

Intrigues, encounters and disenchantments of Carrie Meeber in the Windy City and Sin City: exploring Dreiser's novel – *Sister Carrie*

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Abstract:

In *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser draws a detailed picture of the Yankee way of life in the late 19th century. One of the precursors of American naturalism, Dreiser precisely describes how the city was organized, focusing on society, culture, politics and one identity facet that highlights the ambitions and dehumanized collectivity whose primordial intensions were revealed from the fulfillment of carnal desires. Through the characters' displacements through the cities of Chicago and New York, we were able to formulate understandings about how this maladjusted, immoral and unfair society was structured concerning its politics, culture, identity and social issues. The study was developed by means of a bibliographic, qualitative and descriptive-analytical research for which different theoretical contributions founding this work were mobilized, emphasizing those related to Naturalism, the city, discourse and identity formation. Among the authors, it is worth mentioning: Barros (2012); Benjamin (1994); Bresciani (1985); Coy (2004); Rama (1982); Sennet (2001).

Key Words: City; Displacement; Modernity; Naturalism; Capitalism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Los límites de una ciudad no son espaciales. Una ciudad sobrevive o se expande de otro modo, en la mirada del viajero o en la nostalgia del que recuerda” (Oliverio Coelho)

By the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, we can notice that the relations among city, literature and modernity became closer and produced fruitful reflections about new forms of sociability brought about by the modern city, be they in the speeches of philosophers, politicians, ordinary citizens, as well as in writers' discourse. Walter Benjamin (1994), when analyzing the street occupation phenomenon in Paris and the consolidation of the *flânerie* as a new city inhabitant model, shows us that, within this urban imaginary, the galleries, “miniature world” where the most elegant commercial establishments fulfilled a function of reducing the street panic.

In the social imaginary of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, literature established a discourse on the urban, expressing conflicts, experiences, subjects and the way they relate to that environment. The literary discourse about the urban created another city, the one which is erected by the writing of intellectuals. Angel Rama (1982), in his work – *The City of Letters*, points out that the city is a discourse: “Every city seems to be a discourse that articulates several bifront signs according to laws that evoke grammatical ones. But there is an agreement where the tension of the parties has intensified. Cities sumptuously develop a language through two different and overlapping networks: physics, which the average visitor travels through is lost in its multiplicity and fragmentation; and the symbolic, which orders and interprets it, even if only for those kindred spirits, capable of reading as meanings what are nothing more than sensitive signifiers for others, and, thanks to this reading, the order is reconstructed. There is a maze of streets that only personal adventure can penetrate and a maze of signs that only reasoning intelligence can decipher, finding its order” (Rama, 1982, p. 3).

Rama's postulates about the literate city and the real one, show us how the configuration of identities and networks of urban sociability developed, and how literature allied to the press became a mediator between the real city and the imagined one. As this Uruguayan author rightly pointed out, intellectual activity specialized from the development of cities, and it was in the “city of letters” that newspapers and literary activity stood out, forming a readers' circle, albeit in a small number, but eager for newness.

This phenomenon corresponded to the vogue of a serial novel, the great locomotive of the development of an imaginary forged from the modern urban experience, be it the London of Dickens's novels and short stories or the Paris of Zola's novels and Baudelaire's poetry. Walter Benjamin (1994), studying Baudelaire's literary modernity, affirms that the city emerges in the pages of books, magazines and newspapers, giving rise to the vogue of a panoramic literature.

In this work, we pursue a reflection on the relationship between literature and the city, thinking literary discourse as representing the city, from reading the novel *Sister Carrie*, written by the American naturalist Theodor Dreiser, published in 1900, having as its horizon the urban discourse about modern cities. In Dreiser's narrative, the main characters travel through Chicago and New York, showing the various phases of their lives and confirming the tendency of the Big Apple to be a great magnetized pole.

The writer Theodor Dreiser, although not well known to the reading public, has an important contribution to American literature. Theodore Herman Albert Dreiser (born August 27, 1871, Terre Haute, Indiana, USA; died December 28, 1945, Hollywood, California at the age of 74) is considered one of the leading exponents of Naturalism regarding American literature. He was the main figure of a national literary movement which replaced the observance of the Victorian rules of the time, starting to portray clearly and literarily in its pages the daily urban social life by the end of the 19th century. Among other themes, his novels explore the social problems arising from one America that was rapidly industrializing (Coy, 2004, p. 253).

His experience with poverty in his youth and yearnings for wealth and success would become recurrent themes in his novels, as well as the misfortunes of his brothers and sisters in the early part of his adult life, which gave him additional material for the elaboration of his characters. It is worth mentioning that most of Dreiser's works are based on real characters, notably in his first great work, *Sister Carrie*, supported by the accounts of the adventures and misadventures of one of his sisters (Coy, 2004, p. 235-236).

Dreiser was an American novelist and journalist from a realist-naturalist school. In his novels, the main characters usually achieve their goals, despite the lack of moral and ethical sense in their attitudes and personalities. The literary situations in his works are very similar to natural studies and journalistic details; however, his descriptions are genuine and accurate, trademarks in his writings. His most outstanding novels are: *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), *The Genius* (1915) and *An American Tragedy* (1925), among others. In 1930 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize of Literature and, although he was not awarded such an honor, he had his name written in literary history because he was one of the precursors and best writers of the American naturalist movement (Barros, 1982, p. 2.861).

In Dreiser's narrative, the theme of the tragic aspects of social struggles for survival in an unfair, materialistic and inhuman society develops, in which the darker and more sordid side of the human nature emerges, and the character Carrie illustrates this struggle, when creating her own survival strategies in a hostile environment.

II. THE CITY AND ITS READERS: *SISTER CARRIE* AND HER DISPLACEMENTS

By the end of the 19th century, the urban space infiltrated itself into the social imagination in an unavoidable way. According to the thinking of the time, science was postulated as a solution to all problems. It should also be noted that there was some belief in which the West was entering a "new era" of conquests and innovations, with public life changing, making individuals "actors of a very particular type", as stated by Richard Sennet (2001): "It is likely that there are as many different ways of conceiving what a city is as there are existing cities. The simplest says that a city is a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet. For this definition to be true, the settlement must have a large, heterogeneous population; population concentration must be somewhat dense, trade among the population must make this dense and disparate mass interact. In this environment of strangers whose lives touch, there is an audience problem that is related to the audience problem that an actor faces on stage" (Sennet, 2001, p. 58).

