

**“I STILL HAVEN’T FOUND WHAT I’M LOOKING FOR”:
LACANIAN DESIRE IN THEODORE DREISER’S *SISTER
CARRIE***

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ABSTRACT

The growing ascendancy of the natural sciences in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century had its repercussions in two different domains, namely in psychoanalysis and literary naturalism. While Sigmund Freud incorporated this ascendancy into his method as his biological discourse in laying the foundations of his emergent psychoanalytic methodology, Emile Zola applied these scientific principles and methods to literature in delineating the defining precepts of literary naturalism. Likewise, Theodore Dreiser, one of the foremost exponents of literary naturalism in the United States, applied these precepts (such as the influence of the external forces on the human being and heredity) to his novels and characters with strict adherence to the biological findings and determinism of his era. Discussing the influence of the natural sciences in Dreiser’s naturalistic discourse with reference to his psychological analyses in *Sister Carrie* and emphasizing their parallelism with Freud’s scientific approach, this paper ultimately aims to provide a psychoanalytic reinterpretation of the concept of ‘desire’ in Dreiser’s novel from the viewpoint of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory while underlining the “culturalist” turn in psychoanalysis instigated by Jacques Lacan.

ÖZET

Doğa bilimlerinin 19. yüzyılın ikinci yarısında Avrupa’nın ve Amerika Birleşik Devletleri’nin düşünce dünyasındaki konumlarının giderek merkezi hale gelmesi ile birlikte, hem bu bilimlerin hem de bilimsel yöntemin kültürün diğer alanlarına yansıyan etkileri son derece belirginleşmiştir. Sigmund Freud’un kurucusu olduğu psikanaliz kuramında yer alan dönemin biyoloji ve

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fizik bulguları ile Emile Zola'nın düşünsel zeminini oluşturduğu yazınsal doğalcılık akımı içinde yer bulan soyaçekim ve evrim gibi kavramlar, bu etkinin iki farklı alanda yansımaya örnek oluşturur. Bu makalenin amacı, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri yazınında doğalcılığın en önemli temsilcilerinden sayılan Theodore Dreiser'in *Sister Carrie* adlı romanındaki temel kavramlardan biri olan 'arzu' kavramını; yazarın, Freud'un kuramındaki bilimsellik çabasına benzer şekilde ve psikolojik bulgulara da dayanarak yazın içinde ele alma çabasını göstererek, bu kavramı, psikanalizde kültür odaklı bir kurama yönelişi temsil eden Fransız psikanalist ve kuramcı Jacques Lacan'ın yaklaşımı çerçevesinde yeniden yorumlamaktır.

"Ah," thought Carrie, with mournful misgivings, "what is it I have lost?"

Sister Carrie, p.88.

Something must be lost or absent in any narrative for it to unfold: if everything stayed in place there would be no story to tell. This loss is distressing, but exciting as well: desire is stimulated by what we cannot quite possess, and this is one source of narrative satisfaction.

Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p.186

Wittgenstein's famous dictum about language and speech, "whereof man cannot speak, thereof man must be silent,"¹ contradicts the fundamental principle of psychoanalysis, namely the fact that the method developed by Sigmund Freud is a 'talking-cure.' Although the very first impression about these two positions, one of philosophy and one of (for want of a better term) medicine seems to render such a juxtaposition unnecessary, the post-modern associations of Freud's 'progeny' has carried the 'talking-cure' closer to the realm of culture, language and semiotics. The foremost role played in this shift from "biologism" to a "culturalist" outlook², needless to say, belongs to the infamous French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who tried to devise a system from the 1950s up to the 1980s, no matter how obscure and notoriously difficult

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Utterance number 7. Wittgenstein's original "[w]ovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen" has already become a well-known aphorism in German.

² Richard Wolin, "Freudianism" in *A Companion to American Thought*, p.253.

it may be, in order to theorize the working of the unconscious in spite of his acknowledgement that every utterance, every act within the boundaries of language, indicates a lack in signification, a target that is eventually missed.³ While Freud, influenced by the scientific method of the nineteenth century to a great extent, struggled to place his brainchild on the pedestal of the natural sciences, Lacan played the part of the 'rebellious son,' and, instead of being integrated into one of the dominant schools of psychoanalysis, meticulously developed his own approach by reinterpreting Freud's earlier works so as to bring under scrutiny what he deemed was obscured by aberrant readings of his work. This paper is an attempt to trace the parallelisms between two dominant ideas of the last decades of the nineteenth century, namely psychoanalysis and literary naturalism; in doing so, it aims to underline the biological discourse of Freudian psychoanalysis, which found its literary counterpart in the scientific method of naturalism, and to offer a Lacanian reading of the psychological manifestations of literary naturalism in Dreiser's novel, with special emphasis on the analysis of desire.

Naturalism, which has been defined in relation to realism⁴ as the paramount moment in the quest for the purest and most scientific (and objective) depiction of the world, relies on the groundbreaking discoveries and theories of the nineteenth century. Relying on the systems developed by revolutionary figures like Charles Darwin and Karl Marx, and greatly influenced by theories and philosophical systems such as natural selection and dialectical materialism, the naturalists of the era tried to achieve the scientific standard that was the ultimate paradigm of the *Zeitgeist*. In doing that, Louis J. Budd claims, they "surpassed the realists qualitatively in exploring humankind's animal sides; their approach to psychology could let instinct overpower conscious will."⁵ Like Friedrich Nietzsche's contribution to psychology through his philosophy that delved into the secluded compartments of the human psyche, the naturalists, too, consciously dealt with the power of the animalistic side of the human being –what Freud defines as the Id in relation to the instincts– and its sway over 'the rational animal.' Emile Zola's attempt to depict

³ Niall Lucy explains this aspect of language by an aphorism in a Lacanian vein: "all readings are misreadings" (*Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p.29).

⁴ Louis J. Budd, "The American Background," p.21.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.43.

human beings “carried away by the fatalities of their flesh”⁶ further attests to the fact that the naturalists were not only highly cognizant of the impact of the ‘well-known’ external forces but also of the internal forces, namely of the unconscious (desire) that could excite human beings into doing what they would ‘consciously’ avoid at any cost. Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine define the naturalist’s human being as

an animal whose course is determined by heredity, by the effect of his environment and by the pressures of the moment. This terribly depressing conception robs man of all free will, all responsibility for his actions, which are merely the inescapable result of physical forces and conditions totally beyond his control.⁷

It was quite natural that the development of literary realism would reach its zenith in France, which had been experiencing one social upheaval after another during its progression towards a new order since the Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Unlike the case with realism⁸, one of the evident consequences of such a scientific transformation in literary naturalism –which was due to Darwinism to a great extent– was the problem of moral standards, which emerged as the natural outcome of the deterministic model employed by naturalism. The established norms and mores of the genteel tradition were fundamentally shaken by Darwin’s ideas as well as by the blows delivered by Nietzsche’s amoral philosophy and Sigmund Freud’s exposition of infantile sexuality. God, the Alpha and Omega of the universe, the ultimate transcendental sign from which all the other signs emanated, gave way to a model of the universe in which science ruled supreme without any metaphysical intervention –excluding language as signification, which, Derrida would say, is

⁶ Emile Zola quoted by Knapp in Richard Lehan, “The European Background,” p.47.

