CHAPTER-FIVE
TOWARDS THE EVOLUTION OF A FRESH
FICTIONAL FORM : SISTER CARRIE
Chapter V
Towards the Evolution of a Fresh Fictional Form: *Sister Carrie*

Dreiser’s search for a new pattern of fiction for artistic representation of reality yielded astonishing results. In his first novel *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser’s efforts to deviate from the determinist view of life were apparent. Strains of naturalism and anti-naturalism seem to co-exist in the novel. *Sister Carrie* is often taken as a landmark of American naturalistic fiction. About *Sister Carrie* James T. Farrell writes that it truly “recreates the sense of an epoch; it is like a door which permits us entry into the consciousness of an America that is no more.” But it is no mere document. It is a powerful and tragic story created with an unrelenting logic; his novel is just as fresh and alive today as when it was written. Malcolm Cowley was right in his assertion:

*Sister Carrie* had the appearance of being a naturalistic novel for the work of later naturalists. Yet it was in a sense naturalistic by default naturalistic because Dreiser was writing about the life he know best in the only style he had learned. There is a personal and compulsive quality in the novel that is not at all naturalistic.

But a close examination of the novel shows that naturalism as illustrated in this novel by Dreiser is more ambivalent than clear. Oscar Cargill calls *Sister Carrie* "an unusual Naturalistic novel".

In *Sister Carrie*’s helplessness the impression of deterministic
forces is less significant than the sense of fate in human life. "Carrie is a lone figure in a tossing thoughtless sea." (SC 10)

The responsibility for Carrie and Hurstwood's actions is partly attributed by Dreiser himself to "forces wholly superhuman." (SC 2)

The crisis in the mind of both Carrie and Hurstwood is highlighted deliberately by the writer to reveal a depth of human consciousness. The prolonged debate by Hurstwood before breaking open the safe is a testimony to his indecision and his act of commission.

According to Robert Penn Warren, H. L. Mencken and William White the ideas of Dreiser were not much different from Hardy's. Carrie is the victim of forces over which she has no control. But this should not be oversimplified as a Zolaesque attitude, because Dreiser's protagonists were never at one with themselves or with their environment and they were always one step ahead of their achievements. Contemporary reviewers denounced the sordid content of the novel and also its amoral attitude. But they seem to ignore the grandeur of the novel. The dichotomy that Dreiser was careful to present cannot be missed. Once Dreiser himself considered titling his novel *The Flesh and the Spirit* since in it the contradiction between materialism and spiritualism surfaces glaringly.

The stories of Carrie and Hurstwood depict the polarities of life, "the positives and negatives of energy" as Dreiser put it in *Notes on Life*, "the systole and diastole of experience". We cannot forget that while Hurstwood was overawed by the past Carrie was excited by the possibilities of the future. Moreover, Carrie's heart never rules her
head. Love, as it is conventionally understood, plays no genuine role in Carrie's life. In her life other needs and other drives are all-consuming. Hurstwood is a dupe of fate and finds himself more deeply enmeshed in the tangled web to sacrifice himself in the process. Carrie's plans and activities show her will. Possessed of a sharp eye rather than an emotional heart Carrie achieves security through Drouet. She becomes free from sadness of her mind:

Thoughts of Drouet returned — of the things he had told her. She now felt that life was better, that it was livelier, sprightlier. She boarded a car in the best of spirits, feeling her blood still flowing pleasantly. She would live in Chicago, her mind kept saying to itself. She would have a better time than she had ever had before — she would be happy. (SC 27)

Philip Gerber guessed about the reasons behind the slow critical reception of *Sister Carrie*:

One of the major reasons why this novel was frowned upon in 1900 was precisely Dreiser's obvious adherence to the deterministic view of human conditions.4

Lars Ahnebrink and Stuart P. Sherman also included *Sister Carrie* in the group of Naturalistic novels such as Norris' *McTeague* and Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. But Donald Pizer rightly analyses the peculiarity of Dreiser's naturalism which is greatly different from that of Norris or Crane:

The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct or chance. But he also suggests a compensating humanistic value
in his characters or their fates which affirm the significance of the individual and of his life.\textsuperscript{5}

Carrie loves nobody, but herself. Her egotistic desire for success preempts any passion towards Hurstwood. It may be argued that the novel is not about Hurstwood who seems to be a victim of environment and sex drive. He falls under the sway of forces working from within and without. Apparently, Drouet seems to have attracted Carrie with his congenial cheeks, light moustache, grey ‘fedora’ hat, new suit and shiny brown shoes. It was indeed natural for Carrie to fall in love with Drouet.