The fascination with the urban by writers was, according to Maria Stella Bresciani, due to the great "emotional force of political and literary rhetoric, in general, present in the texts of educated men of the 19th century, when the outlines of a new sensitivity appear with equal impact" (Bresciani, 1985, p. 34). In order to enter these new forms of sociability and sensitivity, it is necessary to read the literary texts, as they provide us important aspects that lie among the lines of this new urban life, as they constitute some oblique capture of reality.

The most varied literary texts expressed the most varied changes in the urban space of the city in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It can be observed that many modern literary texts circulated on the modern city which had the urban landscape as their theme, be they chronicles, short stories, romances or poetries, and without a doubt, such texts contributed significantly to establish a new urban and modern sensibility. Berno Kölln affirms that in the context of important economic changes in the United States, writers brought the "average man" to the literary scene and the working-class as well: "Realism became one of the forms present in the literature of that period. The end of the 19th century, which already pointed to both realism and the

strengthening of industries and monopoly capitalism, is a very significant example of this. The works of William Dean Howells and Stephen Crane touch on several crucial points to understand the advent of monopoly capitalism and its impact on the ways of living and thinking of the subjects, among them the workers. [...] Something similar can be said about naturalism, which came in the wake of American literature from that period. Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser were perhaps the best-known exponents of this 'literary school' inspired by the seminal works of Émile Zola. It is difficult not to be instigated by the potential relationship that exists between the image of man in naturalist literature and the directions of social life in which they flourished. It has been widely noted that one of the most pernicious and astonishing effects of proletarianization in industrial societies is the dehumanization of workers. The concomitance of the bestialized workers and the bestial man image of the naturalists is far from being, from this point of view, a casual coincidence" (Kölln, 2014, p. 6-7).

At first, we see, in *Sister Carrie*, a familiar scenario for that time. People left their hometowns in a search for a better life in big cities that were in full development in the United States by the end of the 19th century. Thousands of people set out, pursuing better living conditions, seeking dignity and wealth in environments that supposedly offered the means to achieve the "American dream". For the main character of the novel was no different. Carrie Meeber got on a train which left her small town in the American Midwest, Columbia City, where she could not manage to progress in life, leaving for the nearest industrial center, Chicago: "A gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss, a touch in the 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, and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 3).

Carrie, despite leaving her family, was excited to live and try her fate in the big city. Since she was a little girl, she had heard interesting things about the Windy City, Chicago, and its fame, and it piqued her curiosity, fueling the hope of one day getting out of her unfavorable conditions and boring life in a town with no prospects like her hometown; and then live and work in a place that could offer promising perspectives for social advancement as well as some fun and entertainment. The White City as Chicago is also nicknamed had an accelerated development at the end of the 19th century, coming to host the Great International Exhibition in 1893, as stated by Cruz (2011): "The accelerated economic and demographic growth of the city of Chicago in the last decades of the 19th century and first decades of the 20th century was associated with major social changes, especially cultural/racial heterogeneity and crime. In economic terms, the growing importance of cities around the Great Lakes region by the second half of the 19th century was related to the growing industrialization of the USA in the post-Civil War period (1961-65). In the city of Chicago, the expansion of the American rail network was remarkable (1848 onwards); the construction of the Michigan-Illinois Canal (1848) and its junction with the Mississippi River (1900). Parallel to these economic factors, the demographic growth of the city was related to the occupation of the American Midwest by the second half of the 19th century and the various demographic pressures that followed to which migration stands out" (Cruz, 2011, p. 8).

But Chicago was not only a promising environment of opportunities, it was also a big city with its virtues and vicissitudes. Being in the wrong place with "wicked" people could ruin anyone, especially a naïve girl from the countryside as it was the main character of the story: "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility. The city has its cunning wiles no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure, with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective, to all moral intents and purposes, as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye. Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 3-4).

In this sense, Theodor Dreiser delineates Carrie's displacements who left her small town to work in the industry in Chicago. The setting is little Columbia City, from where the protagonist departed carrying only four dollars in her pocket, heading for her sister's house. When the train left Wisconsin, Carrie met Drouet, a traveling salesman, responsible for her first life turn, and her journey changed profoundly from then on: "He leaned forward to put his elbows upon the back of her seat and proceeded to make himself volubly agreeable. – 'Yes, that's a great resort for Chicago people. The hotels are swell. You are not familiar with this part of the country, are you?' – 'Oh yes I am', answered Carrie. 'That is, I live at Columbia City. I have never been through here though'. – 'And so, this is your first visit to Chicago', he observed" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 5).

The flirtatious and womanizing character Drouet, speaking of Chicago to Carrie at the beginning of the plot, described the city as an oasis of a thousand wonders, where everything was spectacular and admirable. A place where "life happens", with different and varied possibilities for fun and entertainment, that is, a second New York. But his behavior, in fact, only masked the real intentions behind his generous attitude; he was not there to be the real good Samaritan, or to serve as a guide, showing her the main sights of that charming city.

His main objectives were to seduce and court her; maliciously, the “boy gallant” used the city as a trap to deceive the innocent girl: “‘If you are going there you will enjoy it immensely. Have you relatives?’ – ‘I am going to visit my sister’, she explained. ‘You want to see Lincoln Park’, he said, ‘and Michigan Avenue. They are putting up great buildings there. It’s a second New York, great. So much to see – theatres, crowds, fine houses – oh you’ll like that’” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 5).

Through the timid eyes of a newcomer from the countryside, like Carrie, the city is seen as a paradise to be explored. Our heroine was overwhelmed by wonder. Modernity had arrived in some American cities and everything was new. Life in the city pulsed, people flocked to different places and the shy protagonist could not wait to get lost in that fantastic busy world and find her freedom: “I shall soon be free. I shall be in the ways and the hosts of the merry. The streets, the lamp, the lighted chamber set for dining are for me. The theatres, the halls, the parties, the ways of rest and the paths of song – these are mine in the night. Though all humanity be still enclosed in the shops, the thrill runs abroad. It is in the air” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 5).

Even though Dreiser’s work was published in 1900, the last year of the 19th century, its plot takes place in the second half of that century, when two literary movements, which emerged in France, were in force in that same period: Realism, influenced by Gustave Flaubert and Naturalism, influenced by Émile Zola, styles focused on prose.

