

Original Paper

An Analysis on Carrie's Ethical Choices in *Sister Carrie*

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Abstract

Sister Carrie is the masterpiece of Theodore Dreiser, an American realist writer. The novel is set in the big cities of Chicago and New York at the turn of 20th century. At that time, Consumer Culture prevailed and money defined interpersonal relationship in the United States. This paper made an in-depth analysis of Carrie's ethical choices from the perspective of Nie Zhenzhao's *Ethical Literary Criticism*. *Ethical Literary Criticism* emphasizes that a novel should not be isolated from its ethical environment. Therefore, this paper focuses on the ethical environment at that time, Carrie's moral confusion and the ethical choices she makes. Meanwhile, it is summarized that Carrie is not a simply moral degenerate, but a new citizen who is deeply affected by social transformation with a new ethical tendency, which represents Dreiser's ethical value.

Keywords

Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser, *Ethical Literary Criticism*, ethical environment, ethical choice

1. Introduction

Theodore Dreiser was born in Indiana in 1871 and was the eleventh child of his family. Dreiser's childhood was not a happy one, and his siblings all suffered their own misfortunes. All kinds of hardships at home were later written into novels by him.

Later, a kind middle school teacher gave him generous support to help him enter Indiana University. But he dropped out the next year and worked as a cashier for a furniture company in Chicago. He also worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant, a ticket inspector in a railway station, a clerk in a furniture store and so on. These experiences exposed him to various characters and dark sides of the lower class, endowed him with rich materials for his later creation, and also nourished the tragic thought and naturalistic color in his creation.

Dreiser came from the bottom of American society. He was distressed by the gap between wealth. "More forcibly than ever before, Theodore Dreiser discovered the luck of being born rich... the insufferable difference between wealth and poverty." (Gerber 70) He was the first person to use words

to describe the real life of American people. He was known as the pioneer of contemporary American novels and the master of American realism. Through his works, he revealed the deepest instinct of mankind and put forward sharp criticism of modern industrial society. In Dreiser's novels, he abandoned the "upper class tradition". On the contrary, he boldly exposed the darkness in social life and bravely attacked the traditional American ethics, so most of the characters in his novels come from the bottom of society.

Dreiser worked as a journalist in 1892. He settled in New York in 1895 and began his professional writing career. He published his first novel *Sister Carrie* in 1900. Unfortunately, this novel was banned for a long time because of being accused of "destructive". *Sister Carrie* described the story of Carrie, a girl from the countryside, who came to the big city of Chicago in search of happiness. In order to get rid of poverty, she sold her chastity. In fact, the birth of *Sister Carrie* is not only the product of the author's own era, but also the inevitable result of American real life in the period of social transformation. At the same time, "Dreiser's literary creation has also been deeply influenced by philosophy, sociology, literature and art ideas from Europe". (Chen Guihua 1)

2. Literature Review

At first, this book was rejected by many people, and it triggered all kinds of discussions. Harper Brothers, the first publisher to read this book, refused to accept this book, he said it is not "sufficiently delicate to depict without offense to the reader the continued illicit relations of the heroine". (qtd. in Riggio 48) H.L. Mencken, a prominent early critic, commented on this novel as "the best American novel I have ever read, with the lonesome but Himalayan exception of 'Huckleberry Finn'". (qtd. in Puzel 478)

American scholars have been studying this novel since the beginning of the 20th century. The role of Carrie in the article was even more controversial. Many people think that it is against morality and ethics, so she should not have a happy ending. In the first half of the 1920s, the criticism of Dreiser's works mainly belonged to the traditional historical biographical criticism, which overemphasized the historical background of the novel; In the 1960s and 1970s, Dreiser's novels were carefully read, but most of the studies were divorced from the background of that times; In the 1980s, various critical methods began to be applied to the study of Dreiser's novels, such as feminist criticism, Freudian psychoanalysis, post structuralism and so on.