⁷ Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine, *Naturalism: The Critical Idiom*, p.18.

⁸ In a discussion about the significance of Lacan’s theory for literary criticism, Lucy defines realism as the “literary equivalent of the ‘mirror stage’ of human subjectivity” (p.25) and cites its features as “adult, masculine, sensible, rational” in opposition to “infantile” romance literature (p.26). She gives a ‘catalogue’ of binary pairs for the Imaginary and the Symbolic Orders: for the Imaginary; “infant, feminine, sensory, intuitive, private, pre-Oedipal holistic, true, prior” as well as “poetry, lyric romance, metafiction, aphorism, parody, art, creativity”; for the Symbolic; “adult, masculine, sensible, rational, public, Oedipal, dualistic, false, post” as well as “prose, epic, narrative, realism, essay, irony, theory, criticism” (pp.25-26). As the ultimate expression of realistic tendency in American literature, naturalism appears to be the extreme manifestation of the Symbolic Order.

also a system built around a metaphysical and transcendental sign. Research that did not take note of naturalism and the scientific method in nineteenth-century natural sciences could not claim anything substantial about the workings of the universe.

The Enlightenment, one may state, also found its culminating point naturalism, as far as the role of reason as an instrument of human betterment and advancement is considered. Richard Lehan elucidates the process with reference to Darwinism, which, according to his argument is “both a continuation of and a challenge to Enlightenment assumptions.”⁹ Yet one of the starkest contradictions about literary naturalism also lies here, namely in the fact that this process also led to the realization that the human being is in fact a cog in the machine, a “wisp in the wind,” a tiny atom in a determined scheme of things. Thus, for example, the American Dream, an American reflection of the absolute ideals of the Enlightenment in the New World, also covertly fostered a much-overlooked American Nightmare of ruthless commercial competition and fight for survival in a true Social Darwinist vein. This new order may also be defined as a machine-like model modified for every field of human experience, the industrial mechanization carried into the domain of everyday experience. Even the deistic God as the Great Mathematician of the Universe could hold no place within such a deterministic conception of the universe. What the naturalists like Zola did was to underline the importance of the external forces (instead of some metaphysical forces) that acted upon the human being, determining his/her actions in a system which nevertheless harbored an illusion of free will for human beings. The infamous pessimism of the naturalists was a by-product of technique and method for them, although its social implications proved to be in favor of social struggle for betterment rather than a pessimistic withdrawal.

Although the objective of the naturalists was to create a social document rather than a novel or a story, or better still, to make a scientific experiment in the literary domain –unlike their realist contemporaries, whose principles concerning objectivity did not demand such meticulous scientific precision– it has been stated repeatedly that naturalism in literature, in contradistinction to philosophical naturalism, has always rambled away –fortunately for literature–

⁹ Richard Lehan, p.56.

from the scientific discourse that it purported to practice.¹⁰ Zola, who is now accepted as the 'founding father' of literary naturalism, was highly aware of the impact of science as a method for reflecting life without any intervention on the writer's side. Seen from this particular perspective, literature was supposed to become something like a natural science, or, to say the least, it would be subordinated to science in its attempt to achieve mimetic perfection. Theodore Dreiser's sentimental commentaries in *Sister Carrie* reflect the deflation of this scientific discourse, which creates a visible fissure on the surface of the objective narration in the book. As Furst and Skrine point out, the use of adjectives by the narrator too has usually broken "the surface objectivity" of naturalism, incorporating "the individual imagination"¹¹ to articulate a narration "shot through with poetry"¹². Thus, in many instances naturalism swung back to the poetic use of language in literature, moving away from the scientific discourse and displaying the emotions –giving way to the expression of what Freud would define as the unconscious– that were curbed for the sake of objectivity. That kind of poetic use of language may easily be discerned in the following quotation in which the inexpressible and unarticulated search of *Sister Carrie*'s major character breaks through the dominant discourse:

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 in pursuit and hope is vain that the heartaches and the longings arise.¹³

Theodore Dreiser, one of the prominent names of literary naturalism in American fiction alongside with Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and Jack London, was certainly aware of above-mentioned transformations in science and philosophy in nineteenth-century Europe. His novels as well as those of Frank Norris "take their being from a naturalistic biology"¹⁴ and therefore reflect "the animal condition" existing "in us as a potential state to be aroused at moments

¹⁰ Furst and Skrine, p.22.

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp.52-53.

¹² *ibid.*, p.71.

¹³ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.487.

¹⁴ Lehan, p.62.

of physical and emotional crisis,"¹⁵ which in fact defines the crossroads where biology and psychology meet. Furst and Skrine too highlight the fact that for the naturalists, "particularly in a crisis, under some stress or the impetus of the sexual urge of the influence of alcohol, man (as Freud was to show a little later) reverts to the primitive brutalism latent within himself."¹⁶ Yet the influence of Darwinism, Freudianism and other scientific and philosophical discourses of the *fin-de-siècle* underwent the well-known transatlantic transformation that infused into their very core the prevalent American outlook and notions that redefined these movements and theories in an American vein. Both Darwinism and Freudian psychoanalysis went through a process of adaptation in the New World, the former assuming the form of a justification for the American *laissez-faire* economy under the auspices of Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism furthered by E. L. Youmans¹⁷, and the latter distorted into a vaguer and milder caricature of Freud's original views (for example, infantile sexuality in many cases was omitted or hastily mentioned).¹⁸

Dreiser, who was influenced by Zola's ideas concerning objectivity and the scientific approach in narration as well as the choice of subject matter and morality, was a determinist who studied the human being as defined by temperament instead of character or social masks¹⁹. From this particular viewpoint, the human being's actions are determined by heredity (a person's biological traits and tendencies becoming manifest in that person's temperament, in what may also be defined as the internal forces) and by the external forces (usually referred to as 'environment', it is the greater system over which one has but very little or no control at all). As far as biology or the internal forces are concerned, Dreiser's determinism and his scientific approach resulted in the invention of a specific vocabulary, among which the term "chemism"²⁰ figures significantly. Dreiser coined this term to examine and explain human behavior in terms of chemical elements and reactions. As far as the external forces are concerned, his approach was an extension of his determinism to the social sphere: If economy is a part of culture and culture

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.63.

¹⁶ Furst and Skrine, p.16.

¹⁷ Budd, p.29.

¹⁸ Richard Wolin, "Freudianism" in *A Companion to American Thought*, pp.250-251.

¹⁹ Lehan, p.47.