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was a time of profound changes; people from all over the world piled up in cities looking for jobs. With the “sweet illusion” that “the sun rises for everyone”; the cities were a huddle of people who ventured out into the “city sea” of contradictions and imperious inequalities. The Windy City, for example, at the beginning of the plot, was experiencing a wide industrialization process, in full development of the capitalist market, causing cities to gain new contours and outlines. Chicago was no different, the American midwestern city also took its long strides towards modernity: “In 1889 Chicago had the peculiar qualifications of growth which made such adventuresome pilgrimages, even on the part of young girls, plausible. Its many and growing commercial opportunities gave it wide-spread fame which made of it a giant magnet, drawing to itself from all quarters the hopeful and the hopeless – those who had their fortunes yet to make and those whose fortunes and affairs had reached a disastrous climax elsewhere. It was a city of over 500,000, with the ambition, the daring, the activity of a metropolis of a million. Its streets and houses were already scattered over an area of seventy-five square miles. Its population was not so much thriving upon established commerce as upon the industries which prepared for the arrival of others. The sound of the hammer engaged upon the erection of new structures was everywhere heard. Great industries were moving in. The huge railroad corporations which had long before recognized the prospects of the place had seized upon vast tracts of land for transfer and shipping purposes” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 16).

So, Carrie had to survive in the White City. Wandering through Chicago looking for a job, she came across different commercial establishments and, seeing so many varieties of products, she lost herself in the desire of owning all the luxury that that city could provide. They were unusual products in the eyes of simple people like her; poor people from the rural areas of the American Midwest. The dresses, the shoes, the jewels aroused her craving for consumerism, leading our heroine to long for a future of glamor and luxury. But the harsh reality always came to the fore: when she woke up from her daydream, she realized that her vulnerable and impoverished condition was very far from the opulent and consumerist way of life she wished for: “Carrie passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, shoes, stationery, jewelry. Each separate counter was a show place of dazzling interest and attraction. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally and yet she did not stop. There was nothing there which she could not have used – nothing which she did not long to own. The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, hair-combs, purses, all touched her with individual desire, and she felt keenly the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purchase. She was a work-seeker, an outcast without employment, one whom the average employee could tell at a glance was poor and in need of a situation” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 22).

Like most Americans at the time, Carrie was not born in affluent family. Most of these people arrived in these cities in adverse conditions, many, without professional experience or qualification, had to submit and subjugate themselves to any type of job conditions in order to survive and Carrie’s situation was no different. After wandering the cold streets of Chicago, in search of a job, she began to perceive the real hostile environment that was the great metropolis, where everything was competition and uncertainty, and people need to fight for existence. “There she found other girls ahead of her, applicants like herself, but with more of that self-satisfied and independent air which experience of the city lends – girls who scrutinized her in a painful manner. After a wait of perhaps three-quarters of an hour she was called in turn. - ‘Now’, said a sharp, quick-mannered Jew who was sitting at a roll-top desk near the window – ‘have you ever worked in any other store?’ - ‘No sir’, said Carrie. – ‘Oh, you haven’t’, he said, ‘eyeing her keenly’. - ‘No sir’, she replied. – ‘Well, we prefer young women just now with some experience. I guess we can’t use you’. Carrie stood waiting a moment, hardly

certain whether the interview had terminated. – ‘Don’t wait!’ he exclaimed. ‘Remember we are very busy here’” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 22).

In unrestrained development, progress, however, had serious consequences. The industrial advancement and the growth of urban centers created social problems never seen before. While an elite emerged and benefited and enriched itself with this situation, very poor people became evident. It was in this chaotic and degrading scenario, motivated by working conditions, that most employees of the time, in the beginning of American industrialization, in large cities, such as Chicago and New York, were inserted. The machines were more valuable than workers themselves, who became, in industries and factories, mere expendable parts of a gear that was just starting to work, subjected to slave conditions in their work places, submitted to exhaustive workloads, low wages and nonexistent labor rights until then: “The firm of Speigelheim and Co., makers of boy’s caps, occupied one floor of fifty feet in width and some eighty feet in depth. It was a place rather dimly lighted, the darkest portions having incandescent lights, filled in part with machines and part with workbenches. At the latter labored quite a company of girls and some men. The former was drabby looking creatures, stained in face with oil and dust, clad in thin shapeless cotton dresses, and shod with more or less worn shoes. [...] Under better material conditions this kind of work would not have been so bad, but the new socialism which involves pleasant working conditions for employees had not then taken hold upon manufacturing companies. The place smelled of the oil of the machines and the new leather – a combination which, added to by the stale odors of the building, was not pleasant even in cold weather. The floor, though regularly swept each evening, presented a littered surface. Not the slightest provision had been made for the comfort of the employees, the idea being that something was gained by giving them as little and making the work as hard and unremunerative as possible” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 29, 39).

Like most of those who migrated to large urban centers at the time, Carrie had no qualifications or experience in previous work activities. And in women’s case, the situation was much worse, as they were considered more fragile and incapacitated. That competitive environment of hard work was no place for daintiness. As in the “animal world”, this was the entrepreneurs’ thinking where the strongest and most prepared ones in that society always triumphed, providing profits to companies. However, Carrie had no choice, the need for survival spoke louder. Thus, the only place that accepted her was a shoe factory, subjected to hard work. Standing all day long, she operated a kind of shoe drilling machine, receiving for that service only four dollars a week; a manual activity that even for a man would be inhuman, but in order to keep body and soul together she had to undergo a degrading workload: “At this task she labored incessantly for some time, finding relief from her own nervous fears and imaginings in the humdrum, mechanical movement of the machine. She felt, as the minutes passed, that the room was not very light. It had a thick odor of fresh leather, but that did not worry her. She felt the eyes of the other help upon her and troubled lest she was not working fast enough. As the morning wore on the room became hotter. She felt the need of a breath of fresh air and a drink of water but did not venture to stir. The stool she sat on was without a back or footrest and she began to feel uncomfortable. She found after a time that her back was beginning to ache. She twisted and turned from one position to another slightly different, but it did not ease her for long. She was beginning to weary” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 37).

In this environment that determines failure, a characteristic of naturalism, where what defined success was the law of the strongest, Carrie became an easy prey for the traps of a hypocritical and unjust society. As she did not have the necessary strength to withstand the work entrusted to her, she eventually ended up being discarded from that pathological and excluding environment. After two weeks of exhausting days of suffering at her job at the shoe factory, the young girl got sick and succumbed the circumstances and as it was at a time when workers had no labor rights, she ended up losing her job: “Minnie was truly distressed at this but maintained a kindly demeanor. Hanson said perhaps she had better go back home for a while. When she got up after three days it was taken for granted that her position was lost. The winter was near at hand, she had no clothes and now she was out of work” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 56).