In contrast, the research on Dreiser's novels in China was relatively weak. As early as in the 1930s, Dreiser's novels were first introduced to Chinese readers by Qu Qiubai. However, they received little concern and in-depth study until the 1970s. With the deepening of cultural exchanges, more and more attention were paid to Dreiser, especially his *Sister Carrie*.

During the 1990s, researches on Dreiser and his novels mainly fell into three categories: thematic study, reviews and writing techniques. Later, with the spread of western literary criticism, scholars began to study the novel from various perspectives. For example, Jiang Daochao was the first person to study

consumerism in novels. (Jiang Daochao 52)

In addition, many scholars chose to start from the perspective of naturalism, because they believed that this novel truly reproduced the American society at that time. In his article *The New Understanding of Sister Carrie's Naturalism*, Hou Qinghua specially analyzed the naturalism in this novel represented in the form of American Dream. In addition, many scholars tried to analyze the novel from the thematic study.

Later, with the development of society, many scholars found a new perspective of ecological ethics. Zhu Zhengwu was the representative of this theory. He believes "Because of the prosperity of materials and wealth as well as the high position of male character, one of the best way to accomplish the spiritual redemption and the peace is to review the ecology and ethics of female character in the process of urbanization". (Zhu Zhenwu 56)

Generally speaking, the current research on *Sister Carrie* mainly focuses on the thematic study or criticism, but there are a small number of papers on *Sister Carrie* based on the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism. Among these papers, Li Yinghua's *A Research on Sister Carrie from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism*, it mainly studies the novel from ethical environment, so lacks the exploration of the ethical value behind the novel and the moral tendency of Dreiser. Therefore, based on this foundation, this paper will analyze Carrie's ethical choice by restoring the ethical environment at that time in order to dig out Dreiser's ethical value represented in this novel.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Emergence and Development of Ethical Literary Criticism

In the field of literary criticism, Wayne Booth is a pioneer. He proposes that when creating and practicing moral reading, we should carefully combine moral and aesthetic considerations. He argues that creators of novels are supposed to choose their rhetoric from a moral point of view. Booth believes "the choice of expression and writing strategy is never a choice of moral factors, an invitation to moral criticism". (Booth 108) Starting from the rhetoric of the novel, Booth makes an ethical criticism in western literature. But in the west, a systematic criticism system has not been formed in the study of literary ethics.

At this time, the Ethical Literary Criticism proposed by the Chinese literary criticism circle constructs the method of ethical criticism on its basis, and holds that literature is first to meet the needs of ethical expression. With the continuous exploration of Chinese scholars, taking ethical choice as the core, we have constructed a relatively perfect critical discourse system, so as to make Ethical Literary Criticism a more easily mastered critical method.

From the perspective of methodology, Ethical Literary Criticism is based on ethics and brings ethics into the research framework of literary criticism. "Ethical Literary Criticism is a research method to read, analyze and interpret literary works, to study authors and literary problems from perspective of ethics. The basic thought of this method is that literature is the art of ethics in nature as it is the special

expressions of ethical ideas and moral life in a particular historical period.” (Nie Zhenzhao 1) The fundamental position of this theory is to study the ethical connotation of literary works by taking the imaginary art world as the object.

3.2 Ethical Environment

Besides, Ethical Literary Criticism is the study of the ethical environment of literature. Ethical environment is the thinking environment around people’s way of living. “It shapes our emotional responses and determines what causes pride and shame, anger and gratitude, and it also determines what can be forgiven and what cannot be. Hence, it sets out standards of behavior.” (Blackburn 1) Therefore, “ethical environment” refers to a specific historical situation formed by a specific social background, and it is not possible to judge the ethical standards of the past with the current moral and ethical standards.

Ethical Literary Criticism is not aimed at moral judgment, but to “appreciate literary works from the perspective of social development with an ethical point of view, which avoids any misinterpretation of various ethical environment”. (Nie Zhenzhao 267) Literary criticism should be based on history, that is, to criticize a particular literary work in a particular moral context. Literature has always been a part of human civilization. This means that literature will never surpass history, nor will it be far away from history. The ethical environment of literary works in different historical periods is different, which is the premise of appreciating a literary work.

