

## Virtue between Gender and Monetary Perceptions: A Study of Henry James' *Daisy Miller* and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

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### Abstract

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The concern with female chastity has long been a controversial one. The Victorian period had rigorous rules for female conduct that had to be followed by women if they wished to keep their social status and reputation, however, these rules shifted with the changing values of society in the twentieth century from a conventional to a monetary stance on virtue. This study aims at showing how two authors, Henry James and Theodore Dreiser, represent the two opposing ends of the moral scale, for while James took a traditional approach, where the gender of the transgressor labeled them a fallen man/woman, Dreiser adopted an economic stance where wealth determined a character's rise or fall, regardless of gender. It follows the fate of two pairs of characters, Daisy/ Carrie, Winterbourne/ Hurstwood, showing how the dichotomy between their differing outcomes reflects the changing social attitudes and how society's perception of virtue has shifted from a gender based Victorian stance to a modern economic one. This proves that society's concern is not with the actual virtue of woman but rather with how that woman is perceived.

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**Key words:** Daisy Miller, Sister Carrie, the fallen- woman, the new-woman

### 1. Introduction:

The fallen woman, traditionally speaking, is a term applied to describe any woman or young lady, married or unmarried, who loses her virtue by being involved in sexual relations outside of the sanctity of marriage. This theme was widespread in the Victorian era, due to its middle class moral values and its emphasis on the idea of the woman as angel and the woman's role as limited to that of wife and mother. The figure of the fallen woman became prevalent in the Victorian period with various writers from Jane Austen, Anne Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, to name only a few, touching upon this question with varying degrees and results.

Stories of the fallen woman in Victorian novels followed a set pattern: by yielding to seduction, the fallen woman is forsaken by her family, becomes destitute, suffers social condemnation and ostracism, and eventually dies; death being the only fit punishment for her transgression against the social rules. In opposition, the figure of the fallen *man* was never discussed, for it was generally considered that men did not fall under the same guidelines as women. Men were free to indulge themselves, and it was up to the woman to resist.

This study poses two authors, Henry James and Theodore Dreiser, against each other to show how the two authors' different outlook affected their treatment of this theme; for though Daisy was innocent yet she was punished by society, whereas Carrie, who is in fact a "fallen woman", is seen as prosperous and has society's admiration. This is due in fact to the two authors' different stands on the issue of morality, for while James was more concerned with a gender based virtue, Dreiser saw the issue from an economic standpoint. Thus, we see that Daisy suffers and dies for her alleged crime, while Winterbourne (the male sinner in *Daisy Miller*) is looked upon with complacency and a great extent of tolerance for his liaison, since being 'male' he is not under an obligation to virtue, while for Dreiser, both the female Carrie and the male Hurstwood sin, but the one who is punished is the one who has financially failed. Dreiser's different and revolutionary handling of the issue of sin and morality was so shocking to society that it almost led to the loss of his writing career as a result of the public outcry created by the novel, a novel that shows us a young woman, who twice enters into illicit affairs, with no moral qualms or any tangible social reprisal for her sin.

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So we may see just how modern *Sister Carrie* was, in this sense, by comparing the depiction and fate of the two authors' heroines. Her reputation lost, James' character can only suffer and die, a fate expected and approved in that time, while Dreiser's Carrie attains fame and fortune. This highlights the shift from the traditional Victorian outlook toward the issue of virtue which was gender based to the modern economic stand. James's characters are classified as virtuous according to their gender, while Dreiser's characters are classified according to their financial status, and the poor character is the one who is punished regardless of their sex.

## 2. Henry James' *Daisy Miller* (1877):

Born in New York City, Henry James (1843-1916), the famous American expatriate moved to London, in late 1876. In Europe, James began his long life study of the clash of cultures between Europe and America. He began writing *Daisy Miller* during the winter of 1877, a short novel about a young American girl who travels to Europe and comes face to face with the old world. This novel, like many of James's other works, solicits readers to look into "the sexual double standards" (Leach: 2003, 85) practiced by society against women, for James clearly points out that "society tolerated sex outside of marriage in the case of a man, and reviled it in the case of a woman," (The Fallen Woman Exhibition, 2015) by showing the severe consequences reaped by women who dare to transgress against society's defined boundaries of acceptable female conduct.