Theodor Dreiser, as he portrayed Carrie’s American dream, showed the struggle, the concerns of a girl who went in search of her survival in a supposedly more promising environment in an attempt to achieve success in the big city. On her way, she met two men who had the power to transform her life, pushing her to her limits. And as a livelihood strategy, the young woman was forced to give in to the onslaught of her first boyfriend, Drouet, who offered her the promise of a better life in his “dinky apartment”, as long as she, of course, gave in to his carnal desires. Unconsciously, there she was, subjugating herself to a lover’s life, surrendering herself to a man whose main goal was just using her as a mere sexual object: “‘I struck a little peach coming in on the train Friday’, remarked Drouet by way of parting. By George, that’s so. I must go and call on her before I go way. – ‘Oh, never mind her’, Hurstwood remarked. – ‘Say, she was a little dandy, I tell you’, went on Drouet confidentially, trying to impress his friend” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 48-49).

Dreiser also made a strong criticism regarding the American consumerist way of life then. Through Carrie’s character, the writer revealed his aversion to capitalist ideology, to the people’s thinking at that time when profit was made at any cost and the exploitation of the most vulnerable ones was the ultimate goal to be

achieved. Exacerbated consumerism and the ostentation of that liberal system motivated by capitalism showed the way of life operated by the ruling class that viewed the accumulation of money as the only acceptable horizon, regardless of whether the means for such purposes were morally or ethically acceptable. Under this assumption, liberal consumerist thinking started to be impregnated in all social strata, so much so that the writer evidenced this premise by also mentioning degenerate Carrie's own behavior and mind: "The true meaning of money yet remains to be popularly explained and comprehended. When each individual realizes for himself that this thing primarily stands for and should only be accepted as a moral due – that it should be paid out as honestly stored energy and not as a usurped privilege – many of our social, religious and political troubles will have permanently passed. As for Carrie, her understanding of the moral significance of money was the popular understanding, nothing more. The old definition, Money: something everybody else has and I must get, would have expressed her understanding of it thoroughly" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 62).

One of the key characteristics of Naturalism is the absence of free will, when people do not have the power to decide on their actions, as they are conditioned to the designs of the environment in which they are inserted. Dreiser, through his writing, deconstructs this naturalistic feature, considering Carrie's social ascension that occurred by the end of the novel, becoming a successful actress, de-characterizing, in a certain way, determinism, which is one of the main attributions of Naturalism. According to this work on discussion, Carrie, even though, at many times along the plot, things happened randomly, she was able to decide on her own fate, building her own story and making choices that changed her life for the better. But this attribute of free will does not apply to all the characters in the novel as they were not the masters of their destinies; therefore, their choices were limited, causing them to succumb to the forces of unfavorable circumstances: "Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilization is still in a middle stage – scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason. On the tiger no responsibility rests. We see him aligned by nature with the forces of life – he is born into their keeping and without thought he is protected. We see man far removed out of the lairs of the jungles, his innate instincts dulled by too near an approach to free will, his free will scarcely sufficiently developed to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 73).

Hence, Carrie, after being fired from her job due to her illness because of so much effort in the execution of her mechanical activities, was forced "to ramble" through the cold streets of Chicago, facing degrading places looking for a new job. Hungry and without suitable clothes for the cold, she happened to meet Drouet again. "Luckily" for both, he took her to a restaurant, offering her some money so she could buy suitable clothes for Chicago's harsh winter. He also offered her housing and a job perspective. Apparently, how generous that good Samaritan would be! And who in such a circumstance, in the logic of Naturalism, would not consent such a proposal? Of course, at first, Carrie hesitated to accept such an irrefutable offer, but given her needs, she ended up ceding to this irremediable situation. Drouet also took the opportunity to invite her to live with him in his apartment, as it would be a great chance for her to leave the deplorable estate of the place belonging to her sister, in which she lived so far, a completely hellish environment for her: "'So you lost your place because you got sick, eh?', he said. – 'What are you going to do now?' – 'Look around', she said, a thought of the need that hung outside this fine restaurant like a hungry dog at her heels, passing into her eyes. – 'Oh, no', said Drouet, 'that won't do. How long have you been looking?' – 'Four days', she answered. [...] He looked at her quite tenderly for his kind. There were some loose bills in his vest pocket – greenbacks. They were soft and noiseless and he got his fingers about them and crumpled them up in his hand. – 'Come on', he said, 'I'll see you through all right. Get yourself some clothes'" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 60-61).

Theodore Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie*, fits, in a way, into the characteristic of realistic and naturalistic literary canons. Through his keen eye on reality, he showed the battle of the common subjects against their hostile environments and their internal individual battles, whose relentless struggles against their own desires led them to ruin. There are several scenarios in which we can illustrate all these social barriers, where immorality prevailed, and rational was constantly confronted with irrationality. The "being" was not just one, but "dubious", allowing itself to be dominated most of the times by instinct: "Her conscience, however, was not a Drouet, interested to praise. There she heard a different voice, with which she argued, pleaded, excused. It was no just and sapient counsellor, in its last analysis. It was only an average little conscience, a thing which represented the world, her past environment, habit, convention, in a confused, reflected way. With it, the voice of the people was truly the voice of God. – 'Oh, thou failure', said this voice. – 'Why?', she questioned. – 'Look at those about', came the whispered answer. – 'Look at those who are good. How would they scorn to do what you have done? Look at the good girls, how will they draw away from such as you, when they know you have been weak. You had not tried before you failed'" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 89-90).

Carrie, for instance, constantly fought for survival, at first, in a dignified way, but logically she did not succeed in doing so, because that capitalist system was merciless and implacable for the weakest and, in this way, this character was submitted to a "courtesan" life, conditioned to have a promiscuous relationship with two

men, Drouet and Hurstwood. Her first lover, Drouet, offered her new possibilities but with a price. They went to restaurants, theaters and parks and eventually Carrie came to be attracted by the charming side of the city, becoming mesmerized by the beautiful flank of that urban environment: "Carrie had no excellent home principles fixed upon her. If she had, she would have been more consciously distressed. Now the lunch went off with considerable warmth. Under the influence of the varied occurrences, the fine invisible passion which was emanating from Drouet, the food, the still unusual luxury, she relaxed and heard with open ears. She was again the victim of the city's hypnotic influence, the subject of the mesmeric operations of super-intelligible forces" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 78).