3.3 Ethical Choice

Ethical Literary Criticism also holds that the development process of human civilization includes three stages: natural choice, ethical choice and scientific choice. “Human beings are highly scientific with the help of education, so morality disappears and human civilization enters the stage of scientific choice.” (Liu Hongwei and Nie Zhenzhao 1) On the one hand, ethical choice refers to moral choice; From another perspective, it is a choice between two ethical choices. Different choices have different consequences and reflect different ethical values. Ethical choice is a moral decision. In other words, people’s choice of ethical events is called ethical choice. Ethical Literary Criticism takes ethical choice as the core of the interpretation of all literary works. All characters in literary works will inevitably make ethical choices. In literary works, characters often face two or more ethical choices. Therefore, ethical choice is a way for human beings to choose whether to give up evil or morality. Analyzing ethical choice will help us understand ethics.

4. American Ethical Environment at the Turn of 20th Century

4.1 The Prevalence of Consumer Culture

From the end of 19th century to the beginning of 20th century, it is a special period for the development of modern American novels. The early Consumer Culture was a culture with consumption concept in the era of industrial civilization. Consumers are totally hooked on spending. Their consumption goal is not to satisfy effective needs, but to satisfy motivated needs. At this time, the possession of material is

no longer the basic need of life, but has become a symbol of status. Its rise is not accidental and has its own development characteristics. As a social phenomenon, its emergence also played an important role in the early society.

The novel *Sister Carrie* is created in such a background. The prevalence of Consumer Culture makes people's consumption desire rise infinitely, makes people produce more illusory, and it seems that people are free and liberated. In the novel, people's extreme desire for material satisfaction is described in detail.

Under the guidance of this cultural consciousness, the traditional Puritan ethical and moral thoughts such as purity and self sacrifice have been ruthlessly destroyed by industrialization. Money and interests have become the effective yardstick of human relations. What fills people was the cruelty and copper smell of urban civilization. With the rapid development of commodity mechanization, the omnipotent power of material wealth inevitably leads to the emergence of materialization tendency, that is, people regard the goods they produce as the object of blind worship. In such a society, family, marriage, friendship, and love are all branded with the mark of mutual benefit of money without exception.

In the novel *Sister Carrie*, Carrie was the spokesperson of Consumer Culture. The writer spared no efforts to show real consumerism. Urban description is an important way for writer to describe popular Consumer Culture. Chicago and New York at that time were the epitome of modern American society. There is no doubt that the city described in this work is full of Consumer Culture. This is why Dreiser has devoted a lot of energy to depicting urban areas.

In the novel, the writer Dreiser defined Chicago as "a magnet emitting the attractiveness of Chicago's material prosperity and amazing urban life". (Dreiser 9) At the same time, Dreiser gave another vivid description of the consumption atmosphere in New York, "In Chicago the roads to distinction were politics and trade. In New York, the roads were any one of a half-hundred and each had been diligently pursued by hundreds, so that celebrities were numerous. Walk among the magnificent residence, the glided shops, restaurant, resorts of all kinds, feel the quality of the smiles which cut like glistening swords and of strides born of places, and you shall know of what is atmosphere of the light and mighty". (Dreiser 338)

Carrie, an 18-year-old girl from a small town, strongly felt the flavor of the cities. The colorful city life made her unable to stop. In Carrie's mind, the supremacy of money was equal to happiness and power. The gorgeous hall could immediately make her feel comfortable. Looking at the crowd with exquisite clothes and decorations in the street seemed to be a pleasant thing. When she was unemployed and at a loss, in the face of a wide range of gorgeous clothes like a magnet, she sold her body and lived with Drouet, a salesman.

In such an ethical environment, Carrie's consumption desire is not satisfied, so she would rather pay the price of her body than live with Drouet. In fact, before choosing to live with Drouet, Carrie struggled between ethical consciousness and desire. Ethical consciousness was that she felt that being a mistress

meant losing ethical norms. However, in such ethical environment where Consumer Culture prevailed, all kinds of goods made her quickly lose the constraints of ethics.