²⁰ Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, p.29.

second nature to humankind, we may then take the external forces as a substitution or a complementary factor for 'nature's ways' in the life of the 'social animal.' American literary naturalism, although influenced by the biological notions and hereditary elements that were emphasized by Zola, seems to have placed an equally significant emphasis on the economic aspects –the external forces– of American life as well. As regards the external forces, it may be stated that the United States had to wait for her naturalists to depict the underdog beaten by the greater forces of capitalism, which was to bring the social and economic repercussions of the Gilded Age to the fore, although Marxism or communism in any form was strictly anathema.²¹ Even though it has been claimed "in the U.S.A. naturalism is even more closely linked to social and economic changes than in Europe,"²² certain American writers like Jack London directly dealt with nature in many of their stories, while some like Theodore Dreiser successfully incorporated the 'true-to-nature' essence of naturalism into the ruthless *laissez-faire* economy, which served as the social environment in which the external forces also acted upon the human being.

In the United States, the social milieu for literary naturalism found its perfect expression in the bustling 'cities of desire' like Chicago, a city that figures in many of Dreiser's novels. Dreiser himself was a child of the developing urban nerve-centers of the United States, a writer who had first-hand experience of the dire working conditions and social mobility in cities like Chicago, and who, according to Alfred Kazin, was one of those "who had made a religion of their desire."²³ Naturalism's anti-hero, the helpless victim of temperament and the external forces, had to confront his/her insignificant existence and sheer impotence in these cities while trying to survive by adapting to a new kind of morality, which was sometimes defined as "devolution, degeneration and personal decline."²⁴ Conventional standards of morality, which were under constant philosophical bombardment in the nineteenth century, were defined as "products like vitriol and sugar" by some naturalists such as French Hippolyte Taine.²⁵ In Dreiser's novels, success in naturalistic handling of the human being resides in the ways in which the effects of both the

²¹ Budd, p.25.

²² Furst and Skrine, p.33.

²³ Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, p.63.

²⁴ Lehan, p.48.

²⁵ Furst and Skrine, p.20.

external and internal forces are brought together, which, it may be claimed, is the hallmark of Dreiser's novels.

Dreiser was positively cognizant of the dissolution of the cohesive conception of the human psyche in Western thought, since his own observations made him aware of these recently comprehended forces which were in many ways more influential than the conscious thoughts of the human being:

"We suffer for our temperaments, which we did not make," he once wrote, "and for our weaknesses and lacks, which are no part of our willing or our doing."²⁶

When Henry Samuel Levinson states a deep-seated notion about naturalism, namely that "the dynamics of insatiable desire determined conduct and outstripped individual character,"²⁷ he indeed draws our attention to this fundamental driving force in Dreiser's fiction. Dreiser's "chemism" runs parallel to the (biology-based) Freudian concept of *Instinkt* (instinct)²⁸. In Chapter VIII of *Sister Carrie*, the narrator introduces us to Carrie's inner world through a philosophical section that also makes use of a writer's intuitive psychoanalytic analysis:

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 from 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. He is becoming too wise to hearken always to instincts and desires; he is still too weak to always prevail against them. As a beast, the forces of life aligned him with them; as a man, he has not wholly learned to align himself with the forces. In this intermediate stage he wavers—neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his

²⁶ Dreiser quoted in Kazin, op.cit., p.65.

²⁷ Henry Samuel Levinson, "Naturalism" in *A Companion to American Thought*, p.481.

²⁸ In relation to Dreiser's "chemism," one should also note the influence not only of biology but also of physics in Freud's theory, especially in relation to his concepts related to energy such as 'libido' and 'cathexis.'

own free will. He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one only to retrieve by the other, falling by one only to rise by the other—a creature of incalculable variability [...]

In *Carrie*, as in how many of our worldlings do they not, instinct and reason, desire and understanding warred for the mastery. In *Carrie*, as in how many of our worldlings are they not, instinct and desire were yet in part the victors. She followed whither her craving led. She was as yet more drawn than she drew.²⁹

Likewise, the narrator's comments on *Carrie's* character in Chapter XI rely on a similar psychological awareness coupled with a rather poetical –and therefore *unnaturalistic*– use of language:

Trite though it may seem, it is well to remember that in life, after all, we are most wholly controlled by desire. *The things that appeal to desire are not always visible objects* [...] Desire is the variable wind which blows now zephyrlike, now shrill, filling our sails for some far-off port, flapping them idly upon the high seas in sunny weather, scudding us now here, now there, before its terrific breath, speeding us anon to accomplishment; as often rending our sails and leaving us battered and dismantled, a picturesque wreck in some forgotten harbor.³⁰ [italics mine]

Theodore Dreiser is usually said to be one of the few writers in American fiction to deal with desire in many of his books³¹. His study of the essence of desire is always coupled with questions of its repression under culture, or the 'discontents of a capitalistic civilization.' The following quotation by Philip Fisher aptly describes the protean essence of desire in Dreiser's fiction, all forms of which may be associated with a Lacanian understanding of *objet petit*

²⁹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), pp.73-74.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.97.

³¹ Blanche H. Gelfant notes that Dreiser entitled his Cowperwood novels *A Trilogy of Desire* ("What More Can Carrie Want? Naturalistic Ways of Consuming Women," p.193). Paula E. Geyh quotes Bourne's comment that "Mr. Dreiser's work is desire, perennial, unquenchable" (quoted in Geyh, "From Cities of Things to Cities of Signs: Urban Spaces and Urban Subjects in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*," p.42) and Hussman's comments in *Dreiser and His Fiction*: "Dreiser employs a variety of terms to describe and translate desire. At times he refers to mystic longing, unreasoning passion, or chemic compulsion. But always the reference is to the fact that his characters' desires unquenchable. They are so because *the objects of their desires are not sufficient to explain the intensity of their longings*" [italics mine] (Quoted in Geyh, p.43.)

a.³² Dreiser's understanding of desire, like the law of psychics of the convertibility and preservation of energy, seems to have captured its metonymical movement/deferral:

For Dreiser the energy of promise, erotic energy, the energy of the will or of masculine power, and the energy of the money which he described in *Sister Carrie* as 'honestly stored energy' were convertible. At some point they converged and were indistinguishable.³³

Fisher situates the significance of Dreiser's naturalistic novels in their display of "the interwoven patterns of desire and ambition in an extraordinary portrait of business and sexuality in the social landscape of the American city."³⁴ The American metropolises in the last decades of the nineteenth century also offer an excellent opportunity to probe into the crucial issue of advertising and the 'production of demand' as the focal points of American culture during a period in which the nascent advertisement sector was taking huge steps to invade the remote sections of private life which were still very much untouched. By the end of the nineteenth century, American capitalism excelled in commodifying and fetishizing desire in persuasive images, displaying the promise of a better life within the reach of ordinary people. Images of the city, shining and mesmerizing, combined with the lure of fascinating success stories, whispered dangerous words into the "unguarded ear"³⁵ of gullible people, who were tiny particles in these magnificent complexes of production and conspicuous consumption. Geyh defines the American cities of the period as "cities of things" full of "advertising, street signs, newspaper headlines, political posters, graffiti, etc."³⁶ The initial reification of desire and the subsequent commodification of demands –which are not equal to desire but serve as substitutes for it– in the capitalistic order have transformed both things and

³² David Macey explains this key term, which may be translated as "object small o(ther)" (for the French word, *a(utre)*), as "an other that is not truly other but a projection or effect of ego, the prototype being the specular image with which the subject identifies in the alienation of the mirror stage" (*The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, p.286).

