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Dreiser's Consumer Culture: Fashion and Material Reality in *Sister Carrie*

by Lisa Lucas

Consumerism in America seems to have taken on an entirely new hue as we near the twenty-first century, evidenced by recent phenomena such as *Wrestlemania* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. While many people think this kind of rampant consumer culture is tolerable at best, it is, at least, an expression of the *masses* rather than the elite. Or is it? It could be argued that the various phenomena of consumerism are *not* products generated through the demands of the common people, but rather that they are conceived and controlled by the privileged who, ironically, foster the idea that the products were created because of consumer demand. The issues of power and influence in consumer culture, however current they may seem, do not have their origins in this century. The philosophizing Theodore Dreiser, for example, has much to say in *Sister Carrie* (1900) about the budding fashion industry of the late nineteenth century, which served much the same purpose that *Wrestlemania* does today in that they both provide an opportunity for expression to a sector of society yet untapped by other forms of consumer culture.

As America was becoming increasingly industrialized around the turn of the century, the fashion industry was laying the foundation for what would later become a billion-dollar business. Because of the limited feminine role at the time, women's chief interest in and contribution to consumer culture was usually related to fashion. Just as *Wrestlemania* gives voice to people who may have been hitherto silenced in society, fashion in the late nineteenth century opened up a whole new world to Americans who had been previously excluded from fashionable life. Close observation of the protagonist of *Sister Carrie* provides a study of the pervasive influence of fashion, and also reveals how this industry can be liberating for its more astute patrons.

Throughout the novel, Dreiser comments on the nature of the growing consumer culture of the 1890s and women's subsequent re-

sponse to it. From the very beginning of the novel, in fact, Dreiser claims that women possess innate qualities which subconsciously draw them to the manner of dress, that of others as well as of self: "Those who have ever delved into the depths of a woman's conscience must, at some time or another, have come upon that mystery of mysteries – the moral significance, to her, of clothes" (7). For the heroine, Carrie Meeber, making the transition from rural Columbia City to vast Chicago, clothes are indeed a fascinating and worthy object of admiration and desire; and although she does not realize it in the beginning, clothes prove to be one of her most profitable investments.

Just coming into prominence around the time Carrie is trying her fortune in Chicago was the department store, an integral element in the development of the fashion industry as part of modern consumer culture. On her first long trek in search of employment, Carrie is overwhelmed by all that the department stores offer, and Dreiser takes time to comment on their importance:

The nature of these vast retail combinations, should they ever permanently disappear, will form an interesting chapter in the commercial industry of our nation. Such a flowering out of a modest trade principle the world had never witnessed up to that time. (22)

One soon comes to the question of whether these "retail combinations" serve as a liberating force for individuals like Carrie, or as a force of oppression. On the one hand, the producer-consumer-product relationship seems to be empowering for Carrie and other lower class women in that the department stores enable them to choose new products to adorn themselves with, thereby concealing the traditional indicators of class status. The relationship also gives them the (indirect) power to determine the successes and failures of the producers. On the other hand, however, the producers control the creation and marketing of products, usually with little input from consumers, indicating that instead of consumers informing producers of their desires (demand creates supply), *producers inform consumers* of what they *should* be desiring (supply creates demand). In this sense, the producer exploits the consumer's desire to raise her/his social status.

Neil McKendrick has addressed similar issues in *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (1982), which traces the roots of the commercialization of fashion in eighteenth-century England. The primary benefit of the commercialization of fashion, as far as the middle and lower classes were concerned, was the blurring of social class divisions, a boon

especially for the growing bourgeois. No longer was fashion under the thumbs of the aristocracy, but neither was it ever really controlled by mass consumer culture, because consumers are, after all, only consumers. As McKendrick puts it, fashion became fiercely competitive, as would any potent industry in capitalistic society, causing the fashion industry to manipulate the market, and thereby, the consumers:

This new fashion world was one in which entrepreneurs were trying deliberately to induce fashionable change, to make it rapidly available to as many as possible and yet to keep it so firmly under their control that the consuming public could be sufficiently influenced to buy at the dictates of *their* fashion decisions, at the convenience of *their* production lines. (43)

Rachel Bowlby has used the metaphor of seduction in describing the producer-consumer relationship of the late nineteenth century fashion industry: "The organized effort of 'producers' to sell to 'consumers' would to a large measure take the form of a masculine appeal to women" (19).

If, in *Sister Carrie*, the marketing of fashion largely takes the form of a masculine appeal to women, as Bowlby suggests, and if producers do indeed inform consumers of their desires, as McKendrick asserts, then fashion for Carrie and the women of her time does not seem to have the potential to be a liberating force. However, there are other ways of interpreting the issue. The fashion industry could be seen as oppressive since it controls consumers, making them slaves (albeit unaware of their predicament) to the fashion industry. On the other hand, some consumers, Carrie for example, are wise enough to achieve material success, largely due to "fashion savvy," and by this term I refer not only to the assembling of aesthetically striking outfits, but also to the ability to assess the "worth" of others through their outward appearances. Thus, fashion is in few ways, if any, a barrier to Carrie's social and personal development. In fact, it becomes an instrument of her own empowerment.