But in reality the opposite thing has happened. Carrie became gradually disillusioned about Drouet while the magnetism displayed by Carrie was further intensified. Drouet is similarly portrayed as at the mercy of determining forces, instinct still predominates over reason in him as well. This is not true about Carrie.

Drouet possesses

a mind free of any consideration of the problems or forces of the world and actuated by greed but an insatiable love of variable pleasure — woman — pleasure. (SC 6)

Dreiser also gave an account of Hurstwood’s infatuation with Carrie. Carrie is uneducated and rather limited in her speech. But she succeeds in captivating such a titan as Hurstwood in the very presence of his wife. Hurstwood, as seen by Drouet, is a hero admired by an ambitious man. He is a moderately rich man typical of Chicago’s, nay, America’s progress in 1890. Possessing the fatal
American yearning for a top role in society, hindered by his strict middle class concepts, he is forced into various jobs. He is handicapped by the preconceptions of his social position. Drouet had also the wrong dreams like Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. His ambitions made him appear like a poor victim. Dreiser chronicled in detail his love of cigars, good whiskey, crude speech, his dress and so on to let us know the helplessness of a victim. It is a sad thing to want for happiness but it is a terrible thing to see another groping about blindly for it. Dreiser harps on the pointlessness of the struggle of both Hurstwood and Drouet. Charles Shapiro rightly asserts:

In *Sister Carrie*, the characters, the symbols, the action and even the details are attuned to a basic theme an elaboration of Emerson's complaint that "things" dominate the American scene.⁶

Carrie's character should be judged against this background. That she felt tempted by the lure of dollars was not unusual. But the great thing about her was that she was not a victim, nor was she degraded. Carrie found herself in an antagonistic world, and she has to struggle for finding a place for her in that world. That was her individuality, reminding us of Dreiser's own personal experiences. The novel was a cry from the depths and it was based not on documents but on dreams. It was like somebody contemplating with curiosity and wonder as *Sister Carrie* in the rocking chair staring at a world not because she is weak but because she is too bemused to change.

In *Sister Carrie* there is the puzzle of destiny and the mystery of a materialistic world in which things dominated and all these
haunted Carrie. She was not too weak but she was too bemused. Charles Shapiro was of the opinion:

> In *Sister Carrie* there is the effect on the individual consciousness, of the misdirection of the American success dream.⁷

It seems that Carrie is passive in her desires, all the time dreaming and contemplating about happiness. She is driven by passions. Likewise one may have wrong conception about Hurstwood’s deterioration. His theft at Fitzgerald and Moy’s seems indeed naturalistic. But in that case we must not overlook the fact that Hurstwood fell tempted earlier than the accidental automatic locking of the safe. Environment and heredity were not to blame for the downfall. Dreiser’s Characters are not a victims of circumstance in the true sense of the word applied to naturalism. Secondly, Dreiser’s subjective feelings expressed through his characters and his consequent compassion for them were contradictory to the requirements of naturalistic fiction. Thirdly, in his novels Dreiser employed the narrative device of ‘omniscience’ which distinguished it from naturalistic fictions. This point was discussed by Yoshinobu Hakutani.

> Every novelist makes his presence felt in the selection of fictional material, details and tone, but Dreiser’s presence is more obvious than that of other novelists.⁸

In Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* we find as william J. Handy asserts it:

> naive wonder at its magnificence and at the same time with a disappointment at its unconcerned indifference to the lot of a helpless individual.⁹
In fact, Dreiser delineated life not for experiment but for echoing his own experiences with a view to transcending the technical concepts of the mechanistic theory of man. He did not depict Carrie's character from the point of view of a scientific observer but as one who was bent on understanding human beings in whose struggle there was always a hopeful striving for the ideal. Carrie is above everything alive and hopeful moving, acting hesitating and contradictory. Hakutani rightly asserts:

Dreiser's chief interest lay in the individuals and their endless aspiration. Unlike other literary naturalists, Dreiser attempted to discover an ideal order in man's life.  

A novel like *Sister Carrie* was a subjective necessity for its author. It reveals a process of self discovery in American life. From one point of view the essential theme of *Sister Carrie* is no different from Dreiser's other novels of the later period. It is the same conflict between the lure of material possession and yearning for spiritual satisfaction. Dreiser himself was alternately fascinated by materialism and repelled by its degrading effect on human life. He portrays the conflict from only one angle in *Sister Carrie* and highlights the degrading effect of materialism. In fact, in order to understand the book it is essential that we realize the all important role played by money it is no problem at the beginning. Later money gave him the power to satisfy his passion for Carrie. In the end we see money as the means for Hurstwood to keep his body and soul together. Even to Carrie money is the means for getting everything in life for which she aspires. At the same time we see in Carrie the impossibility of realizing one's hopes. From the very start of the
novel she is dreaming wild dreams of some vague far-off supremacy. At the end she has that supremacy, her name in heights, her future assured.