³³ Philip Fisher, "Theodore Dreiser: Promising Dreamers" in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: 9.American Literature*, p.255.

³⁴ Fisher, p.251.

³⁵ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.4.

³⁶ Geyh, p.1.

(reified) human beings into items that can be traded. The cult of the consumer culture has created shrines out of shopping malls, the forbears of which are the department stores that are frequently mentioned in *Sister Carrie*.

Thus, Carrie the “half-equipped little knight”³⁷ (what is the missing half if not masculinity?) finds the projection of her unconscious³⁸ (female) desire –“a longing for a kind of existential reparation”³⁹ for a “want-to-be (*manque-à-être* as Lacan called it)”⁴⁰ or “the missing phallus” over which “females can only fantasise”⁴¹ – in these demands⁴² and their satisfaction, though desire⁴³ (for the Phallus as the transcendental and privileged sign) of course cannot be satisfied. The little girl standing in the midst of “so much evidence of power and force she did not understand,”⁴⁴ twice alienated by the double lack –first of the penis (which is the Freudian lack) and then of the Phallus (the Lacanian lack) according to Lacan⁴⁵–, fantasizes being a “knight” with a quest. Yet she is in fact caught in “dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy,” which reflect a yearning for the reparation of her (penis) lack (Fr. *manque*): these are mere daydreams in which an ambitious young girl desires to become a knight and assume ‘his’ quest or aspires to achieve supremacy through her desire for the

³⁷ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.4.

³⁸ Another difference between Lacan’s reading of Freudian theory of the unconscious and Freud’s own theory stems from the instinct- and biology-based nature of Freud’s explanations and Lacan’s references to the relation between the infant’s being integrated into the Symbolic Order and the simultaneous emergence of the unconscious as a reflection of the coming-into-being of desire and language. Thus, the (presumed) subject becomes a text or a field on which the unconscious and desire –as shaped by the Symbolic Order and language– become manifest.

³⁹ Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought*, p.201.

⁴⁰ William J. Richardson, “Lacan” in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, p.524.

⁴¹ Sarah Gamble, “desire” in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, p. 216.

⁴² Richardson underlines the crucial differentiation that Lacan makes between desire and need/demand. (pp.524-525). Peter Dews also notes that need (*besoin*), as Lacan understands it, is physical whereas demand (*demande*) is need “expressed in language...accompanied by a plea for recognition as the *subject* of the need to be satisfied” (*Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*, p.99).

⁴³ Macey highlights the eventual ‘desexualization’ of Freud’s libido by a “very broad concept of desire” in Lacanian psychoanalysis (p.94).

⁴⁴ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.17.

⁴⁵ As Sean Homer emphasizes (*Jacques Lacan*, p.54), Freud did not “distinguish between the penis as an actual bodily organ and the ‘phallus’ as a signifier of sexual difference” whereas, for Lacan, the phallus becomes “a particularly privileged signifier” of “lack and sexual difference”.

Phallus so that she “should make it [the city] prey and subject, the poor penitent.”⁴⁶ The (female) dreams of dominance over the (male) city suggest her twice-subjugated position in the Symbolic Order.

What completes the imagery of the period –other than these shopping malls– is the fashionable clothes⁴⁷ in the novel, which also serve as signs of social status and tempting items producing demands (as *objets petit a*) through their ‘interaction’ with Carrie. The narrator never skips details about Carrie’s perception of and fascination with luxurious clothes. This young girl coming from the provincial part of America, though “possessed of a mind rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis,”⁴⁸ is always lured by the dazzling sight that the “semiotics of clothes”⁴⁹ in window shops and on other people’s bodies produce. Constantly imagining herself within those dresses, Carrie sees mirrors all around while her desire is transferred from one object/ideal to another object/ideal –that is to say, the desire of the Other⁵⁰ moves from one object to another through metonymy. In a world of mirrors and unstable signifiers, ‘restless’ Carrie can possess only momentary illusions of belonging/fulfillment/‘self.’ In the mirror, she sees an alienated image of herself, what is in fact her ‘ideal-ego,’ a narcissistic reflection, while her ‘ego-ideal’ –what Lacan defines as the position of ‘the ideal-ego’– too beholds Carrie. Throughout the novel, Carrie copies the gestures and mimics of the people of higher social standing to the point of becoming a collection of their images. Later on, when she becomes a successful actress, she applies the very principle of mimicking others –an instinctive “desire to imitate”⁵¹– to become someone that she is not:

⁴⁶ Dreiser., *Sister Carrie* (a), p.4.

⁴⁷ Gelfant highlights the relation between clothing/hiding and the hidden/the phallus in Lacan’s thought (p.199).

⁴⁸ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.4.

⁴⁹ Gelfant, p.181.

⁵⁰ Both Macey (p.95) and Dews (pp.64-66) note the significance of Alexandre Kojève’s teaching of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic as related to desire to explain the source of Lacan’s theory of desire that originates in the ‘other.’ What Lacan incorporates from Hegel’s dialectic to constitute his theory that desire is the desire of the other (and of the Other) is the mutual struggle and yearning of both parties for the recognition of the other party. Since Lacanian psychoanalysis resituates desire in relation to the Other/language, it cannot be defined from within the subject but through the Other/language.

⁵¹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.99.

She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse. Between these two images she wavered, hesitating which to believe.⁵²

The neon-lit shop windows too serve as mirrors for Carrie, on whose surfaces she imagines herself to be someone else. In spite of her want of experience and intelligence, she “intuitively understands, in this capitalist economy of desire, to lack desired things is to lack the desired self.”⁵³ Carrie, in fact, represents the “Dreiserian center, the self-created young woman” who is no longer “in search of family life, but linked to others only in the push of competition and the pull of sexual romance.”⁵⁴ Thus, Carrie's desire tends to avoid the reproduction of the Oedipal family –her marriage with Hurstwood is for the sake of social status and security– only to lead her towards a deeper incorporation into the capitalist reflection of the Symbolic Order, which constantly emanates (seemingly attainable) images of the Phallus.

From a Lacanian perspective, the ‘self’ is of course constructed out of numerous mirrors of ‘others’ within the system of language –the subject is indeed a discourse composed of fragments within a system of signification called language⁵⁵; her ego is mere *méconnaissance* (misrecognition) after the (first) experience of alienation, that is, by the ‘coming-into-presence’ of the (m)other. The presence of desire itself denotes lack, since the insatiable nature of desire indicates a system of incompleteness: A woman's desire, Lacan argues, is born out of her lack subsequent to the Oedipal complex/initiation to the Symbolic Order –the lack that originates in the Other– and yet her demands and their satisfaction lack what is necessary to fulfill her (female) desire for the Phallus:

⁵² *ibid.*, p.89.