Therefore, it is worth emphasizing that the feelings and relationships were subordinated to social interests and conveniences which are relevant features of Realism. However, Dreiser also used his characters to show the dark side of society and human beings as well, disporting a typical characteristic of Naturalism. The city with its social and unjust ills; individuals struggling against their immoral drives and behaviors, in the pursuit of such "achievable happiness" that was channeled into the futile and material things. Carrie, for example, directed her satisfaction towards consumerism and money. It became scrutable through the book, that for Carrie, money could buy joy, becoming the very materialization of well-being. Dressing well, living in a luxurious place, eating in the best restaurants, attending the best places in the city, such as theaters, for example, all this would fill the void of unhappiness in her life: "Carrie was an apt student of fortune's ways—of fortune's superficialities. Seeing a thing, she would immediately set to inquiring how she would look, properly related to it. Be it known that this is not fine feeling, it is not wisdom. The greatest minds are not so afflicted; and, on the contrary, the lowest order of mind is not so disturbed. Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear. The voice of the so-called inanimate! Who shall translate for us the language of the stones? 'My dear,' said the lace collar she secured from Partridge's, 'I fit you beautifully; don't give me up.' 'Ah, such little feet,' said the leather of the soft new shoes; 'how effectively I cover them. What a pity they should ever want my aid.' Once these things were in her hand, on her person, she might dream of giving them up; the method by which they came might intrude itself so forcibly that she would ache to be rid of the thought of it, but she would not give them up" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 98).

In the game of revealing/hiding the center and the margin, architecture and political discourse endeavored to legitimize it, while literature showed the clash between the monumental city that denies popular participation and the urban imaginary of progress without measure, as Dreiser well illustrated by emphasizing the character Carrie's eagerness to climb the slippery walls of her idealized city where joy would reign and her most beautiful dreams could come true: "she saw lamps faintly glowing upon rich interiors. Now it was but a chair, now a table, now an ornate corner which met her eye, but it appealed to her as almost nothing else could. Such childish fancies as she had had of fairy palaces and kingly quarters now came back. She imagined that across these richly carved entranceways where the globed and crystallized lamps shone upon paneled doors, set with stained and designed panes of glass, was neither care nor unsatisfied desire. She was perfectly certain that here was happiness. If she could but stroll up yon broad walk, cross that rich entranceway, which to her was of the beauty of a jewel, and sweep in grace and luxury to possession and command – oh! how quickly would sadness flee; how, of an instant, would the heartaches end. She gazed and gazed, wondering, delighting, longing, and all the while the siren voice of the unrestful was whispering in her ear. – 'If we could have such a home as that', said Mrs. Hale sadly, 'how delightful it would be'. [...] 'Have you ever seen the houses along the lake shore on the North Side?' asked Hurstwood. – 'Why, I was just over there this afternoon'. – 'Mrs. Hale and I. – Aren't they beautiful?' – 'They're very fine', he answered. – 'Oh, me', said Carrie pensively, 'I wish I could live in such a place'. – 'You're not happy', said Hurstwood, slowly, after a slight pause. He had raised his eyes solemnly and was looking into her own. He assumed that he had struck a deep chord" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 116-118).

So, Carrie, in order to overcome her internal and external battles, fighting against an unjust and hypocritical society and against men who just wanted to use her to satisfy their "personal delights", our heroine used her own available "weapons" she had, and so, perhaps finding her longed-for "victory", even if it was, in fact, meant only an illusory life of ostentation and luxury.

Throughout the plot, Dreiser revealed the subject's role as the main character of the plot when she easily surrendered to her lovers' treats, Drouet, and then Hurstwood. This type of behavior characterizes an insightful trait of Naturalism, which is precisely the subjection of individuals to the environment in which they are inserted. The people in this literary current are nothing more than a product of the environment. Therefore, one of the "devices" used by our heroine was certainly "love relationships"; Her marriage to her second lover, Hurstwood, seemed to be the right ticket that would take her out of the life of anguish and misery she lived at the beginning of the plot and that would eventually bring her the passport to a glamorous and rich life in the "Cities that Never Sleep". Happiness, through material goods, was the prerequisite for the future existence of true love as far she was concerned. But with Drouet, marriage became a distant dream, as he only deceived her

with false promises. Yet, apparently, with Hurstwood she conceived it differently and her life-changing goals could be achieved: "I'm going to strike for a raise in June. They can afford to pay it, as much business as I turn in. I'll get it too, don't you forget. – 'I hope you do', said Carrie. – 'And then if that little real estate deal I've got on goes through, we'll get married', he said with a great show of earnestness, the while he took his place before the mirror and began brushing his hair. He dragged in the reference to the fictitious real estate deal as a sop to Carrie's matrimonial desires. He wanted her to feel contented with her state, the while he winged his merry, thoughtless round. – 'I don't believe you ever intend to marry me, Charlie', Carrie said ruefully. The recent protestations of Hurstwood had given her courage to say this. He had stopped his trifling before the mirror now and crossed over to her. For the first time Carrie felt as if she must move away from him. [...] In contrast, Hurstwood loomed up beside him quite strong and sincere. There was more to him, she felt, in every way. He had no easy manner of putting her off. He sympathized with her and showed her what her true value was. He needed her, while Drouet did not care. – 'Oh, no', she said half-remorsefully, her tone reflecting some of her own success and more of her helplessness – 'you never will'. [...] Hurstwood, when he met her as agreed, reassured her on this score. – 'You mustn't worry, sweetheart', he said. 'Just as soon as he goes on the road again, we will arrange something. We'll fix it so that you won't have to deceive any one'. Carrie imagined that he would marry her shortly, though he had not directly said so, and her spirits rose. She proposed to make the best of the situation until Drouet left again. Her heart was wholly with her handsome manager who seemed so sincere, so considerate, so much more tactful than the drummer" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 135, 138).

Literarily analyzing Carrie's conception and her lovers, Dreiser used prescription, in simple language, to adjectivize it objectively, in order to capture the reliable reality of the realistic period in a universalizing way, portraying two problematic heroes, distorted, full of defects and ulterior motives, which further reinforces the woman's lack of idealization, precisely because she is a mere object in the course of the plot, in opposition to romantic ideals.

