

The values and goals of carrie meeber and antonia shimerda



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Antonia Shimerda and Carrie Meeber have almost opposite value systems. Antonia embodies the traditional American life and values of hard work, integrity and reliance on herself and the land to provide for her needs.

Carrie represents the change in American life that occurred in American society in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. She hates to work, has integrity and concern only for herself and her material things.

Antonia Shimerda arrives in the United States with a past life in Bohemia, a family, and limited economic resources. These funds were soon lost due to dealing with unscrupulous businessmen that sell inferior goods to make a profit.

Throughout her life Antonia has had to work to survive and to help her family. She did this generously and with a good spirit, she went about her work like " she was the happiest thing in the world" (Cather, 308). Despite have been the victim of an attempted rape, left pregnant and alone in Denver, "[s]he lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. . . . All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions" (Cather, 353).

Above everything else Carrie values money and appearance. She moves to Chicago from a small rural town to get money. Unlike Antonia, her past consists not of memories or people, but " a small trunk . . . a cheap imitation alligator skin satchel . . ." (Dreiser, 4). This brief description tells the reader that Carrie is materialistic and superficial. She does not necessarily want to have the best things, but wants to look as if she does; early in the novel she

is content with a "cheap imitation alligator skin satchel." Carrie "rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse" (Dreiser, 4).

Carrie first stays with her sister, but finds the rent too high and the work too hard. Quickly she learns to use her charm and sexuality to receive gifts from men. This becomes her way throughout her life changing only men and the monetary value of the gifts she receives in exchange for her sexual favors.

It is clear that Willa Cather likes Antonia. She remains true to Cather's native state of Nebraska and to Cather's rural heritage. Unlike Cather and Carrie Meeber, Antonia quickly returns from the city to be near friends and family and to live her life. Cather praises Antonia, "It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (Cather, 353).

Dreiser's feelings toward Carrie are much more neutral. Carrie succeeds in her efforts through happenstance and an overwhelming desire to succeed in material things even at the expense of using others. Dreiser does not condemn Carrie so much as he condemns the changes in the American system that has substituted materialism for any other value.

Although she is an apparent success at the end of the book it is also apparent that the things she has built her life on, "trinkets, dress goods, stationery, and jewelry. . . . She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, . . . The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, hair-

combs, purses, all touched her with individual desire" (Dreiser, 24) are subject to ruin and decay.

Of the two, Antonia has the superior value system. Rather than having built a rootless life with no family or friends, she has built a solid life that will carry her to her end. Part of her will continue through her children and grandchildren. She has made something of herself. Carrie on the other hand has lots of luggage but no past. Like Carrie herself, these trinkets will get old and become unattractive.

She will no longer be able to use her charm and sexual appeal to gain the things she wants. When she dies the things she has accumulated will either be passed on to someone else or be destroyed. There will be no destiny; in a generation or two her legacy will be non-existence. Carrie has made herself into nothing.

Works Cited

Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954).
Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. New York: Doubleday, 1981.