⁵³ Geyh, p.7.

⁵⁴ Fisher, p.251.

⁵⁵ Lucy underlines an essential notion of structuralist semiotics which is crucial to understand Lacan's approach as well: “The gap between word and thing (or sign and referent) is a necessary one inasmuch as language can never be identical with what it names. Lack and division are essential to the structure of language, the very structure in which absent reality is made to function as if it were present [...] The very lack within language and the very gap between word and thing is what makes reality possible, making it seem present” (p.23).

Not only did Carrie feel the drag of desire for all this which was new and pleasing in apparel for women, but she noticed too, with a touch at the heart, 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 [...] Their clothes were neat, in many instances fine, and wherever she encountered the eye of one, it was only to recognize in it a keen analysis of her own position—her individual shortcomings of dress and that shadow of *manner* which she thought must hang about her and make clear to all *who and what she was*⁵⁶. [my italics here]

Yet the capitalistic economic restructuring of desire within language creates thousands of reflections of possible selves/identities that one can ‘buy’ or ‘emulate’ to ‘fulfill’ one's lack, whose distorted illusions are conceptualized in the notion of ‘looking like’ the images that are displayed in every shop window –an indispensable image for the age of post-industrial societies– or in the figures of Mrs. Vance, Mrs. Hale and Bob Ames in the novel, who stand for the promise of a better object of desire in Carrie's quest. The ideology of capitalism ‘interpellates’ Carrie as a consumer, offering commodities⁵⁷ to make up for her lack and her desire –which, through the assuring language of the system, is distorted into demands that can be satisfied.

Paula E. Geyh suggests, through her differentiation of the Freudian desire for things and the Lacanian desire through signs, that the process of conspicuous consumption is “*primarily* the consumption of signs and only secondarily the consumption of the things themselves.”⁵⁸ Therefore, in Carrie's eyes, commodities are also signs with invested referential contents that always transcend thing-ness or exchange value. The Symbolic Order in the form of capitalism cannot tame the ambulatory aspect of desire but, through its naturalization, it may commodify it as demands that are marketable. Thus goods are never mere products but signs to be circulated in the market, deferring gratification but sustaining its illusion. Thus, in Carrie's eyes, Chicago becomes a city full of signs with numerous billboards, department stores, names and

⁵⁶ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.23.

⁵⁷ The fact that commodities as signs constitute a language for the consumers to read offers us a key to decipher the semiotics of the developing American capitalism, the first manifestations of which can also be observed in *Sister Carrie*.

⁵⁸ Geyh, p.2.

lights that lure the untamed ear and eye. While Carrie silently gazes at the goods displayed in shop windows with envious eyes, they speak out several times in the book, touching her with "individual desire"⁵⁹ emanating from them and producing a demand to be purchased and to be consumed as signs as well as things:

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. Ah, ah! 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."⁶⁰

Therefore, Carrie's relation with Chicago is primarily one of images instead of words, and therein lies the problem of narration in *Sister Carrie*. Although, as a naturalistic novel, the book aspires to be an example of scientific objectivity, it cannot express Carrie's lack in spite of the narrator's commentaries that allude to the subject. Explanatory details or hints about her depressive mood or her insatiable nature cannot reveal the lack that ails her soul. The narration underlines the insufficiency of words quite candidly, though here the scientific register of narration is suspended to insinuate the inexpressible:

People in general attach too much importance to words. They are under the illusion that talking effects great results. As a matter of fact, words are as a rule the shallowest portion of all the argument. They but dimly represent the great surging feelings and desires which lie behind. When the distraction of the tongue is removed, the heart listens.⁶¹

Carrie's desire, as it becomes clear by the emotional final paragraphs concerning her latest station in her journey towards her uncertain future, is not something that she in her naïveté can comprehend; it is something that eludes the Symbolic Order but tends to surface in her silent dreams about her future in

⁵⁹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.22.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p.98.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p.118.

the rocking chair –rather in her rocking cradle– scenes in the novel, which are her taciturn plunges into the Imaginary Order, so empathically narrated by Dreiser's sentimental language. A strange point about Carrie is that although Dreiser adopts a somewhat psychological approach about Carrie's actions, we are left with a big void about her past in Columbia City and her family, which is indeed a great void/lack in the narrative, something that renders our understanding of the melancholy nature of "the old, mournful –the desirous Carrie,– unsatisfied"⁶² quite obscure. It may be claimed that, although the psychological analysis in the book tries to disclose the internal forces at work within Carrie, Dreiser also tries to form a strong association between these and her materialistic longings originating from a past of deprivation. Yet these insinuations about her class do not suffice to explain either her "unconscious dreams of conquest, memories of unsatisfied needs, psychosomatic symptoms, sudden mood swings [...] panic attacks" on the train during her arrival in Chicago or her "primal anxieties"⁶³ later on. The omission of a detailed past seems to be a deliberate repression in the construction of a neurotic self to be shaped through "sudden mood swings."⁶⁴ The sea imagery that dominates many passages devoted to the episodes concerning Carrie's emotions –first "rushing into a great sea of life"⁶⁵ as "a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea,"⁶⁶ she finds herself "all at sea mentally"⁶⁷– in fact hint at this tempestuous journey that Carrie is undergoing and at the topology of her unconscious.

Thomas P. Riggio underlines the significance of her later acting career in theatres as "the realm of dream and the unconscious,"⁶⁸ a realm on the stage that serves as a mirror (of the Other) and foreshadowing for her experiences. Dreiser maybe unconsciously insinuates the elusive nature of desire and that the

⁶² *ibid.*, p.487.

⁶³ Thomas P. Riggio, "Carrie's Blues,"

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~perelman/classes/english100/riggio.html>

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.10.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.12.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p.137

⁶⁸ Riggio, *op.cit.*. Macey also quotes Freud's commentary from *The Interpretation of Dreams* about the unconscious: "The unconscious is *elsewhere* and performs on a different scene or in a different theatre (*ein anderer Schauplatz*)." (p.286). The title of Chapter XIX in the Pennsylvania State University Electronic Classics Series edition of *Sister Carrie*, "An Hour in Elfland," also suggests the imaginary world of the stage (Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (b), p.154).

subtlety of the Symbolic Order lies in the fact that it makes us believe that we can express (lack and) desire through language and that what can be articulated may eventually be studied within language. Therein also lies one of the crucial questions of Lacanian psychoanalysis: how can we talk about the thing that does not lend its nature to our conscious contemplations? If we recast this question in terms of naturalistic discourse in *Sister Carrie*, it appears that the presumed objectivity of the book's naturalistic narration eventually fails to express the fundamental problem of desire.

