

## Features of Naturalism in Theodore Dreiser's "Sister Carrie"

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**Annotation:** This article examines the features of naturalism as presented in Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie*, exploring how the narrative illustrates the deterministic forces of environment, heredity, and socio-economic conditions that shape the characters' lives. This annotation summarizes the article's focus and main points, providing a concise overview of its content and relevance to the study of naturalism in literature.

**Keywords:** Naturalism, determinism, urban environment, American dream, socioeconomic status, moral ambiguity, social mobility, psychological realism, materialism, heredity and environment, industrialization, class struggle, objective narrative, impersonal city, character development, realism.

### Introduction

Naturalism developed as a literary movement in the late 1800s, shaped by the scientific determinism of thinkers like Darwin and Spencer, who believed that heredity, environment, and social conditions primarily governed human behavior, rather than personal choice. Authors such as Emile Zola, Stephen Crane, and Jack London embraced these ideas to explore the often harsh realities of life, focusing on individuals facing powerful, uncontrollable forces. In American literature, naturalism was particularly significant in urban areas, where rapid industrialization and city expansion highlighted extreme divides between wealth and poverty, as well as between opportunity and hopelessness.

Theodore Dreiser, one of the leading figures in American naturalism, explored these themes in his 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*. The novel tells the story of Carrie Meeber, a young woman from rural Wisconsin who moves to Chicago with dreams of a better life. As Carrie navigates the city's social and economic landscapes, she encounters both success and moral compromise. Her relationships with Charles Drouet and George Hurstwood highlight naturalistic themes as each character is driven by internal and external forces rather than conscious choices. This paper will examine how *Sister Carrie* exemplifies naturalist features in its portrayal of determinism, the influence of environment and heredity on characters, and Dreiser's objective narrative style.

### *Naturalism and Urban Determinism*

#### The City as an Unforgiving Environment

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser vividly depicts Chicago and New York as environments that exert an immense influence on Carrie's life. The city is portrayed as a realm of opportunity and danger, where success seems within reach but remains elusive for most. Carrie's arrival in Chicago marks the beginning of her exposure to the harsh realities of urban life. Dreiser describes the city's bustling streets, factories, and theaters in a way that emphasizes its power over individuals: the city "grinds down" those who lack the resources to thrive. Through descriptions of crowded tenements, filthy streets, and impersonal architecture, Dreiser shows how the city fosters anonymity and isolation, making it difficult for individuals to find stable paths to success.

Dreiser also uses the urban landscape to emphasize social stratification. Carrie's early experience in a low-wage job at a shoe factory contrasts sharply with the affluent lifestyles she observes in department

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stores and theaters, highlighting the economic divide within the city. These class divisions create a sense of aspiration in Carrie but also emphasize the challenges of upward mobility. The city represents an indifferent force, unconcerned with individual aspirations or morals, which align with the naturalist view that human lives are governed by external forces beyond personal control.

### *Class, Poverty, and the Illusion of the American Dream*

Dreiser critiques the notion of the American Dream by portraying Carrie's materialism and ambition in a context where wealth is both a symbol of success and an elusive goal. Carrie's desire for better clothing, a comfortable apartment, and social recognition reflects her belief in the promise of prosperity that the city seems to offer. However, Dreiser illustrates that economic factors, not effort alone, determine one's ability to rise in society. For example, while Carrie eventually becomes a successful actress, her ascent is due to chance encounters and social connections rather than personal talent or hard work alone.

In contrast, George Hurstwood's story reveals the fragility of social status and the illusory nature of success. Once a prosperous manager, Hurstwood's life unravels after he makes a series of impulsive decisions. His descent into poverty is depicted as inevitable, a consequence of economic forces rather than personal failure alone.

Dreiser's portrayal of Hurstwood's decline underscores the naturalist theme that the American Dream is often inaccessible to those who are subject to the whims of an indifferent society. Through Carrie and Hurstwood, Dreiser suggests that social mobility is governed by forces beyond an individual's control, questioning the validity of meritocracy.

### *Characters as Products of Environment and Heredity*

#### Carrie Meeber's Moral Ambiguity and Aspirations

As a protagonist, Carrie exemplifies the naturalist belief that individuals are shaped by their environment and inherent desires. Carrie is not driven by strong moral convictions but rather by a combination of ambition, need, and the allure of material success. Her relationships with men like Drouet and Hurstwood demonstrate her reliance on external circumstances rather than personal agency. Carrie's decisions—such as leaving her family in Wisconsin, moving in with Drouet, and later pursuing an affair with Hurstwood—are influenced by her social and economic ambitions rather than clear ethical considerations.

This moral ambiguity reflects Dreiser's view that individuals respond to their desires and circumstances rather than moral imperatives. Carrie's gradual transformation from a naive young woman to a more calculating, socially aware figure underscores her adaptability to her environment. Rather than condemning or romanticizing her actions, Dreiser presents them as responses to the opportunities and limitations she encounters, illustrating the naturalist view that behavior is shaped by social and environmental factors.

#### Hurstwood's Downfall as a Naturalistic Tragedy

Hurstwood's character arc serves as a powerful example of naturalistic tragedy. Once a successful manager, Hurstwood's status is destroyed by a combination of his impulsive actions and the indifferent forces of society. His decision to embezzle money and flee with Carrie to New York is not driven by malice or greed but rather by a desperate attempt to hold onto a lifestyle that is slipping away. Once in New York, however, Hurstwood finds himself unable to adapt to the competitive job market and the unyielding nature of urban life. His gradual descent into homelessness and despair illustrates the naturalist belief in determinism: despite his former success, Hurstwood cannot escape his circumstances or alter his fate.

Hurstwood's tragedy lies in the inevitability of his decline. His failure to regain stability reflects the social and economic forces that prevent the working class from achieving long-term success. Dreiser's depiction of Hurstwood's downward spiral highlights the fragility of social status in a capitalist society, where personal setbacks can quickly lead to ruin.



## *Naturalism and Dreiser's Narrative Style*

### Objective, Unemotional Tone

Dreiser's narrative style in *Sister Carrie* reflects the naturalist emphasis on objectivity and detachment. He refrains from making moral judgments about his characters, instead presenting their lives and choices as the result of environmental pressures and personal needs. This impartial tone allows readers to interpret Carrie's ambition and relationships without being swayed by the author's opinions, aligning with naturalism's focus on presenting life "as it is." Dreiser's language is descriptive but unadorned, conveying the psychological and social forces that shape the characters' lives without sentimentality.

### Detailed Observations of the Mundane

Dreiser's attention to material details—such as Carrie's clothing, her apartment, and her possessions—emphasizes the importance of socioeconomic status in shaping identity and aspiration. The mundane details of Carrie's life, including her initial poverty and eventual success as an actress, illustrate her shifting desires and social standing. For example, Dreiser frequently describes Carrie's fascination with department store displays and fashionable attire, underscoring her longing for a lifestyle that reflects wealth and status. By focusing on these external symbols, Dreiser shows how individuals in a consumer-driven society are often defined by their possessions and appearances.

### Conclusion

In *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser uses naturalistic features to portray the lives of characters who are subject to forces beyond their control. Through his depiction of urban life, economic determinism, and character-driven motivations, Dreiser critiques the American Dream and questions the attainability of social mobility. The novel's naturalistic elements—such as Carrie's psychological ambiguity, Hurstwood's inevitable decline, and the impersonal city environment—illustrate the movement's core themes of determinism and societal indifference. Dreiser's work remains relevant today as a critique of the economic and social forces that shape human lives and aspirations, offering a sobering reflection on the challenges of navigating modern society.

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