner thoughts or her eagerness to enjoy the pleasures in Chicago to the Hansons, since it seems that in this crowded and dingy home, things concerning comfort and pleasure are considered unreasonable or even criminal. To some extent, Minnie's home provides Carrie with a disappointing example of the domestic life of a woman who has moved from the country to the city and exerts a great impact on Carrie. Preceding Carrie, Minnie left their country home and has settled in Chicago, which, in Carrie's eyes, is promising and alluring, therefore, feeling "dissatisfied at home" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 11), Carrie left Wisconsin, but the frustrating life with her sister only revives the old Carrie of distress. It is for her an urban version of Columbia City. She soon feels about the Hanson flat what she feels about her old home: "Columbia City-what was there for her? She knew its dull little round by heart... Now to turn back on it and live the little old life out there-she almost exclaimed against it as she thought" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 65). Thus, Carrie's conception of home and her life is reshaped, and she realized that she has to resort herself to live in the city. Therefore, the life in the Hansons completely ends her dependence on her family.

Apart from the Hansons, the deep-rooted impact of Carrie's early home on her is revealed at the time when she failed to find a job, she was hinted at by the Hansons to return home. Carrie's apprehension of returning home is relevant to her past memories of the lower class. Her sensitivity to the poor and downtrodden as well as her dread of repeating that fate originate from mixed feelings of pity and shame over her father's life. "Her old father,

in his flour-dusted miller's suit, sometimes returned to her in memory-revived by a face in the window" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 116). The details of the mill often occurred to her when she saw men like shoemakers, blastmen and bench workers on the street. "She felt, though she seldom expressed them, sad thoughts upon this score. Her sympathies were ever with the underworld of toil from which she had so recently sprung and which she best understood" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 116). Carrie's feelings toward her family are complicated, she feels inferior due to her humble background, yet sympathizes with her father's hard work in maintaining their household. As a result, she possesses a natural empathy towards those in the lower strata of society, but she is unwilling to replicate such a life of hardship.

Not only the indigence, the scant affection from her parents also keep Carrie away from home. After Carrie's abrupt leaving from the Hansons, they did not try to find the whereabouts of her, and, in the later episode, when Drouet has temporarily left her and she has been apprised of Hurstwood's treachery. With no place to turn she inevitably looks back to her family, however, Dreiser immediately indicates that "she looked for no refuge in that direction" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 196). Obviously, such a void in Carrie's attachment to her family pointedly suggests the magnitude of her emotional distance from them, an unrelatedness so deep-seated, so much a part of her psychological heritage, that it necessarily repeats itself in all her later associations.

Dreiser also indicates that Carrie's early home life does not provide her with the guiding voice of a "counselor... to whisper cautious interpretations" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 4) and prevents falsehoods from being breathing into Carrie's unguarded ears. His remark on the two choices of a girl leaving her home at eighteen on the first page reveals the importance of the guiding voice in the family for a girl. This guiding voice is conspicuously absent in Carrie's life. Dreiser emphasizes that for the lack of parental instructions, Carrie is easily influenced by Drouet's initial seductive approaches because she "had no excellent home principles fixed upon her" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 65). In fact, apart from Carrie's "unguarded ears", her shame of her family's toiling life and feeling of inferiority, her lack of sense of belonging to a family, her deep-rooted desire for sweet and homey atmosphere all contribute to her choice of fleeing the underworld of toil by living with Drouet. When Carrie moves out of the Hansons and into Drouet's flat, her meager ties with her family in a physical sense are broken for good and she never makes the slightest attempt to communicate with them, which means she becomes homeless indeed.

In the Ogden Place, Carrie is comfortably established as if she is settled "in a halcyon harbor" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 74). Living in this cozy flat, Carrie's industry and natural love of order are developed so that she infused an air pleasing in the extreme in this place. An array of clothing, furniture, and delicious food... all the thing Drouet provided are more than she had ever possessed before. Established in such a pleasant fashion, Carrie is free of certain difficulties, however, she soon confronts mental dilemma. "She looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 75). Although Carrie is satisfied with the new home, she feels the sting of morality because she lives with Drouet unmarried. Therefore, she persuades Drouet to marry her so that "things would be right and her actions would be justified" though she is not enamored of him truly. Likewise, as a flirtatious man, Drouet has no intention of marrying Carrie from the beginning. Carrie, struggling to make ends meet, is anxious to grasp any opportunity to provide her with the food, shelter, clothing, and pleasures that were missing during her early years. Carrie's persistent request for Drouet to marry her reflects her desire for respectability and security. As time goes by, Carrie is caught by an unstable state again by

perceiving that Drouet was unreliable to ensure her enduringly and prosperous life: "...this goodly drummer carried the doom of all enduring relationships in his own lightsome manner and unstable fancy" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 99). Living in this abundance that could disappear at any moment, Carrie "could not feel any binding influence keeping her for him as against all others" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 99). Therefore, when Mr Hurstwood, the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's appears in her life, Carrie is fascinated by his ease, his strength, his position, and his clothing... all the things that Drouet can not offer her and that would guarantee her a secure life.