Daisy's journey then reveals how Europe's patriarchal social system kept women in a strictly defined sphere, and the tragic death of the novel's heroine shows the extreme lengths society will go to, to keep the status quo.

The novel opens in a little town in Switzerland, popular with many of the expatriate Americans. On the first meeting between Daisy and Winterbourne we start to realize that while Daisy is unconscious of any wrong doing on her part, Winterbourne on the other hand *is*. His awareness of wrongdoing, however, does not dissuade him from going forward in his misconduct or in his attempts at drawing Daisy into improper behavior too. Daisy is so frank in her speech that she even admits to Winterbourne, a stranger, the indelicate confession that she enjoys being with young men and that in America she circulated a great deal with these young men. Winterbourne is so perplexed by Daisy's open manner of conversation that he could not at first decide how to classify her, for while she seemed very innocent and unassuming on the one hand, it was very difficult for him to accept her openness at face value.

When Daisy then tells Winterbourne of her desire to visit the castle, he offers to take her, fully aware that such an offer would be seen as improper by a European girl, but Daisy's reaction to him shows no intimation of being shocked. Daisy's innocence is clearly shown when she insists on introducing Winterbourne to her mother, just as she would introduce anyone she meets, for Daisy doesn't believe in doing anything that she would be afraid to acknowledge. This shows that in her relationship with Winterbourne, *Daisy* at least, has nothing to hide or be ashamed of. What is more, Daisy's refusal to have a chaperone go with her, the mark of her rebellion against traditional social norms, shows that she believes that to *be* virtuous is more important than to *appear* virtuous. This theme of the disparity between reality and appearance is clearly shown in Winterbourne's inner dilemma regarding Daisy's apparent flirtatious conduct and her real innocence.

These ideas are further explored when the events of the novel move to Rome, where Daisy's continued public disregard of social traditions labels her an unscrupulous young lady in the eyes of the snobbish European society as well as the American expatriates, (Chatraporn: 2008), represented by the two patriarchal figures in the novel, Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker, both of whom play a significant role in deciding Daisy's fate. Mrs. Walker, to show her displeasure with Daisy, deliberately ignores her mother, Mrs. Miller, as the latter was taking leave of her at the party. In the same way Winterbourne's aunt, Mrs. Costello, refuses to receive Daisy when Winterbourne asks his aunt for permission to introduce Daisy to her on grounds that Daisy has developed a reputation for being forward. This shows her hypocrisy and double standard, for Winterbourne's aunt though refusing to receive Daisy on grounds of moral objections has no qualms about receiving her nephew. It is true that she mildly shows her disapprobation of his behavior, it is nothing though like her sharp and cutting attitude towards Daisy, for it was generally understood that "while young woman's behavior is observed under scrutiny in Geneva and Rome, men enjoy incomparably greater freedom. Hence, Daisy's public flirtation with Giovanelli, though innocent and harmless, leads to social shame, while Winterbourne's relationship with an elderly woman in Geneva is completely justified and occasionally circumvented by negligible gossip." (Aslimoska: nd, 8).

In the end Winterbourne himself joins the outcry against Daisy upon seeing her at the Coliseum at night with Giovanelli. Throughout the novel, Winterbourne had been wavering in his opinion of Daisy's character. He was unsure as to whether consider her a very innocent young lady or a very cunning one. However, after he sees her at the coliseum at midnight, he finally decides that Daisy is not a modest girl and that he does not need to treat her with respect any longer. To show this, he turns away from her just like Mrs. Walker, thereby taking the part of society against Daisy. This is ironic for Winterbourne who more than anyone else should have been certain of Daisy's innocence is the one who suspects her at the end. Though Winterbourne is no better than what society only thinks of Daisy, yet he joins society in judging her, for he holds himself to a different moral measuring scale. Thus while he actually does what Daisy is only accused of doing, he is socially accepted while she is shunned, for society tolerated male sinners but rejected female ones; and James clearly followed this pattern in spite of the undercurrent objection he tried to give across.