Carrie's consumption desire was satisfied again and again, but whenever her consumption desire was satisfied, she set her desire to a higher level. For example, when she learned that Hurstwood, the hotel manager, was richer than Drouet, she resolutely sank into Hurstwood's arms; When Hurstwood's business failed and fell flat, she quietly left him; When she succeeded on the stage, she never forgot the fashionable dresses and luxurious house. Carrie constructed her identity through the room she lived in and the clothes she wore.

In this environment, Carrie's desire for consumption became stronger and more irresistible. She gained great pleasure from participating in consumption and entertainment activities, which covered up the pain of her inner moral unrest to a certain extent. Carrie longed for wealth and could not abide by the traditional ethics. Therefore, it was an inevitable choice for her to sell her body and violate the due marriage ethics.

Dreiser has a deep insight into the influence of ethical consciousness and the rupture of ethical relations. His moral stance towards the characters in this novel is not condemnation, but sympathy, because he is aware of the weakness of people in Consume Culture to resist material temptation.

4.2 The Alienation of Interpersonal Relationship

The alienation of interpersonal relationship is another manifestation of the ethical environment in *Sister Carrie*. *Sister Carrie* was set in a specific period, during which possession of wealth and enjoyment of material were usually regarded as the standard of urban life. The pursuit of wealth and material interests was regarded as the highest personal goal in life. It could be inferred that when people indulged in having a lot of money and met all material needs at any cost, it would lead to changes in personal values. The alienation between individuals will inevitably lead to the alienation of interpersonal relationships.

4.2.1 The Alienation of Family Ties

When Carrie came here go to her sister, Minnie, she found that city life was not the same as she imagined. At the same time, the relationship between Carrie and her sister was not as good as before, that is, the so-called relationship alienation. In Carrie's eyes, her sister Minnie "was now a thin, though, rugged, woman of twenty-seven, with ideas of life colored by her husband's, and the fast hardening into narrower conceptions of pleasure and duty than had ever been hers in a thoroughly circumscribed youth". (Dreiser 19) Carrie's sister Minnie and her husband lived a hard life in Chicago, what could seen from the text, "The walls of the rooms were discordantly papered. The floors were covered with matting and the hall laid with a thin rag carpet. One could see that the furniture was of that poor, hurriedly patched-together quality sold by the installment houses". (Dreiser 16)

Minnie invited Carrie to live with her, not because she cared about her sister, but because she wanted Carrie to give her the rent, like described in the text, "she had invited Carrie, not because she longed for her presence, but because the latter was dissatisfied at home, and could probably get work and pay her

board here”. (Dreiser 19) In their eyes, though Carrie was their nearest relation, they might have regarded her as money with which to buy food.

Moreover, on the first day, when Carrie came back from her work and complained about her work, no one in this family noticed it, let alone cared about her feelings. Under such circumstances, Carrie could not feel the warmth of the family at all. She believed that in the eyes of her sister’s family, she was just an ordinary tenant who can provide them with a little rent to help them relieve the pressure of life. “The ideal is beautiful and the reality is cruel. The pressure of life and hard work soon pushed her from her sister Minnie’s humble apartment to the arms of salesman Drouet and manager Hurstwood.” (Yang Qi and Jiang Chenyong 4)

4.2.2 The Alienation of Romantic Relationship

Another alienated relationship was between Drouet and Carrie. Drouet enjoyed the days when he had no burden of marriage. To some extent, he was just a drummer, and his clothes or behavior were similar to those of the elites who were easily admired by young women. Carrie was beautiful and soon became his prey. He courted her and lived with her, but no matter how much Carrie wanted to marry him and wanted to have a home, Drouet found many excuses to refuse. For Drouet, he only wanted to realize his pride by Carrie’s beauty and innocence, without much consideration of Carrie’s situation. For Carrie, she did not really love Drouet, because she easily betrayed Drouet.

