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Naturalism and the Inevitability of Fate: *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *Sister Carrie*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to analyze and compare two novels written at the turn of the 20th century that are usually classified as naturalist: *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) by Stephen Crane and *Sister Carrie* (1900) by Theodore Dreiser. More specifically, I will compare the main characters of each novel (Maggie Johnson and Carrie Meeber), taking into account the deterministic and Social Darwinist ideas that are recurrent in Naturalism. My aim is to call attention to the fact that both heroines have, apparently, very different destinies, although both works were contemporary and are classified within the same literary genre: Maggie dies whereas Carrie succeeds in her acting career. However, the close reading of the texts and the analysis of the narrative voiced used will show that the endings that both authors give to their main protagonists may not be so different after all.

El objetivo de este ensayo es analizar y comparar dos novelas escritas a finales del siglo XIX y que suelen enmarcarse dentro del Naturalismo: *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), de Stephen Crane y *Sister Carrie*, de Theodore Dreiser. Más concretamente, compararé los personajes principales de cada novela (Maggie Johnson y Carrie Meeber), teniendo en cuenta algunas ideologías recurrentes en el naturalismo como el determinismo o el darwinismo social. Mi intención es resaltar que las dos heroínas tienen destinos aparentemente muy distintos (Maggie muere mientras que Carrie se convierte en una actriz famosa), a pesar de que los dos libros son contemporáneos y pertenecen al mismo género literario. Sin embargo, el análisis de los textos y de la voz narrativa muestra que los finales que los autores dan a las protagonistas no son tan diferentes al fin y al cabo.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to the antagonistic fate of the heroines of two works from the turn of the 20th century: *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) by Stephen Crane and *Sister Carrie* (1900), written by Theodore Dreiser. Both novels are often classified as naturalist. In fact, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is considered one of the first and most prominent examples of naturalism in the US, and, as Milne Holton puts it, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* "is regarded as the first work of unalloyed naturalism in American fiction" (37). *Sister Carrie* is also placed among the canonical naturalist texts. These two works deal with the lives of two young girls as they survive amongst a cruel and tough urban environment. Crane's novella tells the story of Maggie, a young girl living in the impoverished Bowery district of New York in a violent family and in an oppressing environment. On the other hand, *Sister Carrie* is based on the story of Carrie Meeber, an eighteen-year old girl who moves from his native Columbia City to Chicago in order to make a living. One may expect that two works that were written during the same period, that are said to belong to the same genre and whose main aim was to criticize the incipient capitalist society in the US at the turn of the century, should provide a similar outcome of events for their main protagonists. However, nothing is further from the truth, since Carrie becomes a famous actress and Maggie ends up dying in obscure circumstances. Thus, my intention is to analyze and compare the similarities and differences of both heroines in order to provide a possible explanation for their opposite destinies. In doing so, I will take into account the deterministic ideas that both novels support, as well as the precepts of social Darwinism which pervade the rising of American capitalism and which, more often than not, had a devastating effect on the lives of the less privileged individuals.

There are similarities in the obstacles that Crane and Dreiser had to face when they first tried to publish their works. In the case of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Crane's main inspiration for writing the story came during the summer of 1892, a time during which he worked as a reporter in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. As a result of the "profanity and vulgarity of speech" (Bloom 16) of the novel, full of vulgar language, insults and violent passages, several publishers refused to print it. However, some of them also praised the work for its quality. Consequently, Crane was forced to publish it at his own expense under the pseudonym Johnston Smith. In spite of all the difficulties, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* has been critically acclaimed for several decades and it is considered one of the most powerful examples of literary naturalism.