Advertising is also a manipulation of desire through semiotics to re-present and re-create things as stand-ins that appear to 'have' what is necessary to fulfill one's lack, to make one whole again. The cycle of advertising and commodification relies on this sustained illusion of one-ness/completeness as mirrored in a product, or put in contemporary terms of our everyday language, in 'satisfaction.' "The different types of urban subjectivities"⁶⁹ that Geyh mentions are in fact products not only of urban spaces but also of the economic order of such places. By purchasing and consuming a product that the market offers, one experiences a momentary feeling of ease, letting his/her desire be manipulated by the conceived demands which are only substitutes for a lack that cannot even find a complementary part in another human being. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire is always the desire of the Other; one can never desire 'from within' consciously, since the (presumed) self is a patchwork made up of the Other's manufactured 'surrogate desires':

[I]t is also true for Lacan that our desire is in some way always *received* from the Other too. We desire what others – our parents, for instance – unconsciously desire for us; and desire can only happen because we are caught up in linguistic, sexual and social relations – the whole field of the 'Other' – which generate it.⁷⁰

Carrie's (female) desire stems from a lack that cannot be identified within the Symbolic Order/language; or better put still, it is a lack that is comprehended as lack due to the Symbolic Order's constant deferral of desire's satisfaction from one sign to another through a metonymical process. Born into the confines of language, one is also born into lack. The psychological birth of

⁶⁹ Geyh, p.1.

⁷⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p.174.

the infant follows the biological birth, the former being a process that goes on throughout one's life without ever achieving a stable self but pretending or assuming one from which one immediately creates a self-image. This presumed 'stable self' is in fact nothing but an image of thousand reflections reflected onto an 'other' mirror, though one clings onto this image fearing the possibility of dispersal and dismemberment (for fear of a fragmented body, *le corps morcelé*) as if the image of a unified subject could serve as a convenient framework to keep things together. From a world of dyadic unity with the (m)other, the infant (who is not able to speak; inarticulate, not uttering any words) experiences the mirror stage of his psychological disruption/birth, first realizing difference in an 'other' image, what seems to be its 'own' image at the same time (yet not 'itself' but only an idealized and integrated image of unity), reflected in a literal mirror or the corporeal figure of the (m)other –thus the infant experiences the passage through the Imaginary. That is, in a way, the Lacanian Fall, the expulsion from the blissful garden of one-ness, a disintegration of that one-ness into two-ness and then into myriad-ness. The next figure to transgress this blissful state is the father, who enters the child's world to take the mother('s desire) away, setting the rules, making his presence felt and establishing his overruling superiority as the Law/the Name-of-the-Father in culture and language.

In Dreiser's novel, Carrie's desire stems from a lack that can only be sustained in language, which is itself a system based upon difference and deferral stemming from a semiotic gap/lack. *Objet petit a* of the Symbolic Order, which functions like metonymy, defers the 'obscure object' of Desire, unlike demand that stems from the articulation of need⁷¹:

[F]or Lacan, desire 'behaves' in precisely the same way as language: it moves ceaselessly on from object to object or from signifier to signifier, and will never find full and present satisfaction just as meaning can never be seized as full presence Lacan calls the various objects we invest with desire (in the symbolic order) *objet a* ('objet petit a' – 'a' here standing for the other (autre) with a small 'a'). There can be no final satisfaction of our desire since there is no final signifier or object that can *be* that which has been lost forever (the imaginary unity with the mother and the world).⁷²

⁷¹ Macey notes that "the drives endlessly circle around" *objet petit a* (p.280).

⁷² Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.99.

What capitalism as a manifestation of the Symbolic Order does is to make use of the language of advertisements (as language always does) to channel desire into demands that can be satisfied but eventually to leave the core of desire untouched and unsatisfied. Gelfant comments on Carrie's desire as a "natural force" but goes on to explain the social conditioning that the Symbolic Order applies on it:

[T]he objects of desire are socially constructed artifacts imbued with impossible dreams of happiness. Insatiability is thus ontological and cultural, an innate human condition and the sign of social conditioning.⁷³

Geyh defines the essence of Carrie's desire as determined by "various economies: capitalist, political and familial."⁷⁴ Thus, the (self-assumed) subject perceives an illusion of unity with the desire of the other/Other, and it desires to integrate the desire emanating from the object (*objet petit a*), which it naively assumes to be a complement for its own lack.

Fisher defines the search for identity in Dreiser's fiction as "looking around to see who I am" through "an externally referenced identity."⁷⁵ Although the "I" here, who is the 'enunciating'/speaking subject, lacks its very essence of being in language, it tries to assume the desire of the Other to find fulfillment and completion:

The speaking subject that says 'I am' is in fact saying 'I am he (she) who has lost something' – and the loss suffered is the loss of the imaginary identity with the mother and with the world [...] To speak as a subject is therefore the same as to represent the existence of the repressed desire: the speaking subject is lack, and this is how Lacan can say that the subject is that which is not.⁷⁶

The (m)other/the breast becomes the first (part-)object of the child,⁷⁷ during the very first experience of loss during the passage from the Imaginary Order (via the Mirror Stage) to the Symbolic Order. Yet, what is lost during this shift is what constitutes lack. Loss is circumscribed by lack⁷⁸. Loss is being bereft of what is needed whereas lack here signifies something that cannot be brought back, something that creates an illusion of a retrievable loss:

To be sure, this quest is doomed to failure, for the original psychic fusion of the infant with the mother was never anything more than an imaginary fullness – as an "object" it was already lost. And yet, it is this irretrievably lost object that remains "cause" of the subject's desire which subsequently is instantiated in more proximate objects that are represented for the subject in fantasies, i.e. images that are taken up into signifying functions through which the subject plays out the various scenarios of its desire.⁷⁹

The Symbolic Order restructures lack to characterize it as loss in language, though lack cannot be represented and undone, unlike need, demand or loss. Alfred Kazin, too, emphasizes such aspects of Carrie, making interpretations that revolve around terms like lack and desire, though his explanation rather concentrates on Carrie as a self-centered individual and tends to overlook the 'cause of desire' (read *objet petit a*) in the Symbolic Order:

She will never lose her essential passivity, her "wondering," the unconscious cruelty of being able to captivate Drouet, to infatuate and ruin Hurstwood, without herself coming to any realization about them. In some cardinal meaning of the word, Carrie is innocent—in that sense that she is *lacking*. Naively wrapped up in her own life, she is unable to imagine another's. This may be the fate of "modern" people whose personalities are constructed for

⁷⁷ Charles Rycroft explains the term's Kleinian associations (*A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, p.113). Macey notes the relationship between the Lacanian *objet petit a* and this concept (p.280).

⁷⁸ As Richard Boothby states, Lacan's metapsychology of the unconscious and lack might be better understood through Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, the hindsight related to the psychoanalytic exegesis of personal history (*Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan*, p.xiv).

⁷⁹ Richardson, p.525.

⁷³ Gelfant, p.179.

⁷⁴ Geyh, p.10.

⁷⁵ Fisher, p.252.