Carrie wanted to get out of poverty, and Drouet was the man for her. In fact, Drouet was not true love for Carrie, otherwise Carrie would not have been so easily tempted to betray him. It could only be said that the relationship between them was more like a transaction. Drouet could meet all Carrie’s needs at that time. However, as time goes by, Carrie felt no happiness. She wanted to get more material wealth. Therefore, her relationship with Drouet was not based on love, but on their respective personal needs. Once neither of them could find satisfaction in the relationship, the relationship would end. At this time, Hurstwood’s appearance brought her hope. Compared with Drouet, Hurstwood had more wealth and higher social status. She resolutely abandoned Drouet and chose to go with Hurstwood.

In such an ethical environment, it is impossible for Carrie not to face her ethical predicament, so Carrie was often in contradiction. The contradiction was manifested in the choice of following traditional morality or succumbing to reality. She was often condemned by her conscience, but another self in her heart always defended herself. Finally, her desire for material life prevailed over morality. In addition, after living with Drouet, Carrie asked for marriage many times, because in Carrie’s eyes, as long as she got married, her ethical predicament would disappear.

As for Hurstwood, the reason for the alienation of his relationship with his family was that his family didn’t care about his life and emotional needs at all. In their eyes, Hurstwood was just a person who met their material needs. It was because Hurstwood lived in such a cold family atmosphere that he was attracted by the innocent and beautiful Carrie.

Carrie’s pursuit of material enjoyment in the novel showed that people in the consumer society abandoned the constraints of social ethics and indulged their desires, so as to fall into an ethical

predicament. The friends Carrie made at different stages depended on his financial situation. She was always struggling between material desire and ethical consciousness. It can be said that Carrie's material desire is stimulated to a great extent.

Human survival is inseparable from society, and people's communication is creating an environment conducive to their own development. In such an ethical environment, the purpose of interpersonal relationship was utilitarian, and Carrie began to lose her morality and collapse her faith. Carrie constantly made choices and used them to change her development environment.

4.3 Materialized American Dream

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* vividly depicts the struggle of the protagonist Carrie in order to realize her dream in a more objective and realistic artistic style, reflecting the fate of the lower class in the social transformation period of "natural selection", and shows the great influence and role of the environment in the fate of the characters. At the same time, it also implies the disillusionment of the myth of the so-called "American Dream" that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed. "It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." (Adams 214)

American Dream has always been an important basic belief that Americans are proud of. In a general sense, American Dream means that in the United States, no matter the differences in status, origin, race and gender, as long as they have the necessary conditions such as intelligence, diligence and perseverance, anyone can compete fairly with others through their honest labor under the same conditions, achieve ultimate success and happiness, and make their dreams come true.

To some extent, American Dream is indeed an inspiring ideal. However, with the development of history, American Dream has gradually changed from the original lofty realm to secularization, and evolved into a hallucination that only a few people can realize. Especially in the late 19th century and early 20th century, for a variety of reasons, American dream for most low-income workers was just a dream.

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* showed us the disillusionment of Carrie's American Dream. American Dream gave all men their own ideals, and it was what inspired Carrie to go to Chicago alone. Therefore, although she felt pain when she left her parents, she was still determined to realize her dream. When she first arrived in Chicago, she worked hard to stand on her own two feet. She also fantasized about using her salary to achieve her wish, but she soon realized that the ideal did not match the reality. As described, "the fine ladies who elbowed and ignored her, brushing past in utter disregard of her presence, themselves eagerly enlisted in the materials which the store contained". (Dreiser 18) She also wanted to win the respect of others. She wanted a better life and respect, which was consistent with the original American Dream. For naive Carrie, social status could be measured by clothes, so when Carrie first met Drouet, she felt that he could be relied on, "The whole suit was rather tight-fitting, and was finished off with heavy-soled tan shoes, highly polished, and the gray fedora hat". (Dreiser 10)

Carrie deeply believed that luxurious cloths could become a symbol of social status and wealth, which was why she never stopped pursuing exquisite clothes. In her opinion, clothes were not only practical, but also can be used as a tool to enhance her beauty, and finally help improve her social status. In the process of material pursuit, she gradually ignored her spiritual needs. Although she does succeed to some extent, she pays a heavy price of moral decline in the traditional sense. Unfortunately, the final outcome is still far from her ideal real happiness.