Still concerning Naturalism, it proves that evolution, although guided by "capital forces", objectifies man and society, immersed in harmful environments that cause certain pathologies, mainly psychological ones. Thus, this author showed, in a striking way, the ailments of the human being and his mechanistic vision – it is still in an evolutionary state and had no control over its actions -, he brought up various themes of the daily life of ordinary people in conflicts with their desires and their moral weaknesses that always ended up leading them to carnal impulses.

On that assumption, Drouet, Carrie's first lover, lived his daily battle for survival and lust, traveling to different cities in an attempt to sell his goods. As a traveling salesman, he wandered from city to city and used his livelihood to search for possible female preys to satisfy his sexual desires. In Hurstwood's case, his monotonous but lucrative life put him in a favorable position to live extramarital relationships facilitated by his management of a famous bar in the city of Chicago. For both of them, their shameless actions were considered normal and their work activities were nothing more than artifices to achieve their worldly goals: having money and women: "Drouet on the contrary went merrily forward, pursuing the routine of his satisfactory employment and brooding not at all upon his companion's situation. He stinted himself nothing in the way of flirtation and observation of the other sex. His friends called him out to this or that sortie upon the susceptibilities of the fair sex in various cities and he seldom failed to respond. There was no compunction in the matter – there was no detailed thought upon the subject. Women were made for men – and there was an end to it. Hurstwood, however, was a man who was less light-minded and consequently more subtle. He saw a trifle more clearly the necessities of our social organization, but he was more unscrupulous in the matter of sinning against it. He did not, as a matter of fact, conduct himself so loosely as Drouet, but it was entirely owing to a respect for his situation. In the actual matter of a decision and a consummation, he was worse than Drouet. He more deliberately set aside the canons of right as he understood them. [...] A few days later, Drouet in his peregrinations encountered one of his well-dressed lady acquaintances in Chicago on his return from a short trip to Omaha. He had intended to hurry out to Ogden Place and surprise Carrie, but now he fell into an interesting conversation and soon modified his original intention. – 'Let's us go to dinner', he said, little recking any chance meeting which might trouble his way. – 'Certainly', said his companion" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 106-107).

Regarding Carrie, despite her social and psychological problems, she managed to use her charm and eroticism to attract her two promising unscrupulous lovers, so that, she could enjoy a glamorous life and the luxurious places that only cities like the Windy City and the Big Apple could afford. Even with the solicitude of her lovers, Carrie still felt devalued and attached to a life, which, in her point of view, was not what she deserved, and that generated more non-conformity and anguish in her. With her peculiar ambition, the girl wanted more than they could offer. Carrie longed for the glamor and luxurious life of the rich, the true owners of power and happiness; the owners of sumptuous mansions and material stuff.

For this reason, the attractive young woman, through impersonality and engagement, escalated substantial lengths to reach a level of ostentation whose high steps have revived more and more her spirit of freedom and delight. Her ambition was the generating force that drove her up to the steps of her desired fame.

In her way of seeing the world, she had no doubt that one day she would reach the level of those well-dressed and elegant women from the fanciest streets of Chicago and New York where she once dared to be to never come back: “Even after all her depressing conclusions she could sweep away thought about the matter and then the twenty dollars seemed a wonderful and delightful thing. Ah, money, money, money. What a thing it was to have. How plenty of it would clear away all these troubles? [...] They dined and went to the theatre. That spectacle pleased Carrie immensely. The color and grace of it caught her eye. She had vain imaginings about place and power, about far-off lands and magnificent people. When it was over, the clatter of coaches and the throng of fine ladies made her stare. [...] On the North Side had been erected a number of elegant mansions along what is now known as the North Shore Drive. The present lake wall of stone and granitoid was not then in place, but the road had been well laid out, the intermediate spaces of lawn were lovely to look upon, and the houses were thoroughly new and imposing. When the winter season had passed and the first fine days of the early spring appeared, Mrs. Hale secured a buggy for an afternoon and invited Carrie. They rode first through Lincoln Park and on far out towards Evanston, turning back at four and arriving at the north end of the Shore Drive at about five o’clock. At this time of year, the days are still comparatively short, and the shadows of the evening were beginning to settle down upon the great city [...] Such childish fancies as she had had of fairy palaces and kingly quarters now came back. She imagined that across these richly carved entrance-ways, where the globed and crystallized lamps shone upon panelled doors set with stained and designed panes of glass, was neither care nor unsatisfied desire. She was perfectly certain that here was happiness” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 65, 90-91).

In her relentless pursuit of felicity that eventually would come through a successful marriage to someone who would care and support her, Carrie did not realize at first that her “pseudo-heroes” only wanted her for sexual pleasure and gratification. Tired of Drouet’s promises, the *bon-vivant*, she was driven to accept Hurstwood’s promises of marriage and a happy life in another city; the prominent manager then took her, almost forcibly, leaving to “Gotham”. With the promise of a luxurious life, the deluded young woman ended up falling into the stratagem of her new lover, as well as in the traps of a city much bigger than Chicago, the “Sin City”, New York, which, at that time, was a real melting pot of opportunities, but also a very dangerous place for newcomers: “The getting married suggestion struck Hurstwood forcibly. He saw clearly that this was her idea – he felt that it was not to be gotten over easily. Bigamy lightened the horizon of his shadowy thoughts for a moment. [...] ‘Well’, he said jokingly, ‘I’ll come and get you one of these evenings’, and then he laughed. – ‘I wouldn’t live with you, though, if you didn’t marry me’, Carrie added reflectively. – ‘I don’t want you to’, he said tenderly, taking her hand.” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 147, 150).

Dreiser, for being a writer considered naturalist, but a little attached to realism, shows us the darker side of the human being, its most intimate defects and ailments. However, in *Sister Carrie* we can observe that the individual, despite his/her limitations, while being passive in an environment that is hostile to him/her, can rather triumph, through willpower, work, persistence and also the fortuitous opportunities that are presented to him or her throughout his/her life. Even though these subjects are doomed to a so often infallible determinism, in some circumstances, as in Carrie’s specific case, she could overcome the difficulties, imperfections, besting the limited kind of narrow destined for the weakest within this stage of survival where actors wear their “finest masks” to achieve their personal deviant goals.