The rocking chair is one of Dreiser's most powerful symbols. Carrie is seen sitting on a rocking chair, having learned that she is thus without happiness. We first see her boarding a train, we first see her in a chair, rocking back and forth. She has travelled far, the rocking chair will not take her anywhere. There is no a liberation for Carrie. Carrie came to Chicago seeking a more adventurous and fulfilling life than the sedate restricted existence she had lived with her parents in rural Wisconsin. For a brief period of time she lived with her sister Minnie and her husband Hanson, while she sought and eventually began employment as a factory girl. Again, she was in quest of liberation. The dreary atmosphere of the Hanson household and the physical and the mental strain of her job led her to go for more freedom and she accepted the advances of Drouet. Till now Carrie was "yet more drawn than she drew" (SC 70). At this stage Carrie was a poor victim to dominance of 'things' and Dreiser gives an account of Carrie being overwhelmed by the desires for material possessions:

Into this imporant commercial region the timid Carrie went...... She walked bravely forward, led by an honest desire to find employment and delayed at every stop by the interest of the unfolding scene, and a sense of helplessness amid so much evidence of power and force which she did not understand. (SC 16).

Only a few lines later, we get another picture of Carrie being
fascinated by the world of things:

A flame of envy lighted in her heart. She realised in a dim way how much the city held — wealth, fashion, ease — every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart. (SC 23)

Again there is Dreiser’s omniscient comment:

She was again the victim of the city’s hypnotic influence, the subject of the mesmeric operations of super—intelligible forces. (SC 74)

But at this stage of Carrie’s life as Louis J. Zanine remarked,

Dreiser was examining his own impulses toward self—gratification and interpreting his own existence within the evolutionary universe of Herbert Spencer.11

Zanine makes it clear that

This is not to assert that Dreiser portrayed Carrie as a mirror of his own personality or that he fully endorsed her rather unthinking selfish behavior.12

The book closes with Carrie’s mind awakened to new truths. Bob Ames recommended to Carrie Hardy and Balzac and reminded her that she could find higher fulfilment and deeper happiness in the more serious theatrical world of comedy—drama.

The true artist, he declares, does not seek

“acclaim from the masses but strives to serve the masses” The world
Towards the Evolution of a Fresh Fictional Form: Sister Carrie [93]

is always struggling to express itself to make clear its hopes and sorrows and give them voice. It is always seeking the means, and it will delight in the individual who can express these things for it. That is why we have great musicians, great painters, great writers and actors. They have the ability to express the world's sorrows and longings, and the world gets up and shouts their names ... you and I are but mediums through which something is expressing itself. Now, our duty is to make ourselves ready mediums ... you must help the world express itself. Use will make your powers endure." (SC 485 - 486)

Most people are not capable of voicing their feelings. They depend upon others. That is what genius is for. One expresses their desires for them in music; another one in poetry; another one in a play. Carrie reflects:

Not money .... not clothes.... not applause - not even that - but goodness - for others (SC 486).

We see a more "perfect Carrie in mind and body, because now her mind was aroused." (SC 485).

In Sister Carrie New York becomes a catalyst both releasing and intensifying the qualities of mind and character. While Hurstwood feels insignificant in New York, Carrie is overwhelmed by "the wonder of it its infinite sense of possibility, an atmosphere easily and quickly felt" (SC 265). New York made her more self-reliant and more self-confident. It is true that in the world of Sister Carrie man will never find a moment of restful contentment and the tides of life will not spare him in their rush toward unknown shores, but Carrie like all of Dreiser's characters feels that time will bring complete fulfillment.
Sinclair Lewis was also all praise as James Lundquist informed us about it:

Dreiser’s great first novel Sister Carrie which he dared to publish thirty long years ago and which I read twenty-five years ago, came to housebound and airless America like a great free Westernwind and to our stuffy domesticity gave us the first fresh air since Mark Twain and Whitman.¹³

Sinclair Lewis spoke of the new dominant liberal attitudes towards morality. But Sister Carrie gave America something more. It gave America a new heroine who in the midst of all illusions discovered the disillusionment without losing faith in life’s romantic possibilities. Joseph K. Davis also threw light on this aspect of Sister Carrie:

In 1900 in his first novel Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser shows the impact of the modern city upon the lives of his major characters.¹⁴

Here we find something similar to that of a Fitzgerald novel. As often found in city novel we find in the fictions of Fitzgerald the picture of personal dissociation which reflects a larger social order. The dissociated person has not found a way to integrate motive and act and so to organise his life’s activities towards a continuous and progressive fulfilment of his Emersonian desires. Dissociation is distinguishable from frustration. In developing without equivocation the modern name of personal dissociation and urban victimization Fitzgerald with the vision of a seer explained why his fictions reveal an essential helplessness of man in an overpowering and alien world. Fitzgerald’s interpretation of the city growing as it did
out of a typical social experience of the times has a historical relevance as well as significant implications for the development of American responses and evaluation of American life.