⁷⁶ Moi, p.97.

them by “want” and fulfilled by “society.” There were to be more and more people with nothing of their own but a desire for “happiness.”⁸⁰

The Other/the others are always (out) there (inside her). Male figures/gaze/desire surround Carrie; thus, she is also an image created by the male gaze, a female figure that becomes an object of male desire –first for Drouet, the seductive city’s incarnation in a radiant (male) image. Drouet, the unsophisticated womanizer who only has eyes for beauties whom he meets during his journeys, desires Carrie as he would desire any other beautiful woman/object. Drouet is defined as a man with a “keen desire for the feminine,”⁸¹ with “one idol –the perfect woman,”⁸² which seems to be his fetishized ideal object rather than a concrete female figure. That is to say, for him, Carrie is just a sign like others, to be cherished for a certain period only to be displaced by another sign (that refers to an illusion of perfection or maybe to a fixation), another object of Drouet’s sexual appetite, of his (male) libido that vainly tries to substitute the penis for the Phallus. Drouet appears to be the focal image of the city, a figure in whose clothes and glamour one can almost find the (male) seducer image.

Riggio claims that Carrie’s assessment of male figures by their clothes attests to the fact that her desire is “to satisfy more basic needs [in a Maslowian sense] than the sexual.”⁸³ Yet, when Carrie examines Drouet’s radiant clothes thoroughly, what she sees and experiences is a *temporary* magnetism due to an overwhelming dominance of promising signs in his presence –he is present because he, as a sign, wears the clothes that differentiate him from other signs/the ‘background.’ What she beholds in his image/presence is not a sign of the penis but, rather, an illusionary sign of the Phallus.

Yet Carrie does not feel bound by any male figure around her –the different surnames through which the male figures in the novel define her, Mrs. ‘Murdock’ and Mrs. ‘Drouet,’ are mere auxiliaries in her quest. This girl of “hotels rather than homes, affairs rather than marriages, roles and not identity”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Alfred Kazin, *An American Procession*, p.243.

⁸¹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.6.

⁸² *ibid.*, p.105.

⁸³ Riggio, “Carrie’s Blues,”

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~perelman/classes/english100/riggio.html>

⁸⁴ Fisher, p.251.

assumes her surnames *herself*, Miss ‘Meeber’ and Miss ‘Madenda,’ which signifies her eventual independence from the male figures (the supremacy of the male/penis) and her eventual dodging being subsumed into the Oedipal family once more (unlike her sister Minnie Hanson, who in her impoverished routine offers a foil for Carrie), though she cannot evade the logic of the Symbolic Order (the dialectic of Lack and the Phallus):

The woman herself is a static figure, arrested in a pattern of desire, but she generates a vortex of forces that flow inexorably towards consumption and death. Men should fear this woman, for a man who gazes upon her may be doomed, as may be those upon whom she gazes.⁸⁵

Geyh underlines the possibility of a non-Lacanian and non-Freudian model of desire –a Deleuzean model– in Carrie’s actions, to the extent, she claims, that Carrie rejects “economies of desire the male world imposes on”⁸⁶ her. Her success as an actress and the ensuing feeling of self-confidence take her beyond the male discourse of flattery and beyond the *relative* male power signified by the presence of the penis. Yet, Carrie’s freedom from the male models of economy of desire seems to fall prey to her demands stemming from the capitalistic projections of the Symbolic Order.

Another character deserving particular attention within this framework is the tragic character of the novel, George Hurstwood, the respectable saloon manager whose well-established and prestigious position in Chicago society is immediately revealed by his clothes when Carrie first meets him. As it is with many characters in the book, it is the clothes that make the man, or better put, it is the image that determines the position of a character in terms of economic and social standing. Young Carrie, like countless girls on their way to become parts of this machine of capitalistic production, may just possess rudimentary skills of analysis and may not know much about family and other social institutions but she has a strong notion of “self-interest” coupled with ambition “to gain in material things,”⁸⁷ which is one of the essential characteristics necessary to survive in the capitalist order. Unlike Hurstwood, who gets carried

⁸⁵ Gelfant, p.192.

⁸⁶ Geyh, pp.13-14.

⁸⁷ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.2.

away in his own illusions of rejuvenation and happiness through Carrie's youth and beauty through which he thinks he may revive his misplaced and repressed desire, Carrie is able to feel that the "blind strivings"⁸⁸ of her heart will guide her towards a better future. Yet Hurstwood's tragic downfall stems from his inability, as stated in the novel, to introspect. Dreiser makes use of a quasi-scientific language to narrate Hurstwood's desire for Carrie and his deteriorating psychological (and physical) state, the former being a sexual drive stemming from sexual instincts and the latter being a chain of chemical reactions:

Not trained to reason or to introspect himself, he could not analyze the change that was taking place in his mind and hence his body. Constant comparison between his old state and his new showed a balance for the worst, which produced a constant state of gloom, or at least depression. Now it has been shown experimentally that a constantly subdued frame of mind produces certain poisons in the blood, called *katastates*, just as virtuous feelings of pleasure and delight produce helpful chemicals, called *anastates*. The poisons, generated by remorse, inveigh against the system and eventually produce marked physical deterioration. To this Hurstwood was subject.⁸⁹

Still, there might be a different reading of this mature man's desire for a beautiful young girl and his eventual downfall, a reading that transcends a Freudian interpretation. What Hurstwood desires in the novel might as well be what he thinks the other may fulfill, that is to say, the void/lack that he feels inside after a successful career, a tedious marriage and the insipid life he has led. In other words, Hurstwood, who seems to have succeeded reasonably in his prestigious version of the American Dream –his prosperity is rather precarious since 'his wealth' in fact belongs to his wife–, confronts the emptiness of the ideal, finding a great void in the land of plenty. Riggio suggests that the point that both brings Carrie and Hurstwood together and draws them apart might be their relation to the family, namely "the conscious domestic ties" that are "in conflict with more primitive and anarchic drives."⁹⁰ When Carrie leaves

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p.487.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p.339.

⁹⁰ Riggio, "Carrie's Blues,"

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~prelman/classes/english100/riggio.html>

Hurstwood in destitute, she once more fails to 'settle' within the boundaries of the traditional family (that reproduces the Oedipal structure).

As regards Hurstwood, the great void inside him may also be read as the failure of the American Dream, of earlier promises failing to fill the lack in him, the gap between his *méconnaissance* of a unified self and the patchwork of a neurotic man who desires what cannot be achieved. This realization may indeed be the source of his desire for Carrie; it is not her beauty or youth alone but also what he perceives in the young girl as 'promising.' Carrie, in other words, becomes the sign of a new rise after a lost dream. That is to say, Hurstwood desires the desire of the other (and the Other), namely Carrie's desire for the Phallus. When he, as the representative figure of the successful upper-middle class man who has had his share of fortune and of the American Dream, fails to make a fresh start for himself, it is not merely because of his old age and spent energies but also because of Carrie's rejection of his insufficient desire to will, which of course also suggests the social mobility constantly on the move, disposing of the exhausted to replace it by the desiring, which is also going to be eventually replaced in turn. Lehan's following comment may also be interpreted in terms of desire as defined by the Symbolic Order in the form of the capitalist system:

Society is continuously breaking down, throwing away its waste, rubbish, and junk, including the human jetsam that makes up this world. There is always an ongoing process of death and renewal, a life force driving ahead of us [...]⁹¹

Hurstwood's desire for what could not have been achieved (the Phallus) and what cannot be achieved (the fulfillment of his lack) first directs him towards success in his career and then towards the one in whom he thinks he sees their projection while in the end this illusion leads him to his ruin, to being a "self-unmade man."⁹² In seeing his desire in Carrie, the reflection of the desire of the Other, he perceives his own lack more acutely than ever.