In the period of social transformation, many traditional lifestyles and ethical concepts have been strongly impacted, and people's ideological understanding has changed dramatically under the constant impact. Carrie's fate reflects the result of people's contradictory choices in the period of social transformation.

5. Carrie's Ethical Choices and the Reasons

This part mainly discusses the ethical choices of Carrie's attitude to life. Carrie tried to make a living for herself, but the harsh reality drove her into a corner. The only thing she could do was survive with men in the big city.

5.1 Choice for Survival Mode

At the beginning of the novel, the writer laid out the fate of the unfortunate girl. "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. The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. Without a counselor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! Unrecognized for what they are, their beauty, like music, too often relaxes, then weakens, then perverts the simpler human perception." (Dreiser 1)

At first, Carrie came to Chicago full of longing, imagining that she could live independently in this big city with her own hands, and that she could also buy clothes she liked with her salary. But when Carrie first came to the city, she vaguely felt that her imagined city life was about to be destroyed, especially after she lived in her sister Minnie's house. Carrie did not expect that her sister invited herself to live at home just to collect rent and improve their life. At first, in order to pay her sister's rent and have a better life, Carrie looked everywhere for suitable job opportunities. But because of her inexperience, Carrie couldn't find a job at all. After repeated failures, the girl squatted helplessly on the roadside and cried. She wanted to look elsewhere, but found that she didn't have the courage to enter any store again. She opened her mouth and asked if there was a suitable job, and it would always be the same result. Finally, she had to go home. Carrie was very happy to find a job in the shoe factory on her way home. For Carrie at this time, life seemed to be developing in a good direction.

But gradually, Carrie began to get tired of the job. Whether it was the chaotic environment or the complex group relationship, she lost confidence in the job. When she came home, she wanted to complain to her sister about her dissatisfaction with her work, but found that no one cared about her

feelings. To make matters worse, they only focused on whether Carrie could pay the rent on time, which undoubtedly hit Carrie deeply. Carrie was very disappointed with her family. Later, the cold weather made things worse. Carrie lost her only job because of her serious illness and couldn't even afford a coat. Carrie couldn't pay the rent because she lost her job, and Hanson's attitude made her unbearable. Carrie knew she could not go on like this forever. Eventually, she can only return to the countryside, to live a poor life.

Carrie's desire to live alone soon disappeared when she met Drouet. Drouet gave her warmth that Carrie had never received from her family. She was completely attracted to this rich and handsome man. At the beginning, when Drouet offered to give her financial help, Carrie hesitated. She didn't know how to explain the source of the money with her family, let alone how to use it. She could not persuade herself to accept the money in peace of mind. Driven by moral consciousness, Carrie decided to return the money. But when Drouet gave her advice and lured her to live outside, she could enjoy this money and a comfortable life. The gentleman kept encouraging Carrie to believe that she could survive in the city without the help of her family.

Facing this ethical predicament, Carrie must make a choice. If she refused, her identity would still be a country girl without a job. On the contrary, if Carrie chose to accept it, her identity was a mistress. Finally, Carrie chose to degenerate. "Although her conscience told her that it was immoral to exchange being a mistress for material satisfaction, she had more desires at this time. The huge contrast between ideal and reality lost her original heart. The pursuit of material blinded her eyes. She was willing to live with Drouet against gossip." (Li Yuting 4) Similarly, through Drouet's introduction, she met Hurstwood, who was higher than Drouet. She decided to get rid of Drouet and use marriage with Hurstwood to control her own destiny. In Carrie's view, her life was miserable compared with Drouet and Hurstwood. This shows that her ethical identity is waking up.