Like Stephen Crane, Dreiser was originally a journalist. Both were particularly interested in "muckraking", a kind of journalism which developed at the beginning of the 20th century and intended to expose social ills, reflect the poor living conditions of the most disadvantaged ones and denounce political corruption (see Cecelia Tichi). Dreiser was persuaded by his friend Arthur Henry to start writing novels. This proposal, which Dreiser reluctantly accepted, was the first step in the creation of *Sister Carrie.* As in Crane's case, Dreiser found many difficulties when he tried to publish the novel. It was finally published by Doubleday, Page and Company of New York in 1900, although a revised edition of the novel appeared in 1907, including several cuts of the most explicit scenes and a reduction in the number of pages. This last edition was the source for most subsequent reprints of the novel. Dreiser was bitterly disappointed because of the novel's failure in terms of selling. Frederick J. Balling explains it as follows: "Despondent and embittered by the poor reception of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser contemplated suicide until he was once again rescued by his brother Paul, who got him a job as a magazine editor" (8). Nevertheless, the novel went on to become a cult novel

within contemporary American Literature. As we can see, both novels share a similar plot and a similar history of publication. However, Maggie and Carrie have very different destinies, a fact which invites a deeper analysis of both texts.

2. NATURALISM AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY: HISTORICAL, IDEOLOGICAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND

2.1 Naturalism as Historical Background

Both *Sister Carrie* and *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* are classified as naturalist novels. Thus, they are part of the naturalist movement, which relied heavily on determinism, a philosophical position according to which the environment and the surroundings condition the outcome of the lives of every human being. In other words, the environment has a crucial role in the physical and psychological development of every one of us. As a result, it is essential to describe the social environment that surrounds Maggie and Carrie.

Both novels are set during the last years of the nineteenth century. This period was known as "The Gilded Age", and it brought a profound transformation of American society. Before the Civil War, the rural, agrarian social model predominated. However, once the war was over, the Second Industrial Revolution gave way to a new urban nation. Those changes were especially felt in big urban areas such as New York or Chicago (the places were Maggie and Carrie live).

In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century some inventions such as the steam locomotive or electricity became widespread. As a result, railroad communications improved enormously. Chandler remarks how the time it took to move freight from Philadelphia to Chicago was reduced in ten years: "nine weeks in 1849,

three days in 1859" (122). Moreover, agricultural and industrial mechanization provoked a tremendous amount of production. Consequently, a huge labour force was required in order to carry out the productive process on a large scale. As Zinn underlines, "to accomplish all this required ingenious inventors of new processes and new machines, clever organizers and administrators of the new corporations, a country rich with land and minerals, and a huge supply of human beings to do the back-breaking, unhealthful, and dangerous work" (234). In order to meet the need for labour force, millions of immigrants arrived in the USA, most of them coming from Europe. Therefore, the population of the major cities increased dramatically. For instance, Chicago (the place where Carrie moves after leaving her hometown Columbia City, Wisconsin) grew from 100,000 to almost two million inhabitants between 1870 and 1900. In the case of New York, the population increased from roughly 1,000,000 in 1870 to almost 4,000,000 in 1900. Maggie and Carrie emerge from impoverished neighbourhoods inhabited by thousands of workers. Areas such as the Bowery in New York (where Maggie lives) were ruled by extreme poverty, violence and social degradation. This situation was similar in the working-class neighbourhood of Chicago's near West Side where Carrie first lives with her sister and her brother-in-law.

In stark contrast with the harsh life of the disadvantaged neighbourhoods that serve as initial settings for both *Sister Carrie* and Maggie*: A Girl of the Streets*, some magnates took advantage of their economic and political power and amassed enormous fortunes. These men, popularly known since the last decades of the 19th century as "Robber Barons", accumulated the largest part of the country's resources, to the point that, as Howard Zinn points out, a scarce 2% of the population possessed as much as 60% of the overall wealth of the USA:

> Names such as Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, Philip Armour, Jay Cooke, and Charles Tyson Yerkes (the latter being Dreiser's model for Frank Cowperwood in *The Trilogy of Desire*) represent both the promise and the corruption of American business. These tycoons took advantage of new structural forms for business: while the corporation limited owners' liability, organizations such as pools, trusts, and holding companies allowed for greater control of the market. (Zinn 234)

Tycoons such as those mentioned above are not featured in the works. In the case of *Maggie* the action is set in a small, impoverished neighbourhood in which such privileged individuals cannot even be conceived. Nevertheless, Pete, who belongs to the lower class but has a slightly more privileged position than most people in the Bowery, is regarded as a sort of tycoon by Maggie. On the other hand, in *Sister Carrie,* there are some examples of wealthy and successful individuals, such as Hurstwood at the beginning, but they are by no means comparable to the "Robber Barons".

