

Theodore Dreiser's Style in "Sister Carrie"

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Abstract. This article explores the distinctive and often criticized stylistic features of Theodore Dreiser's work, particularly *Sister Carrie*. Critics such as James Phalen, Donald Pizer, and John Flanagan point out Dreiser's linguistic shortcomings, including vagueness, pretensions, and syntactic errors. Despite these flaws, Dreiser's raw, unrefined style aims to present an unfiltered depiction of life, characteristic of naturalism. His stories often combine fiction and reality, creating a complex picture of the characters' dual identities and societal influences. The use of symbolism and irony further emphasizes the themes of deception and social criticism, especially in the portrayal of sibling relationships and gender roles. Dreiser's deterministic worldview and depiction of random events emphasize the limitations of human choice in his works.

Key words: writing style, naturalism, fiction vs. reality, symbolism, sibling relationships, gender roles, societal critique

Introduction

James Phalen critiques Theodore Dreiser as “probably the most egregiously deficient stylist among novelists of the first rank.” Despite recognizing Dreiser’s significant stature, Phalen highlights Dreiser’s notable linguistic shortcomings. Donald Pizer is even more severe, labeling Dreiser “the worst writer of his eminence in the history of literature.” John Flanagan remarked that Dreiser writes as if he lacks a native language. In "Dreiser and the Plotting of Inarticulate Experience," Julian Markels notes that Flanagan categorized Dreiser’s stylistic flaws into verbal and syntactical faults. Verbal faults include inaccuracies, pretentiousness, archaisms, faulty idioms, triteness, misuse of foreign terms, and unfortunate coinages. Syntactical faults encompass faulty references, dangling modifiers, agreement failures, and substituting participial constructions for finite verbs. Flanagan debated which flaws were more annoying.

Dreiser’s language use in his novels is distinct. The second sentence of "Sister Carrie" reads, “It was in August, 1889.” This could be simplified to “It was August, 1889,” but Dreiser’s phrasing confuses readers about what “it” refers to, following a lengthy word sentence. This complex sentence indicates the period in which the novel’s events begin, blending fiction with a real-time span. Dreiser’s descriptions often create a virtual sense of America, such as his depiction of department stores as historical artifacts. For example, “The nature of these vast retail combinations, should they ever permanently disappear, will form an interesting chapter in the commercial history of our nation” suggests a subjective and virtual perspective rather than purely informative.

In Dreiser’s character portrayal, such as describing Drouet as “a type of the traveling canvasser for a manufacturing house,” the reader learns his name only after several pages. This exemplifies

Dreiser's clumsy, chaotic sentences and faulty syntax. Sentences like "The, to Carrie, very important theatrical performance was to take place at the Avery on conditions which were to make it more noteworthy than was at first anticipated" demonstrate his redundant repetitions, poor diction, and lack of euphony. However, as a naturalist, Dreiser strives for an accurate depiction of life, believing polished style detracts from the reality he presents. His raw, unadorned style reflects the unfiltered truth, making the novel an imitation of life. Dreiser's style, distinct from any other author, reflects life's uncontrolled nature, expressing his anxiety through words that fall together haphazardly. His style models the chaotic universe he aims to describe.

Dreiser's novels are cornerstones of American naturalism, illustrating the harsh world of poverty and struggle. Chicago, in "Sister Carrie," represents dual realities: the day's work extinguishing desire and the night's liberty and desire. This dichotomy is revealed through Dreiser's language, which creates characters' false identities. For instance, Carrie's delight in money and material possessions reflects her constructed identity driven by external values.

Dreiser's characters often embody dual identities: an "obtained" identity they are born with and a "gained" or created identity. Characters like Carrie seek wealth and luxury for the status they represent rather than for the items themselves. Symbolism, such as the window symbolizing deception, and the ironic use of sentimental language, reflect the uncertainty and relativity of the modern self.

Public systems and the language of representation shape Carrie's moral decline, with Dreiser excusing her rise through deceit. The contrast between Carrie and Hurstwood highlights gender roles, with Hurstwood's deception and eventual domesticity contrasting with Carrie's lack of guilt and consumerism. Hurstwood's initial deception, leading to their flight from Chicago, and subsequent bigamous marriage illustrate his manipulative nature and Carrie's passive acceptance.

Dreiser's narrative often includes accidental events, reflecting a deterministic worldview where human choice is limited. For example, Hurstwood's theft is accidental, and Clyde Griffiths in "An American Tragedy" accidentally drowns Roberta Alden, reinforcing the theme of limited personal control.

- Dreiser's portrayal of female characters like Carrie often shows them as passive, reluctantly yielding to male desires. However, Carrie's reluctance can also signify her ability to conceal her inner feelings. Dreiser allows characters to articulate their perspectives, often without irony, emphasizing their passivity and helplessness.
- Overall, Dreiser's style, criticized for its clumsiness and lack of refinement, reflects his naturalistic approach to depicting the raw, uncontrolled nature of life and the complex interplay between reality and fiction.

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