2. Yearning for Home: Hurstwood's Spiritual Homelessness and Quest for Refuge

Hurstwood, like Carrie, is a middle-class man and an affluent house owner who undergoes profound spiritual alienation before meeting Carrie. He possesses a material shelter but lacks a proper spiritual refuge; he is, in other words, effectively "homeless". He "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" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 36). The house, a brick building of a very popular type then, the horse and the family—all are comparable credentials that signify Hurstwood's financial and social well-being, but the perfect "neatness" of these arrangements is belied by the disorder that exists within the house. Dreiser shows the preciousness of "(a) lovely home atmosphere ...one of the flowers of the world, than which there is nothing more tender, nothing more delicate, nothing more calculated to make strong and just the natures cradled and nourished within it" (Dreiser, 1992, pp. 67-68), before indicating its complete absence at the Hurstwoods. With considerable understatement, Dreiser remarks "Hurstwood's residence could scarcely be said to be infused with this home spirit. It lacked that toleration and regard without which the home is nothing" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 68). Hurstwood, "the deep-feeling manager," lives in a luxurious but barren dwelling (Dreiser, 1992, p. 68).

The house's failure as a home results from its opulence to a certain degree. In Amy Kaplan's reading of *Sister Carrie*, she refers writers' efforts to construct for middle-class readers "inhabitable and representable" domestic spaces out of unfamiliar "rented spaces"—hotel rooms, apartments, and lodging houses—that are "filled with things neither known nor valued through well-worn contact, but cluttered instead with mass-produced furnishings and the unknown lives of strangers" (Kaplan, 1988, p. 12). Inside the house, the distinctly alienating domestic artifacts of metropolitan consumer culture also contribute to the deprivation of homey atmosphere. At the end of the nineteenth century, *Ladies' Home Journal* and other magazines offered middle-class readers advice about domestic goods and decorating styles from overseas (Richter, 2015, p. 133). In "The House of Fiction," Jean-Christophe Agnew describes a view of the domestic interior: "as so much raw space to be furnished with mobile, detachable, and transactionable goods," where the boundaries between "the self and the commodified world" frequently "collapse" (Agnew, 1989, p. 135). Likewise, domestic objects in the Hurstwoods fail to register the unique features of the inhabitants. Dreiser describes the decoration of Hurstwood's home in detail:

There was fine furniture, arranged as soothingly as the artistic perception of the occupants warranted. There were soft rugs, rich, upholstered chairs and divans, a grand piano, a marble carving of some unknown Venus by some unknown artist, and a number of small bronzes gathered from heaven knows where, but generally sold by the large furniture houses along with everything else which goes to make the 'perfectly appointed house'. (Dreiser, 1992, p. 68)

Through Dreiser's remarks with tongue in cheek, it can be seen that the unfamiliar commodities and commodified spaces in the Hurstwoods undermines the function of home as a comforting and private sanctuary for them. Although the depiction of its lavish furnishings may imply that the stylish interior compensates for the house's barrenness as a home, Dreiser's following portrayal is tinged with irony. The home is cluttered with "from heaven knows where" bronzes, a marble carving of "unknown Venus by some unknown artist" and things generally sold by the large warehouse, all of them imply that Hurstwood's home is a holder of featureless products of mass culture rather than furniture with personal artistic taste.