From the above, we can see that Carrie always wanted to rely on herself at the beginning. She experienced a series of struggles of independence and degeneration. However, the indifferent family atmosphere and distorted working environment finally made her choose to degenerate. She found that she could get a better life with the help of men and climb up the social ladder. Desire and temptation make her moral consciousness disappear gradually, and finally choose to rely on men to degenerate.

5.2 Choice for Love

The purpose of this part is to analyze Carrie's ethical choice for love. Carrie's view of love changes with the change of environment. With the rapid development of American capitalism and booming economy, the efficiency of machinery production has been greatly improved, and a large number of surplus rural labor force has begun to enter the city. People are free to choose their own life, and unfamiliar cities have become a gathering place for young people. Carrie is one of them.

Carrie, who lived in the countryside since childhood, was kind and simple. She yearned for pure love. When she met Drouet, she was full of worship for him. When she arrived in Chicago, Drouet also extended a helping hand when she was hungry and cold. She thought he was her prince charming, but

unexpectedly Drouet didn't really love her and refused to marry her. Since then, Carrie's fantasy of love began to burst, but in order to meet her survival needs, she still chose to live with Drouet. Carrie's love began to be based on material things. In the face of these great temptations, Carrie was completely captured by the big city. When Drouet could not satisfy her desire, Carrie met Hurstwood with better conditions, and Carrie resolutely gave up Drouet.

In order to solve the ethical predicament between abiding by marital responsibility and pursuing a better life, she made a new ethical choice. In her dealings with Hurstwood she had found him a true gentleman. Moreover, Drouet could not meet her needs for marriage. When Hurstwood invited them to the theatre, Carrie was very excited just because of a letter. Later, when Drouet went to work, Hurstwood visited unexpectedly, and they talked for a long time. This was a very important conversation, which made them more sure of each other's feelings. "In this conversation she heard, instead of his words, the voices of the things which he represented. How suave was the counsel of his appearance! How feelingly did his superior state speak for itself! The growing desire he felt for her lay upon her spirit as a gentle hand." (Dreiser 105) Later, they naturally fell in love. When Drouet discovered Carrie's betrayal and told Carrie about Hurstwood's marriage, their love fell in trouble.

It can be said that the ethical choice made by Carrie was closely related to her ethical consciousness. Before meeting Hurstwood, Carrie had hope to marry Drouet as soon as possible, so that she could use her wife's identity to get out of the ethical predicament. Now Carrie was faced with another ethical predicament--whether to continue with Hurstwood. If she gave up this relationship, it meant she gave up the superior living conditions on her own initiative; If she chose to continue to marry Hurstwood, it meant she had violated the ethical order recognized by the society and would be punished by public opinion. Obviously, for Carrie at present, she must choose the latter.

Under the same circumstances, Hurstwood was unwilling to give up Carrie. He hated his indifferent family atmosphere, only Carrie could bring him warmth. So they eloped to New York and married in the presence of the priest, which means they have started a new life. Soon, the quality of life of Carrie and Hurstwood in New York began to decline. Hurstwood was idle all day. After his money was spent, it was obvious that he could not meet Carrie's needs. The burden of life fell on Carrie.

Carrie once again faced an ethical predicament. The predicament she faced was a material problem on the surface, but an ethical problem in essence. She was married to Hurstwood at that time, so her behavior should be in line with marriage ethics and bear her responsibility as a wife. The husband was at a low ebb in his career, as a wife, she should help him out of trouble. However, Carrie had become a star, and she longed for fame. "She began to look upon Hurstwood wholly as a man, and not as a lover or husband. She felt thoroughly bound to him as a wife, and that her lot was cast with his, whatever it might be; but she began to see that he was gloomy and taciturn, not a young, strong, and buoyant man." (Dreiser 298) Facing the declining family and her decadent husband, Carrie was unwilling to assume her responsibility as a wife, but chose to give up her obligation.

