

019
TANG

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and the Self in Consumer Society



**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts at the University of Macau**

June 2010

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract of the Thesis.....	viii
Introduction: A Materialistic Approach to a Naturalistic Novel.....	1
Chapter One: An Insatiable Desire for Commodities.....	11
Chapter Two: Personal Appearance and the Self in the Novel.....	30
Chapter Three: Adaptation and the Changing Self in the Novel.....	42
Conclusion.....	50
Works Cited.....	51



Abstract of the Thesis

In this paper, I will analyze Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* using materialistic approaches. Although Dreiser himself is often regarded as a naturalist, but never a Marxist, it can never be denied that he had sketched a vivid picture of the urban consumer society in America in the late nineteenth century and reading the novel from materialistic approaches can help to explain how the insatiable desires of different characters in the novel, especially the protagonist Carrie, are connected to commodities. With respect to commodity fetishism, a Marxist view is that Carrie's commodity fetish is owing to the mystification of the commodity. Although Carrie is the one who makes the products, she dissociates the manufacturing process from the commodity that she is pursuing. Moreover, it is the mystification that stimulates her desires to consume because the mystified world of commodities has made her feel small and inadequate, and she has to keep consuming in order to feel happy and satisfied temporarily. Marx believes that it is a kind of ideology, which is called "false consciousness", that the bourgeois uses to control the working-class people in order to satisfy the interests of the bourgeois.

In fact, another reason why the characters have an unquenchable thirst for commodities in the novel is to improve their appearance and construct their self-identity. Characters in the novel believe the possession of commodities can make them better and the self formation of the characters is constituted by different kinds of commodities. This belief is a strategy of

adaptation in the consumer society, which puts great emphasis on appearances. It is Carrie's sensitive observation to the importance of appearance that makes her well-adapted in the competitive consumer society. Although it is later found that the characters, who strive for self-identity through commodities, actually lack "autonomous self". It is not necessarily a bad thing since there are only winners and losers in the capitalistic society. Indeed, it is Carrie's weak sense of self that leads her to a successful career in theater in the novel.