Winterbourne's mistaken judgment of Daisy in the end is due to his attempts to apply the conventional rules he has accepted since leaving America to Daisy, without realizing that she is not applying the same values as him when dealing with the world. He admits to his mistake at the end of the novel when Winterbourne visited his aunt the next summer and mentioned to her that he had done Daisy an injustice. He says that he had been too long out of America and lost the ability to look at the world with innocence.

Daisy's character reflects the audacious young woman, who is often associated with the fallen woman, but being as rebellious as she was against accepted social beliefs and unheeding of the warnings, she should not have reacted as violently as she did to being misunderstood. There is a simmering anger at the injustice that has befallen Daisy, a latent rejection of the values that caused the death of an innocent young girl and a call for a change of the values that could not accept her nonconformity.

James' assertion that Daisy's behavior is acceptable in America, when Daisy herself says that she had a great deal of gentlemen friends, to some extent paves the way for the revolutionary ideas of Dreiser, when the figure of fallen woman shifts to that of New Woman.

This term was first used by Sarah Grand in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" published in March 1894, in which the new woman is identified as being a sexually liberated woman entirely freed of the Victorian moral shackles. In order to accommodate this new type of woman, new patterns had to be drawn by contemporary writers. In this pattern the woman is rewarded and shown as prevailing at the end rather than being condemned and penalized. (Aslimoska: nd, 8).

With the advent of this new figure to literature a new destiny had to be shaped for her, a fate where she is no longer outcast by society but rather takes control of her life. Thus "The patriarchal notion of bodily-fallen women is rejected and the boundary between the ideal and the fallen woman is eliminated. (Chatraporn: 2008, 31).

### 3. Theodore Dreiser:( 1871- 1945)

One of the most significant American writers of the early twentieth century, who was also among the first who tried to portray the consumer society, is Theodore Dreiser. In his novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), Dreiser criticizes not only the effects of the material values on American society, but also its prevailing moral assumptions. (Bel: 2014) Dreiser's realism in dealing with matters of morality captured the essence of American society, where a character's status is determined economically, and his affluence determines not only the degree of creature comforts he might enjoy, but also the measure of prestige he might claim, and the extent of social power he might command.

During the nineteenth and twentieth century, the United States went through a process of industrialization and became one of the most developed countries in the world. What was mostly an agricultural society, where people lived in farms and small towns, turned into an urban economy. This led to the rapid growth of cities and the subsequent migration of people to the city in hopes of finding work and success. This idea is expressly found in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, where the protagonists, like Carrie come to the city in search of wealth, success and power trying to make their way up the social ladder. Dreiser believed that to them, modern cities had a blinding impact for it attracted people with its lights, shops, restaurants, theatres and once a man was exposed to the shiny city, nothing could save him. (Bel: 2014).

*Sister Carrie*, which takes place in Chicago and New York of 1889, begins with Caroline Meeber, an eighteen year old girl from the country, who leaves her parents' house and goes to Chicago in search of a job. We are told that she is "full of the illusions of ignorance and youth." (Dreiser: 1981, 7). Carrie is attractive, intelligent and likes to surround herself with beautiful things, by which she measures her success. Carrie is fascinated with the lure of the big city but soon finds that instead of finding contentment, she actually discovers that human nature cannot be spiritually sated by materialistic ideals.