Not only its opulence, the symbolization of the Hurstwoods also reveal their emotional detachment from one another. They remain together, barely because they extend, rather than provide refuge from, the increasing commercialization of American culture, which also amounts to a failure to create a physical space for intimacy and thus to make a house a home. According to Stephanie Coontz, *The Gilded Age* middle-class family is a place for expressing class aspirations rather than individual ones. "Even the new emphasis on using home decorations, windows, and furnishings to signify a particular family's identity generally boiled down to depicting its economic and social status through mass produced ornamentation advertised as appropriate to one's occupation" (Coontz, 1988, p. 268). Hence, there emerged an archetype rather than an individual family, and the "individuality" of Victorian middle-class homes was tied to conventional notions of occupational and familial propriety. Similarly, the manager, Mr. Hurstwood, views his family merely as status symbols, reflecting his success as a businessman. Julia Hurstwood recognizes her husband solely as the provider for her escalating needs and their children as means for social advance. She is, as Dreiser remarks, "cold and too calculating" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 90). Out of their inordinate vanity, the Hurstwood family is degenerated into an empty and expensive form—a public showplace for social and monetary connections rather than a private haven for interpersonal and emotional ones. It is not evident that whether impersonal and indifferent domestic artifacts in Hurstwood's home simply express or are in fact the cause of impersonal and indifferent domestic relations but Dreiser refrains from depicting the fracture of the Hurstwoods until he has described the failure of the material environment to provide a nurturing home atmosphere. It seems to suggest that material interiors influence the interiority of the inhabitants, disabling the family members' emotional connection to one another and to the house and its contents that the name home is always imagined to invoke. "There was no love lost between them. There was no great feeling of dissatisfaction. Her opinion on any subject was not startling. They did not talk enough together to come to the argument of any one point" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 71). Therefore, Hurstwood has been "homeless" spiritually before he suffers from homelessness in a material sense.

Facing the apathetic family atmosphere, Hurstwood seeks at some level to find someone who will make him feel at home. Before meeting Carrie, Hurstwood finds the intimacy missing in the family in the Fitzgerald and Moy's Hotel he manages, where he is keen to greet strangers and acquaintances and discriminate them. "He had a finely graduated scale of informality and friendship" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 36). For Hurstwood, there are really no strangers in the saloon and "it was part of his success to greet personally with a 'Well, old fellow,' hundreds of actors, merchants, politicians, and the general run of successful characters about town" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 36). It is worth mentioning that most of Hurstwood's friends are members of the Elks, a social club formed by middle-class men on the basis of gender, which, with other social and service clubs, exerted limitation on the intensity of marital bonds at that time (Coontz, 1988, p. 270). This is also the case of the Fitzgerald and Moy's

Hotel for Hurstwood, which offers him respite from the suffocating environment of his home and marriage. However, it is just a solace of his vanity and pursuit of success, and his absence exacerbates the tensions within his family. As Dreiser reviews:

Such an atmosphere could hardly come under the category of home life. It ran along by force of habit, by force of conventional opinion. With the lapse of time it must necessarily become dryer and dryer—must eventually be tinder, easily lighted and destroyed. (Dreiser, 1992, p. 73)

The person who ignited the flame was Carrie. When Hurstwood meets Carrie, he is attracted by her youth, beauty and innocence. Carrie's innocence arouses a sense of sympathy and protectiveness in Hurstwood's heart at the first meeting, who wants to play the role of a man of strength to protect this troubled girl. Meanwhile, to his frustration, a certain amount of respect he has commanded at home is gone, and he has even lost track of their doings. Hurstwood's family life, which has been indifferent, becomes more suffocating for him, thus, the complete ignoring by Hurstwood of his own home comes with the growth of his affection for Carrie and he longs to turn to Carrie for solace and compensation for his lack of warm domesticity. "He consoled himself with the thought, however, that, after all, he was not without affection. Things might go as they would at his house, but he had Carrie outside of it" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 114). After putting in his second appearance, Hurstwood finds Carrie so attractive partly because "her industry and natural love of order" give the "cosey" apartment she shares with Drouet "an air pleasing in the extreme" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 75), and he fantasizes about the time "when Drouet was disposed of entirely and she was waiting evenings in cosey little quarters for him" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 114). It can be seen that Hurstwood admires Carrie's youth and beauty as well as her facility as a home-maker, in other words, Hurstwood finds Carrie compelling as a mistress not only because she represents an alternative to domestic life, but also because she represents the fulfillment of its promise of a comfortable home, which, in fact, is the main contributing factor to his impulsive decision to cheat Carrie into eloping.