Regarding the romance analyzed in this study, we can infer that Dreiser outlined a character for a possible social ascension, contradicting in some aspects the true deterministic function of naturalism, which is to mold man according to the environment he lives in, with the maxim that "man is a product of the environment". In this way, a person’s character formation can also be explained by the social environment in which he or she is inserted and by the natural forces that order a given space, not just by atavism. In this assumption, Carrie took advantage of the chance that she was “randomly” offered to become a successful actress, as she did not lack acting talent. In the end, she strove, dedicating herself to the point of becoming a great star, reaching the place she always dreamed of: her glamor and ostentation paradise, governed by the fundamental spring of her happiness, money: “Carrie looked at him a moment and forgot all about the company present. She began to feel the part and summoned an indifferent smile to her lips, turning as the lines directed and going to a window, as if he were not present. She did it with a grace which was fascinating to look upon. – ‘Who is that woman?’ asked the director, watching Carrie in her little scene with Bamberger. – ‘Miss Madenda’, said Quincel. – ‘I know her name’, said the director, ‘but what does she do?’ – ‘I don’t know’, said Quincel. ‘She’s a friend of one of our members’. – ‘Well, she’s got more gumption than anyone I’ve seen here so far – seems to take an interest in what she’s doing’. – ‘Pretty, too, isn’t she?’, said Quincel [...] The whole earth was brimming sunshine that morning. She tripped along, the clear sky pouring liquid blue into her soul. Oh, blessed are the children of endeavor in this – that they try and are hopeful. And blessed also are they who knowing, smile and approve [...] For Carrie, as we well know, the stage had great attraction. She had never forgotten her one histrionic achievement in Chicago” (Dreiser, 1981, p.170, 171, 325). [...] “Such of these letters as came while Carrie was still in the Seventeenth Street place were read with more interest—though

never delight—than those which arrived after she was installed in her luxurious quarters at the Wellington. Even there her vanity—or that self-appreciation which, in its more rabid form, is called vanity—was not sufficiently cloyed to make these things wearisome. Adulation, being new in any form, pleased her. Only she was sufficiently wise to distinguish between her old condition and her new one. She had not had fame or money before. Now they had come. She had not had adulation and affectionate propositions before. Now they had come. Wherefore? She smiled to think that men should suddenly find her so much more attractive. In the least way it incited her to coolness and indifference” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 358).

Yet, for Carrie, everything she had achieved, an ideal world and her own joy, were nothing more than material and superfluous things. The rich young woman credited her happiness for her assets and, at the end of the novel, she realized that, despite all the money she had gained and the glamor she always longed for, the emptiness, sadness and boredom were always present in her life. Perhaps, it happens to be one of the most valuable lessons made by the magnificent author of *Sister Carrie*, precisely because he criticized the exacerbated consumerism and the capitalist thinking at the time in which his text is located; since the unfair struggle for accumulation of money did not solve social problems, it did not fill people’s ego; on the contrary, they just immersed themselves in a “sea” of disappointments and illusions. Through Carrie’s character, the aforementioned author showed us that in order to achieve true happiness, it is not worth going over everything and everyone, including disregarding dignity and honor. It is inferred, therefore, that money alone would never bring dignity and happiness together; in this world of greed and dispute it is not enough to just have, but to be virtuous above any momentary carnal gratification. This seems to be one of the main messages of Dreiser’s beautiful work: “The effect of the city and his own situation on Hurstwood was paralleled in the case of Carrie, who accepted the things which fortune provided with the most genial good nature. New York, despite her first expression of disapproval, soon interested her exceedingly. Its clear atmosphere, more populous thorough-fares and peculiar indifference struck her forcibly” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 315). [...] “‘Oh, I do want to see Nat Goodwin’, said Mrs. Vance. ‘I do think he is the jolliest actor. The papers say this is such a good play’. – ‘What time will we have to start?’, asked Carrie. – ‘Let’s go at one and walk down Broadway from 34th’, said Mrs. Vance. ‘It’s such an interesting walk. He’s at the Madison Square’. – ‘I’ll be glad to go’, said Carrie. ‘How much will we have to pay for seats?’ – ‘Not more than a dollar’, said Mrs. Vance.” (Dreiser, 1981, 323). [...] “The walk down Broadway, then as now, was one of the remarkable features of the city. There foregathered, before the matinée and afterwards, not only all the pretty women who love a showy parade, but the men who love to gaze upon and admire them. It was a very imposing procession of pretty faces and fine clothes. Women appeared in their very best hats, shoes and gloves, and walked arm in arm on their way to the fine shops or theatres strung along from 14th to 34th. Equally the men paraded with the very latest they could afford” (Dreiser, 1981, 324). [...] “She prepared that afternoon at three o’clock for the departure at half-past five for the noted dining room, which was crowding Delmonico’s for position in the favor of society. In this dressing, Carrie showed the influence of her association with the dashing Mrs. Vance. She had constantly had her attention called by the latter to novelties in everything which pertains to a woman’s apparel” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 328). [...] “Such of these letters as came while Carrie was still in the 17th Street place were read with more interest, though never delight, than those others which arrived after she was installed in her luxurious quarters in the Wellington. Even there, her vanity – or that self-appreciation, which in its more rabid form is called vanity, was not sufficiently cloyed to make these things wearisome. Adulation, being new in any form, pleased her. Only she was sufficiently wise to distinguish between her old condition and her new one. She had not had fame or money before. Now they had come. She had not had adulation and affectionate propositions before. Now they had come. Wherefore? She smiled to think that men should suddenly find her so much more attractive. In the least way it incited her to coolness and indifference” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 467). [...] “Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart. Onward, onward it saith, and where beauty leads there it follows. Whether it be the tinkle of a lone sheep-bell o’er some quiet landscape or the glimmer of beauty in sylvan places, or the show of soul in some passing eye, the heart knows and makes answer, following. It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings rise. Know then that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking chair by your window dreaming, shall you long alone. In your rocking chair by your window shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel” (Dreiser, 1981, p. 629).