Fitzgerald went through a typical pattern of hope and disillusionment. In this disillusioning process of discovery, he developed an understanding of the society and an emotional complexity towards it that equipped him also to become the generic novelist of twentieth century city fiction. While other novelists of his time like Robert Herrick and James T. Farrell shared some of his isolated insights into the meaning of city life, none had gone through the total experience of discovery that gave Fitzgerald an inclusive and immediate knowledge of the modern city. This is in many ways comparable to the art of his predecessor's novels. Like his immediate literary successor, Dreiser also recreated movingly the common disillusionments, fortuities and defeats in city life. His disillusionment was also extreme because he felt so seriously the startling antithesis in the city between what men hope for and what they realize. He was also deeply affected by the fearful spectacle of the city life both as an observer and as a participant. Dreiser began to seek confusedly but persistently for a philosophy of life as soon as he found himself in the building of the American city life. He made experiments with characters like Carrie "a wisp in the wind" (SC 70) in going to study the chaotic scene and felt forced to question and reject a set of beliefs that belonged to a world from which he was now removed like his Sister Carrie. The city of New York seemed to Carrie a miraculous continent pulsating alive and full of promise. It was a compound of hope and joy in existence, intense hope and intense joy. Her first reaction when she saw
Drouet was one of the simple uncritical wonder and gratification, something different from animalism of violent selfishness. But in her relationship with Hurstwood Carrie appears to be more conscious and detached. She was gradually aware of the sordidness beneath the outer glaze and dazzle.

In Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* the story ends in disillusionment and dissatisfaction. The attenuation of the romance mode is incipient in the ironic treatment of the career of Sister Carrie. The story could be a romantic story of acquisition and attainment of the impossible. But the romance mode is deliberately subverted to suggest a critique of Carrie's illusions. Carrie is egotistic and through the portrayal of her character Dreiser tried to reassess the value of romantic egotism. Carrie came of a poor family background but she did not beg for anybody's favour. She wanted to have wealth and luxury as a matter of right. This firmness of her character makes her all the more interesting. She knew the pangs of poverty but she was not poor in her attitude and gestures. She wanted to know the power of money because poverty degenerates a man. Carrie succeeded in saving herself from degeneration.

Jennie Gerhardt, the heroine of Dreiser's next novel was vulnerable. But not so was Carrie. By degrees she had collected herself. As a new woman she cared little for puritan strictures on immorality. Carrie can be called a victim of deterministic forces if she only wanted wealth. But she also wanted a control over the situation. She never appeared to be helpless and even at the cost of moral integrity she could overcome her helplessness. To some extent Carrie is in pursuit of a dissipated aimless career but she never allowed affluence to be destructive. Her pursuit of wealth and happiness had a different kind of grace and adventure which we
shall later find in Clyde Griffith, the protagonist of *An American Tragedy*, written twenty five years after *Sister Carrie*. It may be argued that Carrie could not rise but she did not fall too. The premises of a naturalistic novel strip the protagonist of will and ethical responsibility. Dreiser did not strip Carrie of will and ethical responsibility. She is restless because she has a will of her own. Till the end she was in quest of fulfilment, something to provide her life with import. It was because of her will that she was dissatisfied even after being wealthy, pampered and sought after. She had sensed the possibility of an interesting career ahead even before Bob Ames told her about serious stage roles. If she was a little confused, it was because she realized that life was a puzzle. Again her will power was in contradiction with her ethical responsibility. She did not take keen interest in sincere ethical convictions, but she was conscious about what she willed. This was the deeper dilemma of the individual self finding affirmation in a world in which order lies beyond one's rational comprehension.

Dreiser as a creative artist took a big leap in the novel and went far beyond the exploration of the influences of heredity and environmental imitation on human mind. He wanted to create a distopic vision of romance. In the later novel *Jennie Gerhardt* Dreiser's attempt towards the evolution of the new fictional form was more distinct. *Sister Carrie* in spite of all the shadows of the naturalistic fictions is not a story of man as victim of environment. The story on the other hand is more about her straggle to overcome the limits of a given life. The illusions engendered by the surrounding in which Carrie found herself turned into disillusionment and the subversion of the romance form is nearly achieved. The use of the form is still more fascinating in the next novel *Jennie Garhardt*. 