Although Hurstwood and Carrie's elopement to New York is his decision on a whim, a hint of living with him had already crept into Carrie's mind. When Hurstwood professes his love to Carrie, he uncovers the deep scars that has been deeply hidden in his respectable life, portraying himself as a man waiting to be saved, a prisoner of the indifference and hypocrisy of those around him. All he hopes, is Carrie "waste a little affection" to him (Dreiser, 1992, p. 102). Undoubtedly, for Carrie, who is innocent, kind and has fully experienced the pain brought by indifference and isolation, his pitiful courtship arouses compassion and sympathy in her heart and moved her deeply. The girl who was regarded as a plaything by a salesman now is valued as a savior by a man who "had ease and comfort, his strength was great, his position high, his clothing rich" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 103). She feels an overwhelming sense of being needed and making a difference in someone's life, let alone such a powerful man. No matter in Columbia City, or Hanson's narrow flat, Carrie is forced to suffer from the manipulation of fate, even in Drouet's apartment, the temporary shelter, she can not determine the direction of life with Drouet. However, Hurstwood's position, wealth, gentlemanlike appearance seem to be some sort of stronger assurance for Carrie's stably wealthy life, and the fundamental assurance is his behavior that convinced Carrie he will be related to her by marriage, which Carrie has always longed for. It has always been the basis of Carrie's conception of happy and comfortable domesticity. Thus, after the elopement, these two

homeless people, who find sympathetic response and solace in each other, try to construct their ideal home in New York.

3. A Seemingly Ideal Haven in a Heartless World

It can be said that the apartment in New York where Carrie and Hurstwood newly settle is a temporary haven in a heartless world. "The furniture for each room was appropriate, and in the so-called parlour, or front room, was installed a piano, because Carrie said she would like to learn to play" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 239). Obviously, this lovely apartment makes Carrie feel at ease, "For the first time in her life she felt settled, and somewhat justified in the eyes of society as she conceived of it. Her thoughts were merry and innocent enough" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 239). Unlike the flat that Drouet rented for Carrie, which was fully decorated by the landlord, the apartment that Carrie shares with Hurstwood offers her the freedom to decorate it as she likes. "For a long while she concerned herself over the arrangement of New York flats, and wondered at ten families living in one building and all remaining strange and indifferent to each other" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 239). Apparently, Carrie's desire of an ideal home in a physical sense is satisfied. Rather than simple arrangement of crude or ornate furniture, the interior of this place is decorated "appropriately" according to their preferences, engendering a kind of lovely atmosphere in this apartment. More importantly, Carrie is finally justly entitled to these things, although she is Hurstwood's wife in name only. Mrs. Wheeler's title is to her the surest assurance of Hurstwood's love and fortune. Living in satisfaction, her heart brims with warmth and delight so that she is no longer bitter about the indifference she once experienced but turns her attention to the indifference that existed among others.

As she did in Chicago, Carrie initially uses the New York apartment to launch a foray into domesticity, perfecting her biscuit recipe and arranging an attractive table for Hurstwood. This homey atmosphere also infects Hurstwood, who is especially gratified by the homey interior created with furniture bought on the installment plan and regards his new home as a cradle for emotions. "He really thought, after a year, that her chief expression in life was finding its natural channel in household duties" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 241). The homey atmosphere matters him so much that when his business suffers setbacks, he quickly finds solace at home. "Troubled as he was, he never exposed his difficulties to her. He carried himself with the same self-important air, took his new state with easy familiarity, and rejoiced in Carrie's proclivities and successes" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 239). However, due to the influence of her early family, Carrie is deficient in forming intimate relationships and her affection for Hurstwood is largely based on his ability to provide an ideal life for her though she exhibits considerable liking and affection for him. And Dreiser insists "True love she had never felt for him" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 229). Her lack of any deep feeling for him is perhaps best demonstrated after the dissolution of Hurstwood's partnership in the Warren Street saloon, when he can hardly avoid pouring out her his distress over his lost investment and the poor prospects now facing him. Carrie's only response is to reflect to herself indifferently: "Yet, what have I got to do with it? ... Oh, why should I be made to worry?" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 277). As the idle Hurstwood lets himself go to seed increasingly, she feels no sympathy but "gnawing contempt" for him (Dreiser, 1992, pp. 281-282). As Hurstwood has no luck getting a job and money is running out to the point where he can barely pay the house rent, Carrie leaves him. Eventually, he sells all his furniture, leaves his home, and becomes a homeless man, spiritually and materially. "The place that has been so comfortable, where he had spent so many days of warmth, was now a memory. Something colder and chillier confronted him" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 347). His final disintegration is

marked not only by Carrie's abandonment but also by his forced sale of the furniture that registered their personal traces and sweet home life.