⁹¹ Lehan, p.63.

⁹² Fisher, p.256.

What Dreiser describes as an outcome of a catastrophic combination of Hurstwood's temperament and fortune in the case of Hurstwood's stealing the money from the safe of the saloon without really intending to do so may also be read as expression of his desire to desire the unachievable once more. When his conscience (or internalized moral principles) gives free reign to his repressed desire under the influence of alcohol; and when the superego's restraints –what Lacan would associate with the Symbolic Order and the phallic law of the Father, which always exist not within the subject but outside it– slacken, Hurstwood's repressed desire, which can never be fulfilled, comes into view in a new guise. In his commentary relying on the usual Freudian explanation that defines subject-object relations according to the tripartite model of the Id, the Ego and the Superego, Alfred Kazin, echoing Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, offers an explanation for the 'criminal' deed of Hurstwood, relying on the narrator's remarks:

“accidental” crime forcibly illustrates Dreiser's belief that we do what a “voice” within us tells us to do. That voice is the criminal, thief, and murderer in us that everything in our laborious upbringing and officially moral civilization tries to suppress. The true source and inspiration of our actions is always unexpected. Civilization is an ordeal. Inwardly, we are always in flight.⁹³

Unlike Freud and Kazin, we may also discern the power of the Symbolic Order in Hurstwood's actions, indirectly compelling him to take the money from the safe⁹⁴ in order to grope for his desire again, while his superego (the Freudian restraint that stems from the outside of the subject and eventually becomes an internal part; for Lacan, a part of the Symbolic Order and the Law) also makes him feel guilty of the crime he is about to commit. The following quotation from Chapter XXIX depicts Hurstwood's desire (stemming from the unconscious, which originates from language and the Symbolic Order) as juxtaposed with his sense of duty and guilt (as a reflection of the Phallic Law and the Symbolic Order). As Elizabeth Grosz emphasizes, “[a]s unconscious, desire cares little for social approval or the rewards and punishment

⁹³ Kazin, *An American Procession*, p.240.

⁹⁴ His unlocking the safe might be interpreted as an act that reveals what is repressed deep within his self (Eric Ackroyd, *A Dictionary of Dream Symbols*, p.264).

consciousness offers to demand [...] While such a logic can support social laws and values, it is also able to subvert or betray them, based as it is on expelled, socially inappropriate, repressed wishes”⁹⁵:

To those who have never wavered in conscience, the predicament of the individual whose mind is less strongly constituted and who trembles in the balance between duty and desire is scarcely appreciable, unless graphically portrayed. Those who have never heard that solemn voice of the ghostly clock which ticks with awful distinctness, “thou shalt,” “thou shalt not,” “thou shalt,” “thou shalt not,” are in no position to judge. Not alone in sensitive, highly organized natures is such a mental conflict possible. The dullest specimen of humanity, when drawn by desire toward evil, is recalled by a sense of right, which is proportionate in power and strength to his evil tendency. We must remember that it may not be a knowledge of right, for no knowledge of right is predicated of the animal's instinctive recoil at evil. Men are still led by instinct before they are regulated by knowledge. It is instinct which recalls the criminal—it is instinct (where highly organized reasoning is absent), which gives the criminal his feeling of danger, his fear of wrong.⁹⁶

In repressing the drives, situating the sexes, and creating the ego in *méconnaissance*, the Symbolic Order in the form of capitalist economics and ideology both spurs/creates/manipulates and checks/consumes (desire as metamorphosed into) demands to keep the system running:

We live in a society which on the one hand pressurizes us into the pursuit of instant gratification, and on the other hand imposes on whole sectors of the population an endless deferment of fulfillment. The spheres of economic, political and cultural life become ‘eroticized’, thronged with seductive commodities and flashy images, while the sexual relationships between men and women grow diseased and disturbed.⁹⁷

While for Freud it is the drives stemming from the unconscious, whose gratification is constantly sought by the Id but repressed by the Superego, that loom in our daily speech and actions, for Lacan it is the Symbolic Order and language that one is born into that define desire. As desire stems from the unconscious and the unconscious is always “‘outside’ rather than ‘within’ us” or

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, p.65.

⁹⁶ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (a), p.269.

⁹⁷ Eagleton, p.193.

“between us,”⁹⁸ from Lacan’s viewpoint, Hurstwood’s desire (for Carrie) would never be ‘his own desire’ as a mere object-cathexis: It would rather be a manifestation of lack brought about by one’s initiation to the Symbolic Order and language (and, as Althusser remarked, the ‘interpellation’ of ideology as well), which indicates a position before the formation of the (presumed) subject and the ego as *méconnaissance*. When Carrie realizes the ultimate failure of Hurstwood’s desire, she decides to leave him behind, knowing that her desire will carry her through without him.

When Hurstwood comes to the end of desire, when he does not want anything more, he dies [...] Wanting more, Carrie goes on living, dreaming of a happiness that, fortunately perhaps, she will never know. Thus she remains, forever, the producer’s insatiable consumer.⁹⁹

The magnificence of her dreams and success becomes amplified by Hurstwood’s frustrations and destitute. Thus, his failure and consequent suicide in depression is a ‘system failure’ of desire, a manifestation of the extreme form of the death-drive to (in Freudian terms) “annul all tension by reverting to an inorganic state”¹⁰⁰ or the “final triumph over the void of the lost object,”¹⁰¹ an object that was conceived as a panacea for lack. Hurstwood’s ‘final act’ serves as a foil for Carrie’s ‘incomplete success’ in her ‘quest’ for the Phallus – a ‘success’ that is defined by the clash between the world she imagines (the pre-lapsarian world of *wunsch Erfüllung*/the pleasure principle of Freud and Lacan’s *réalisation du désir*) and the world of reality (what Freud would define as the reality principle) of the Symbolic Order (and language in Lacan’s theory); a clash that keeps her striving and longing for the elusive ‘light’ of desire: “Tomorrow it [the light] shall be melted and dissolved. Tomorrow it shall be on and further on, still leading, still alluring, until thought is not with you and heartaches are no more.”¹⁰²

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p.173.

⁹⁹ Gelfant, p.191.

¹⁰⁰ Macey, “Death-drive,” *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, (p.83). Macey also underlines Lacan’s view that “the death-drive is an aspect or component of all drives.”

¹⁰¹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, p.9.

¹⁰² Dreiser, p.487.

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