In "*Sister Carrie and the Industrial Life: Objects and the New American Self*," Stanley Corkin astutely points out the extreme focus on objects instead of people in the late-nineteenth century. Fashion was simply the latest addition to this new world of materialism. The manner of dress was an outward expression, not of self, but of wealth, and because Carrie had the ability to read these expressions, she becomes a material success (614). Carrie never pretends that clothing is

a panacea, a road to emancipation and freedom for women; rather, Carrie sees clothes for what they are: something that can be bought and used for her own self-promotion. She sees fashion just as she sees money: "Something others have and I must get." Because Carrie comes to understand the *material reality* of physical appearances, she frees herself from the oppression of the fashion industry. The key to this liberation is that Carrie focuses more on the dress of *others* than of herself. She uses her keen powers of fashion observation to read the signals of the clothes: which men were the most promising producers, not of clothes in the fashion industry, but of clothes for Carrie.

For example, from the beginning of the novel when Carrie encounters Drouet on the train to Chicago, she is aware of his fine clothes, which Dreiser explains are "the things without which he is nothing" (6). Carrie reads his clothing: "There is an indescribably faint line in matter of men's apparel which somehow divides for her those who are worth glancing at and those who are not . . . There is another line at which the dress of a man will cause her to study her own" (7). So although Carrie finds Drouet's clothing pleasing to the eye, she realizes acutely that her position does not match favorably with his: "This is the line the individual at her elbow now marked for Carrie. She became conscious of an inequality . . ." (7). So even in her young country-girl naivete, Carrie has the ability to understand not only the beauty of clothing, but more importantly, the *meaning*, the reality, of the clothing.

The innate ability to read the aesthetic and monetary language of clothing is developed under Drouet, but soon Carrie is ready to move on. She sees that her new romantic interest, Hurstwood, is by far the better dresser, and furthermore, he obviously has the resources to afford these new and better clothes:

What he wore did not strike the eye as forcibly as that which Drouet had on, but Carrie could see the elegance of the material. Hurstwood's shoes were of soft, black calf, polished only to a dull shine. Drouet wore patent leather, but Carrie could not help feeling that there was a distinction in favour of the soft leather where all else was so rich.
(94)

Just as important as Carrie's comparison is that Dreiser tells us that this sort of thing is *natural* to women like Carrie: "She noticed these things inconspicuously. They were things that would naturally flow from the situation" (94). During the early days of fashion, as well as now, women's powers of comparison in the manner of dress were consid-

ered spontaneous, almost subconscious, acts.

Carrie continues to refine her taste in clothes in New York through the tutelage of Mrs. Vance. Their conversations more often than not center on what is "all the rage" that season. Mrs. Vance takes special care to give Carrie hints about styles and colors that might be particularly striking on Carrie, and Dreiser tells us that this exchange is unusual for two pretty women, suggesting that the wise fashion consumer is always in competition with other consumers.

Carrie is aware of her own social position as indicated by her clothes, and Mrs. Vance unintentionally drives that point home, especially by introducing Carrie to Broadway, where people constantly parade their newest, finest apparel. As the two walk together amidst "fashion's throng," Carrie comes to realize that there are more rungs on the socioeconomic ladder for her to climb: "She could only imagine that it must be evident to many that she was the less handsomely dressed of the two. It cut her to the quick, and she resolved that she would not come here again until she looked better" (324). Carrie is hurt that she cannot dress more finely, and throughout the novel it is only this type of experience – a sort of fashion rejection – that arouses in her any emotion that could be construed as determination to succeed. She dreams about the time when she can walk on these streets and feel like she truly belongs: "At the same time she longed to feel the delight of parading here as an equal. Ah, then she would be happy" (324).

But the failure of Hurstwood, her once-promising producer, brings her back to reality: food must come before fashion. After he loses his job and Carrie finds a position as a chorus girl, she is forced to put all her money toward survival. However, as her salary gradually increases, she finds herself spending as "recklessly as she dared" on clothes, knowing that the most important element for future material success, especially during this superficial era, is outward appearance – for prospective employers as well as acquaintances and friends. She does not tell Hurstwood about her raises; after receiving her first extra money, she says, "I'll not give him the rest of my money . . . I do enough. I am going to get me something to wear" (401).

Carrie's success is rapid from this point on. She soon has made a name for herself and gained a salary equal to her fame; she has all the clothes and other fineries any woman could want. Despite the oppressive elements inherent in any marketing situation, especially that of fashion, Carrie is a success, a huge success in one of the most object-oriented times in American history. She succeeds because she uses all her resources to understand the producer-consumer-product relation-

ship and make it work to her advantage. Although some could argue that in the beginning she was a *product*, bought by Drouet, he finds her place in the spectrum, which is as a consumer. Even if labeled as a product, she is clever enough to perceive the relative position of others through their dress, and then endeavors to gain more power, thread by thread. By understanding the language of clothing, Carrie can manipulate the men who can help her reach the top of the hierarchy. In the end she is much more than merely a wise consumer; she is a producer. People may want to buy her – but that doesn't make her a product, as might be assumed, because she can *refuse* to be purchased. When the millionaire tries to "buy" her, she decides whether or not to put the product on the market, so she is a *producer*, not a product, as she began – an amazing development in a novel of so many wisps being blown about in the wind.

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