At the end of the novel, they both become homeless spiritually and materially: Hurstwood turns on the gas in a seedy hotel and ends his life, while Carrie, as a celebrity and successful actress, is courted by posh hotels to move into their spacious suites with all the latest amenities. She chooses to establish herself in the Waldorf hotel, where all the work of home-making, including furnishing, cooking, and decorating falls to others. It is a public place, not even a home. Although these spacious suites are furnished with all the latest amenities, their decoration is exactly the same, thus, the interior decoration of the suites fails to express the individual character of the residents forever. And the final failure of her material and professional advancement to satisfy her emotional needs is again vividly suggested by her sadly remarking to her roommate that she feels lonely. The space she occupies in the Waldorf is sizable, but she remains trapped in a gilded cage. Drowning in the expanding alienation brought by the transformation of the United States into a consumer society, Carrie and Hurstwood are trapped into the whirlpool of consumerism and materialism in their pursuit of an ideal home, always wandering on the road to find the ideal home.

4. The Essence of Dwelling

Regardless of poverty or wealth, regardless of residing in tenements, elegant apartments, or posh hotels, Carrie and Hurstwood never find a haven in the heartless world that could offer them lasting happiness. In their quest for the ideal home, they never ponder upon the true essence of an ideal home but linger on the material sense of home and its materialistic implications, as Martin Heidegger refers in "Building Dwelling Thinking":

Both modes of building—building as cultivating and building as the raising up of edifices—are comprised within genuine building, that is, dwelling. Building as dwelling, that is, as being on the earth, however, remains for man's everyday experience that which is from the outset 'habitual'... For this reason it recedes behind the manifold ways in which dwelling is accomplished, the activities of cultivation and construction... The real sense of *bauen*, namely dwelling, falls into oblivion. (Heidegger, 2001, pp. 145-146)

Carrie and Hurstwood transform their residence into a mere tool for existence, turning their home into an unfamiliar entity, ready for their manipulation. Their focus is solely on home exists in the physical sense, replacing their own existence with various concrete activities of being, thus, they forget their own existence, rendering themselves homeless. Dwelling, as the basic character of human being for Heidegger, is never thought by Carrie until the appearance of Bob Ames, whose refined demeanor and philosophical outlook contrast starkly with Carrie's previous experiences, leaving a lasting impression on her.

In the scene next to the last chapter of the novel, during the second meeting between Carrie and Ames, Carrie is touched by Ames's perception of pursuit in life profoundly. Noting Carrie's disappointment and melancholy, he tells Carrie that "Life is full of desirable situations, but, unfortunately, we can occupy but one at a time" (Dreiser, 1992, p. 384). When Carrie expresses sadness to the failure of the hero in Balzac's *A great man of the provinces in Paris*, which she has read at Ames's previous suggestion, Ames responds her with a philosophical view on success. He interprets the failure of the hero as merely the loss of wealth, status, and romantic love, which doesn't count for much. Only when his pursuit of these things leads him astray from the true human goal—the pursuit of knowledge, which is, namely, failing spiritually, is it truly tragic. Ames also convinces

Carrie that her happiness lies within her heart. It is obvious that Ames articulated Carrie's existential dilemma through their comments on Balzac's works, just as Heidegger mentions:

However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in a lack of houses... The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell... Yet as soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that calls mortals into their dwelling. (Heidegger, 2001, p. 159)

For Carrie, the moment she begins to ponder on her own existence and discovers her place in the world, marks the true discovery of her ideal home. This holds true for modern individuals as well; understanding the self, learning to coexist with the self, is what grants enduring stability and happiness. Only then can one find ideal home for the soul in this transient and alienating world.

Conclusion

In *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser masterfully explores the intricacies of domesticity and its profound impact on the two main characters, Carrie and Hurstwood. Set in a time of rapid societal change and growing consumerism, the novel delves into the precarious nature of failed domesticity and the pursuit of an ideal home. Both Carrie and Hurstwood, yearn for a sense of belonging and emotional fulfillment that their respective families fail to provide in their own ways. From the tenement to the grand New York apartment and grand or seedy hotels, they seek refuge and stability, cherished them temporarily yet ultimately find themselves homeless materially and spiritually. Dreiser's portrayal of the characters' struggles with materialism, love, loneliness, and nothingness of life serves as a poignant reflection of the changing landscape of late-nineteenth-century America. Through the lens of home, Dreiser draws parallels between the personal transformations of his protagonists and the larger societal shifts occurring at the time, making *Sister Carrie* a timeless exploration of human desires, dreams, and the pursuit of happiness in a world of ever-shifting values and indifferent urbanization.

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