Carrie goes to live with her sister, Minnie, and is quickly confronted by the harsh realities of city life. Carrie finds a job at a shoe factory for a very low wage, most of which is spent on her room and board, but Carrie cannot live a confining life in poverty, so when she meets with Druet, a travelling salesman, she agrees to leave her sister's house and move in with him. To the Hanson's ( who represent the conventional idea of morality) this is the fall and ruin of Carrie, but to Carrie herself this is the first step towards her later success, for through her moral fall Carrie has risen economically, and she will not act the part of the ruined girl; and when Carrie later goes to New York, and gets a job as a chorus girl, again in moral terms she is doing the wrong thing, but once more the step toward ruin is a step toward success for Carrie.

Through Carrie's seduction we can see Dreiser's moral ambiguity by asking if what happens to Carrie is indeed bad. He says "in the light of the world's attitude toward woman and her duties, the nature of Carrie's mental state deserves consideration. Actions such as hers are measured by a conventional scale. Society possesses a conventional standard whereby it judges all things. All men should be good, all women virtuous," (Dreiser, 1981: 78), implying that society's judgment is not always foolproof. Twice we see that "Carrie must become indecent in order to live decently," (Grebstein: 1963, 7) for in that society money is the most significant sign of someone's status and that which makes him/her an acceptable member of the American upper class, like Hurstwood, who "concludes that if one has no money, people who do will not pay any attention to him."(Bel: 2014, 7).

People in this novel measure their happiness by what they have, possess or own. The more they have, the better their reputation and status in the city will be. They often represent themselves as wealthier, or as more powerful than they really are. Carrie deceives people around her to make them think she is better than she really is in order to be accepted into their world, for in this consumer society one's monetary status defines his social status and so when Hurstwood loses his money, he loses his social position (not because he has had an affair), while Carrie gains social position as she becomes wealthier. (Bel: 2014).

In writing the ending of *Carrie*, Dreiser creates an alternative identity for her as she moves from kept woman to provider. Carrie began the novel as the seduced, but she ends the novel in a role reversal as the abandoner instead of as the one who is abandoned. Carrie is now in the provider, and Hurstwood, in another role reversal, has to assume a role within the home. He is now dependent on her. (Marlow: 2006).

Ironically, it is Hurstwood who actually fulfills the traditional role of the fallen woman as we see him forsaking his family, living in sin with his lover, then being rejected by his lover and with no way to support himself, Hurstwood turns to beg on the street, and when unable to bear his humiliation any longer, Hurstwood finally fulfills the last step in the traditional fallen woman story: he commits suicide. (Malm: 2008).

Hurstwood's final failure to find and maintain a job forces Carrie to go out into the work force. "After Carrie has ventured out on her own for the first time, her history begins to tell the tale of another new form of identity available to women, the New Woman." (Marlow: 2006, 42). A woman, who is able to defy the conventional attitudes towards women, marriage, work and sex, and so Carrie's fallen woman story takes an entirely different outcome, for instead of being destitute and cast away, like most fallen women, Carrie prospers and casts away not one man, but two. (Malm: 2008).

For Dreiser, as well as for other contemporary writers, who found that the traditional gender patterns and stereotypes could no longer apply in a modern world, had to construct new models to fit into the changing attitudes and perceptions of women and their role in society. Thus the "fallen woman" has moved away from the traditional role designed for her into a new role, one that she writes for herself.

#### **4. The Shift from a Gender to a Monetary Approach:**

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period of great changes and upheavals in almost all aspects of human life.

These changes came as a result of the emerging industrial forces, with their accompanying economic growth and the emergence of new theories that led to the questioning of traditional, religious and ethical values. All of these changes coincided together to bring about the most defining change of this era: the change of woman's role in society. This change revolutionized the way in which society looked at women, for the quiet and submissive woman that was portrayed in the Victorian period was gradually becoming unacceptable and intolerable to a large number of women who were gradually starting to express themselves and asserting their individuality and their rights in a society that was male dominated, thus igniting the first sparks of the feminist movement. (Aslimoska: nd, 67-68).