Thus, Dreiser used his characters as well as both the cities of Chicago and mainly New York to thematize and emphasize social problems experienced at the time, clearly demonstrating his criticism of alienating and inhuman capitalism, which increased alarmingly at the beginning of the century in the United States. With the immigration of several peoples from different countries in search of the longed-for American dream, and with the urbanization process of large cities, these people left the countryside heading for other places. Although the opportunities were favorable for some, the majority struggled in horrible conditions of survival, a fact that is faithfully portrayed in the study analyzed here, such as the case of the Irish who huddled in the New York ghettos, fleeing the famine that plagued them in Ireland. Through Hurstwood’s character, Dreiser showed us the situation of several underemployments and the working condition of these modern slaves

of capitalism and how unhealthy and inhuman their working conditions were with exhausting hours and with the use of heavy machines in terrible conditions, even for a simple tram driver, driving one of the public transports at the time as described by the character in question: "There is a more subtle result of such a situation as this, which, though not always taken into account, produces the tragedies of the world. The great create an atmosphere which reacts badly upon the small. This atmosphere is easily and quickly felt. Walk among the magnificent residences, the splendid equipages, the gilded shops, restaurants, resorts of all kinds. Scent the flowers, the silks, the wines; drink of the laughter springing from the soul of luxurious content, of the glances which gleam like light from defiant spears; feel the quality of smiles which cut like glistening swords and of strides born of place and power, and you shall know of what is the atmosphere of the high and mighty. Little need to argue that of such is not the kingdom of greatness, but so long as the world is attracted by this and the human heart views this as the one desirable value which it must attain, as long, to that heart, will this remain the realm of greatness. So long, also, will the atmosphere of this realm work its desperate results in the soul of man (Dreiser, 1981, p. 308)." [...] "On her spiritual side also, she was rich in feeling, as such a nature well might be. Sorrow in her was aroused by many a spectacle – an uncritical upwelling of grief for the weak and the helpless. She was constantly pained by the sight of the white-faced, ragged men who sloped desperately by her in a sort of wretched mental stupor. The poorly clad girls who went blowing by her window evenings – coming from some of the shops of the West Side, she pitied from the depths of her heart. She would stand and bite her lips as they passed, shaking her little head and wondering. They had so little, she thought. It was so sad to be ragged and poor. The hang of faded clothes pained her eyes. – 'And they have to work so hard!' Was her only comment. On the street sometimes she would see men working – Irishmen with picks, coal heavers with great loads to shovel, Americans busy about some work which was a mere matter of strength – and they touched her fancy. Toil, now that she was free of it, seemed even a more desolate thing than when she was of it" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 144). [...] "Special Notice. The motormen and conductors and other employees of this company having abruptly left its service, an opportunity is now given to all loyal men who have struck against their will to be reinstated, provided they will make their applications by twelve o'clock noon on Wednesday, Jan. 16. Such men will be given employment (with guaranteed protection) in the order in which such applications are received, and runs and positions assigned them accordingly. Otherwise, they will be considered discharged, and every vacancy will be filled by a new man as soon as his services can be secured. (Signed) Benjamin Norton, President. – He also noted among the want ads one which read: – Wanted – 50 skilled motormen, accustomed to Westinghouse system, to run U.S. mail cars only, in the city of Brooklyn. Protection guaranteed" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 418).

Through his writing, Dreiser reliably described the political, social and economic framework of the time by portraying various scenarios of the oppressed and working class. Through the trajectory Hurstwood's character, there was a revelation of the darker and more merciless side of capitalism that contributed to the strongest to stand out, causing the collapse and ruin of the weakest and least adaptable. That was the end of those who were not strong enough to manage to survive that unjust and inhumane struggle in a society engineered for only the strongest to succeed and the weakest to be ruined as was Hurstwood's case by the end of the novel: "He got up and looked out the window into the chilly street. It came gradually in his mind, as he stood there, to go to Brooklyn. – 'Why not?' his mind said. 'Anyone can get work over there. You'll get two a day'. – 'How about accidents?' said a voice. 'You might get hurt'. – 'Oh, there won't be much of that', he answered. 'They've called out the police. Anyone who wants to run a car will be protected all right'. – 'You don't know how to run a car', rejoined the voice. – 'I won't apply as a motorman', he answered. 'I can ring up fares all right'. – 'They'll want motormen mostly', came the reply. – 'They'll take anybody, that I know', he replied. For several hours he argued pro and con with this mental counselor, feeling no need to act at once, in a matter so sure of profit" (Dreiser, 1981, p. 419).

III. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through Dreiser's characters we can observe that they made their choices according to the circumstances, changed their directions and learnt lessons from their faults. All three characters are well-drawn and three-dimensional. Carrie had gained experiences instead of her growth. She had self-interest but she was not that strong. She was too shallow in her relationships, grabbed her opportunities when they were offered and kept moving on with her life. She overcame all her sufferings and emerged herself as a successful, self-governing actress. Carrie represented in a way the modern women of twentieth century in America but in the end, she was not so sure about the new way of independent life they were destined to live from then on. Carrie was elevated to a lofty and luxurious tower, entering the sparkling world which was brittle and fragile, whereas, Hurstwood struggled hard to survive in the streets and turned ruined, proving one of the fundamental traits of naturalism: the weakest are just products of an impious environment and are always doomed to destruction. But Carrie came to prove to be an exception to this naturalist fateful rule.

When we “trace” Carrie’s journey from Columbia to Chicago, from Chicago to New York, we are able to infer that the city can mean not only its streets, monuments or buildings, but also its traditions and histories and their subjects: the ones belonging to the mansions of the upscale neighborhoods of the cities, as well as the ones who inhabit the underground of the ghettos with their ills and misfortunes. It is precisely in the literary narrative that these elements gain relevance, since literature transfigures reality, often invents, outlines “cities’ floor” for individuals to walk by, just as the poet Carlos Drummond did with his “frock-dead”, and it is along these lines that one reads the literature and the culture of an era, or as Walter Benjamin postulated, by “brushing” history against the grain, illuminating the history of the winners and losers.

Taking into account the characteristic aspects of this outstanding novel, *Sister Carrie* fits, therefore, more specifically in the naturalistic molds, in view of being an experimental narrative, written through a clear and objective colloquial language, in a period corresponding to the advances in science in the second half of the 19th century, when positivism and the “evolution of the species” prevailed in the writings of the time. In addition, Dreiser magnificently managed to encompass the obscure and controversial social themes, using pathological characters, especially those affected by psychological problems, whose focus of analysis was human behavior.

Although this author constantly highlighted the characters Carrie, Drouet and Hurstwood, we came to the conclusion that they were not the only protagonists in the plot. Since in Naturalism the environment also occupies a privileged place in this literary current, we can affirm that both “Windy City and Sin City” also have a primordial role in the plot construction and from the characters’ movements, especially Carrie’s one, through these cities, it was possible to denote intellections about some cultural, political, economic, identity and social aspects of the collective body that made up the American society in the beginning of the 20th century as it was emphasized in this study.

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