

Construction of identity in the city's setting



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *Sister Carrie*, the city is the narrator. It is the main focus of the book, and greatly impacts all those who are influenced by its magnitude. For some, it is a beacon of hope and a promised land of wealth and opportunity, while for others its walls close in more everyday as they fight the battle of poverty and the effects of being low to middle class. The city can make or break a person; it is truly a matter of survival of the fittest. The city will reveal a tragic flaw in a person, or it will be a foundation for extreme success. The city, with all its material prospects and consumer culture, is a combination of utopia and tragic disappointment, where the men who influence her make Carrie into a rags-to-riches success.

In Chicago, Carrie feels the drag of desire upon her while looking for a job. She does not want to blend in with most people of the city, those who are plain and ordinary, but longs to stand out. She envies the clothing and fine material possessions that women of finer backgrounds flaunt and cannot bring herself to adapt to the fact that she is below them. This holds true even when she is a wage-seeker without anything. "To avoid a certain indefinable shame she felt at being caught spying for a position, she quickened her steps and assumed an air of indifference supposedly common to one upon an errand (17)." Working in the shoe factory she starts to become a product of her environment, truly disheartened and depressed by the women and mindless gossip that surrounds her. She finds the ordinary sweatshop life unbearable and knows the city life holds some other purpose for her.

Carrie sells herself for twenty dollars to Drouet, whom she sees as an opportunity to advance her social status. Her desire for material pleasure overcomes her sense of morality, "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen,

she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse (1)." It is the standard of the city that sets this precedent, and Carrie, longing to find identity through the cosmopolitan standard, is saved by men like Drouet and Hurstwood. She becomes a product of her environment by adapting the personality that Drouet wants for her and becomes a reflection of masculine desire. Carrie plays her roles convincingly before ever entering the stage life: from the beauty who men desire, to the woman who has no opinion other than that of material nature, to a mistress and wife. While losing her individuality, these roles help her form independence, a key element that will prepare her for thriving in city life. She follows orders because she knows she will get money and material goods out of it, which will make her stand out from the mundane while blending in with the higher class, and it is there that she will find her place.

Once Carrie gets a taste of the better life, she becomes immune to the life she left behind. A homeless man pleads for change from Drouet for a place to sleep. Drouet " handed over a dime with an upwelling feeling of pity in his heart. Hurstwood scarcely noticed the incident. Carrie quickly forgot (135)." This is the point of no return, her innocence gone, replaced by the wealth and fortune the city holds. " She realized...how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women (22)..." She compromises her moral integrity for this, which is partly the city's fault for it keeps those who can afford it under a spell where morals matter not but where self-worth is measured in the Broadway shows one can afford to see, the clothes they can afford to buy, and the ability of money to speak powerfully. " Carrie had no

excellent home principles fixed upon her, if she had, she would have been more consciously disturbed.... under the influence of varied occurrences... the food, the still unusual luxury...she was again the victim of the city's hypnotic influence (79.)”

The consumer culture of a city can be deceptive and corrupt because one is truly defined and identified by their material possessions. This hypnotizing influence can cause apathy to anyone and anything with the exception of desire. Carrie is truly a product of her environment once she obtains a stage role making thirty-five dollars a week in the city of New York. She leaves behind Drouet, Hurstwood, and the rest of her life as she feels she is now above them and truly independent. She no longer relies on them to provide money, clothing or other material goods. Both Drouet and Hurstwood have created this monster of success by picking her up and making her their work of art. She survives and thrives in the city, while Hurstwood, forever changed and corrupt in the love he felt for Carrie, falls to his ultimate demise.

The city is capable of fostering both beauty and destruction, but it is not capable of purity. Even in beauty there is sacrifice, in success there is suffering for someone who is affected by it. The city is the center of identity in all who live in it, for the rich are defined by their material goods and keeping up with the Jones' attitude, while the poor curse their existence and cannot cope with the cruelty of the expense of living. Carrie explicates a touch of irony, for what she sees as great wealth in the men she meets is still mediocre, upper middle class at best. It is not necessarily talent that got Carrie to where she is at the end of the book, but chance, accident, and luck.

The men who fostered her rise are destroyed by her in the end while Carrie becomes a product of pop-culture. But that's just the way it is in the big city.