Henry James, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, painted a picture of a severe and judgmental society, represented by Europe, where matters of female morality were dealt with swiftly and severely. Ironically however, morality was only considered to be pertaining to women, while male morality was a very loose issue. This moral double standard can be seen in the figures of Daisy and Winterbourne, where the flirtatious and outspoken yet innocent Daisy is shunned and ostracized, while Winterbourne, though involved in a not so secret affair, is received and sought out by society. Daisy is censored by society for her wild behavior for it is not in keeping with the traditional idea of womanhood as being modest and dutiful. She defies social customs by walking around at night with young men without a chaperone, receiving them alone in her hotel without the presence of a third party and disregarding the warnings of the older female characters, all of which make her a candidate for the guilty verdict passed against her by society. "Daisy is branded as a bad girl because she does not perform the role of woman 'correctly.'" (Johnson: 2001, 47). Winterbourne, on the other hand, suffers neither ostracism nor any ramifications for his outing with Daisy, nor for his affair with an elderly woman in Geneva, which he continues even after Daisy's death. He enjoys immunity for the simple fact that he is male. Hence society's ruling is not concerned with the actual guilt or innocence of a character but rather judges them based on their gender.

This practice was common in Victorian society, which suffered under the fallacy that the nature of Man is sexual and worldly, while Woman's was thought to be naïve and incapable of caring for herself without a guardian or husband. Thus while there is no such thing as a 'fallen man,' for men were seen as being above reproach, the 'fallen woman' was a widespread term used to describe any female who deviates from the norm.

*Sister Carrie* on the other hand, in a challenging stance by its author shows that Carrie, while a woman who fits into the conventional formula of the fallen woman, does not suffer the same tragic fate of fallen women. For, as Dreiser was aware of the changes taking place in society, he felt that the old formulas of dealing with fallen women in literature were no longer applicable. Thus Carrie's character forces the reader to confront questions about social values and morality as the heroine, rather than meeting with censure, rises and prospers.

Dreiser's description of her fate implies that people in modern society are seen and judged according to their monetary status. He says that in choosing a life of comfort first with Drouet then with Hurstwood, Carrie cannot be equated with a fallen woman, for her desire for clothing, shelter and better living conditions were actually indoctrinated into her by this society. Thus Carrie is not morally responsible for her choices as she was a product of her age.

Ironically enough Dreiser does punish one of his characters, but it is not the morally fallen one, but the one that has failed financially. For in this society that is built on deception and appearances, wealth hides ones faults whereas poverty exposes them to ridicule and contempt. Thus Hurstwood, who enjoyed social power when rich, loses it when he lost his money.

## 5. Conclusion:

The double standards practiced when judging the sexual behavior of women has long and strictly been applied in Victorian patriarchal societies as reflected in the various literary works of the age. A woman who did not conform to the approved conduct guide was called a fallen woman and endured severe condemnation and social ostracism. James, who felt that women were being unjustly judged by society, gives us a young American girl, who is unaware of the knowledge of evil, to show the injustice and cruelty of a society that does not appreciate the purity of such a young lady and judges her according to its own corrupt values. He throws her in the midst of the evil European society to show how society has failed to understand her innocence as it truly is, for she is condemned merely for acting upon her own sense of 'right,' rather than what is sanctioned. In his novel, James calls for a change in the social system that led to the death of the innocent Daisy, while others who are not continue to live and enjoy social esteem.

This pattern, however, underwent a significant shift in modern writings that have upended the parable of the fallen woman to allow her to live and prosper, thereby to emerge as a new strong character that can defy society and survive. This emerging figure, the new-woman, was the product of an age when women entered the work force, became economically independent and in control of their own destinies.

Dreiser's *Carrie* marks one of the first modern women in American fiction. *Sister Carrie* was seen as revolutionary at the time of its publication for Dreiser rather than punishing his heroine's immorality, as expected, punished his hero for his financial 'fall.'

Thus we see that though both Daisy and Carrie go on a life journey, yet their destinations take different turns, for Daisy is innocent yet punished while Carrie is guilty yet succeeds, to show how society and its moral codes affect people.

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