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Carrie Meeber and the Reflected Self

by Michael T. Prahl

Deborah Garfield, in her article "Taking a Part: Actor and Audience in Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie," analyzes the novel in terms of the theatrical aspects of the story. This approach is appropriate and, to a degree, fruitful, given Carrie's chosen profession as well as various elements of staging found within the novel. It is, however, what is left unstated in such an analysis, what is implied, which gives this approach its force. The unstated element in this approach is the notion that we are all, whether characters in a story or "real" people, merely playing roles, merely reflecting back to our audience the images of ourself which we receive from them. This is the lesson one learns from Carrie Meeber in Dreiser's novel.

This concept of a mirror stage in human development (or stade du miroir) is not of recent origin; however, it was developed in its present form by the French psychologist Jacques Lacan in the second half of this century. Very simply stated, this theory holds that at approximately six to eighteen months of age, individuals develop their personalities based on the persona presented to others which is then reflected, or mirrored, back to them. This reflection process begins with an awareness of others such that the "initial" persona presented to others is in itself a reflection. According to Lacan, this reflection is that which individuals receive the first time they perceive themselves in an actual mirror. This is the first time individuals realize they are independent entities, physical beings which have an existence apart from others. The image each is presented with at this point is a reflection which is then mimicked (Lacan XIII). Thus, according to Lacan, there is no authentic self, at least in any meaningful sense, since one is merely presented with reflected images, the roles, of oneself: the mirror images one assumes during the course of one's existence.

Although Dreiser does not provide his readers with a full history of Carrie prior to her train trip to Chicago, based on her actions throughout the novel one must assume that she is no different from anyone else: her identity undergoes changes due to her relation to those around her.
This can be seen in the changes resulting from her association with Drouet, Hurstwood, Ames, Mrs. Vance, and, to a lesser degree, Lola Osborne. It is almost as if each of these "others" functions as director in the play that is Carrie's life. She thus appears, as do we all, as an actress playing a role. If she is merely reacting to those with whom she comes into contact, she is not self-determined but is other-determined: an actress. Carrie is an actress, not only when she is on the stage, but in her "everyday" life as well. The "self" with which she begins Sister Carrie is one which has been defined by those with whom she has grown up in her home town. She is then redefined, first by Drouet, then by Hurstwood, then by Mrs. Vance, then by her "audience," then by Ames, until she is finally left, at the end of the novel, simply awaiting a new role:

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. (399)

Even here, Carrie is seeing a reflection of herself, for what does one see when looking out through a window? With any light in the room at all, even so little as that entering from the outside at night, the first view one has is of oneself: vague and indistinct to be sure, but a reflection of oneself, nevertheless. This is only the last of many such scenes from the novel: witness when Drouet finds her looking at herself in a mirror before going out one evening in Chicago, when she and Hurstwood are on the train leaving Chicago and she is looking out through the window, or when she is just looking through shop windows. It is always herself that the glass is reflecting back at her. The comments which are made to her are reflections as well: Mrs. Vance questioning her about clothes and jewelry, or Ames suggesting books for her to read, for example. Carrie does not act upon her world, she merely reacts to it - as do we all.

How is such behavior related to the Lacanian model? This relationship needs to be demonstrated for my reading of Sister Carrie to remain coherent since there are two primary components to Lacan's theory (mirroring and needs/desires) and only one, mirroring, which has been discussed so far. It should be stressed that, while Lacan's theory was developed as a result of his psychoanalytic practice and is directed at human beings, if such an approach is valid, it will apply to any personality whether "real" or "fictional." For Lacan, wishes are labelled as needs, whether they are conscious or unconscious (and they
are generally the latter), and desires are those wishes or goals which are forever unattainable (LeMaire 162-64). As LeMaire states: "... desire always lies both beyond and before demand. To say that desire is beyond demand means that it transcends it, that it is eternal because it is impossible to satisfy it" (164). It should be recognized that these desires, just as with the "self," are "other" determined: they are the creation of that with which individuals interact during their lifetimes. This is precisely Carrie's status at the end of the novel. She is dreaming of a situation, happiness, which, for her, is unattainable. Dreiser attempts to leave the door open a bit for Carrie, in the previous quotation, by stating that such happiness is something which she "may never feel" (emphasis mine), but if the rest of my reading of the novel is coherent, then she can never attain such an end. Happiness will remain forever a "pipedream."

What are we left with if all we are is determined by others and by desire, which at its root is the creation of others - if there is no "authentic self"? As stated earlier, all that has been shown is that perhaps our traditional understanding of the "self" is inaccurate; that is, Carrie has demonstrated that we are all mere shells covered by the various roles we play, each of which depends on the circumstances in which we find ourselves at any given time.

There remains one final difficulty which such a position presents us: how are these "others" empowered to delineate who we are when they themselves are no different - also the creation of "others"? Our traditional understanding, and the tradition within which Lacan operates, holds that the "self" is a thing - something which can be pointed to, measured, evaluated. This cannot be the case. Each of us has a "self," but it is not a "thing"; it is the process within which we all interact. It is being reflected by and reflecting back to others themselves: being an "other" for others. Perhaps this process might be viewed as simply another role for each to play, but it is different in one very important regard: it is unchanging. The novel is an evocation of this process: it is the means by which we can see that, although Carrie Meeber has no "self" in any traditional sense, she very definitely has a series of roles which have been affected by and which in turn affect others - the process which is the "self."
Works Cited