Through the above analysis, we find that with the development of their love, Carrie's ethical choice for love has changed from company to separation. During their romantic period, Carrie thought Hurstwood was a trustworthy soul mate and would like to be with him. But when their emotional conflicts accumulated, Carrie was dissatisfied with him and their new life. In the end, she became more and more popular, which made her take the inactive Hurstwood as a burden. Her ethical consciousness made her succumb to the desire for a better life, which led Carrie to finally make the ethical choice of leaving Hurstwood. With wealth and high social status, Carrie would no longer become an accessory to men because of material needs, because she has achieved economic independence, and she could meet her needs and material enjoyment by her own efforts. Carrie's view of love was not pure, but was mixed with many complex and realistic elements, all of which were to meet her personal desires.

5.3 Reasons for Carrie's Ethical Choices

On the way of growing up, Carrie kept falling into different ethical predicament. Carrie didn't want to continue to be the rural girl who couldn't make a living, so she couldn't refuse. She had to accept it constantly in order to achieve her goal. At first, the young but inexperienced girl was eager to meet the needs of survival with her own hands. But gradually, when she found that there was nothing she could do in this big city, she began to realize that she could not get rid of poverty alone.

When her ethical environment changes, her desire also changes. Drouet's temptation constantly shook her heart, and she finally chose to become a mistress to meet her desires. Gradually, Carrie's environment changed again, and Drouet could no longer satisfy her desires, so Carrie was soon attracted to the richer and more attractive Hurstwood. After a long time, Carrie's guilt of getting something for nothing finally disappeared under her desire, making her lose her moral consciousness and moral judgment.

The external environment influenced Carrie's judgment. If she hadn't come to Chicago, she would still be that simple rural girl; If she had not met Drouet, she would still be the girl who wanted to create wealth with her own hands to realize her American Dream; If she had never experienced a rich life, how could she not be satisfied and abandon Drouet and Hurstwood successively? From the moment she accepted Drouet's financial support, she was no longer the simple rural girl Carrie. She will sell her body because of vanity, and her desire will escalate with the change of the environment. Finally, even when she has enjoyed a very rich life, she still feels material wealth does not bring happiness. With the rapid development and prosperity of economy, rich materials stimulated consumption. Under the temptation of this environment, Carrie accepted the standard and sank.

Some of Carrie's characteristics at the beginning, such as shyness and her inability to express her inner thoughts, show that she is a civilian from the bottom of society. But when she first walked into the Chicago Business District, she found great differences in the lives of people with different identities. Just as when she worked in the shoe factory, she used clothes to draw boundaries. Although she had tasted poverty, she looked down on ordinary workers. She is not willing to give in to fate and is determined to change herself, so as to become a successful person in the upper class society. It is not

difficult to see that Carrie consciously yearns for the life of upper class, but she changes her ethical identity all driven by her desire and instinct.

6. Conclusion

In all, *Sister Carrie* is a literary work with a clear ethical structure. The novel describes the protagonist Carrie falling into multiple ethical predicaments due to the dislocation of ethical identity from beginning to end. Carrie's ethical choices reflect the helpless choice made by small people for survival after encountering ethical difficulties in a specific ethical environment. It can not be simply concluded with "error". From the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, this is actually an inappropriate ethical choice.

Carrie's ethical choices mean the change of her understanding of material life and spiritual life, which highlights the significance of moral teaching in the work. "Commodity economy and consumer culture stimulate people's material pursuit, but under the control of this mentality, the seemingly different life trajectory of the protagonist Carrie and other characters clearly proves the same truth, that is, the satisfaction of desire regardless of morality can not bring people happiness. The material pursuit, whether success or failure, ultimately brings spiritual disillusionment: the loser ends up with despair, and the winner loses himself with disappointment." (Chen Guihua and Wang Guoping 4) These warnings brought by the novel still have thought-provoking practical significance even for today's people. Reading *Sister Carrie*, we can get some enlightenment from Carrie's ethical tragedy: the ethical rules of society are the guarantee of ethical order. As long as a person lives in an ethical society, he must maintain ethical consciousness and be bound by ethical rules, otherwise he will lead to ethical tragedy due to improper ethical choice. Therefore, every social individual should strengthen learning, strengthen their own ethical awareness, follow ethical norms and make appropriate ethical choices.

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