The county moved from a stratified society to a class society. Both Carrie and particularly Maggie belong to the lower classes, although Carrie manages to promote to a well-off middle class. Nevertheless, the role of women within the society of the period was a secondary one. They were supposed to stay at home and take care of domestic and private affairs, be submissive and create an atmosphere of peace within the household ("the angel in the house", a term coined by Victorian poet Coventry Patmmore). Their access to education was very restricted and, as a result, most of them did not have a public voice.

In general terms, women were kept out of the productive process, but when the big companies required their labour they started to be seen as competitors by their male colleagues, and thus despised. As Marx and Engels highlighted in *The Communist Manifesto*, "the less the skill and exertion of strength implied in manual labour, in other

words, the more modern industry becomes developed, the more is the labour of men superseded by that of women" (18).

The first steps of the feminist movement were taken during this period, and a new model of woman starts to emerge. This new kind of woman has very little to do with the traditional canon of the Victorian Lady that was preponderant at the time. Literary critic Claire Eby considers Carrie a transitional figure, not part of the Victorian model but not yet a new woman:

> The "New Woman" typically had a career and was economically independent. Frequently New Women aligned themselves with members of their own sex (in partnerships that were not necessarily romantic) rather than in conventional marriages. Carrie follows this pattern when, deserting Hurstwood, she earns a fine income on stage and moves in with the more upbeat Lola Osborne. Yet the typical New Woman was better educated and frequently more politically inclined than Carrie, and so we might best think of Dreiser's heroine as a transitional figure, moving from the Victorian model of True Woman toward the recognizably modern New Woman. (6)

Compared to Carrie, Maggie is a much more traditional woman, which is probably a consequence of her upbringing in the Bowery. She is by no means an independent woman and does not show any ambition or intention to climb up the social ladder. However, her personality may have been shaped differently had she been raised in a wealthier environment.

2.2 Naturalism as ideological background

The end of the 19th century registered a clash between conservative and progressive ideologies. The traditional customs and morality were "threatened" by modernity and the new ideas that it implied. This unsettled atmosphere was the breeding ground for

both Maggie and Carrie. The society in which the two heroines live is presented as very traditional by Crane and Dreiser but, at the same time, both authors manage to show that society through the prism of the "new ideas", either implicitly (in the case of Crane) or explicitly (Dreiser).

Victorian Morality spread its influence all over the Anglo-Saxon world during the 19th century. It was a kind of morality based on decorum, virtue (or, at least, the appearance of virtue), laboriousness, austerity, social formalisms, patriarchy and the undervaluation of women. It brought about strong sexual repression and ignorance. In addition, it encouraged a confined way of life and a lack of respectable public amusements, which resulted in the establishment of widespread social hypocrisy, as it has been explained at length by historians such as Judith R. Walkowitz. In other words, those attitudes which were not admissible in public were often tolerated in the private sphere (for instance, there was a prostitution boom during the period). Many precepts from the Victorian Morality model were incorporated to patriotic discourses in the US, and some of them still endure in the most conservative and fundamentalist stratum of American society.

The Puritans, as well as the Victorians, practiced a very rigid morality. They sanctified the culture of effort, work ethics and the accumulation of wealth. There is a very clear example of the canonical Puritan family in *Sister Carrie*, represented by Carrie's older sister Minnie and, above all, by her husband, Hanson, who lives an extremely austere life and constantly makes judgments about Carrie's actions. In *Maggie* there are not such clear examples of Puritanism or attachment to Victorian values. Nevertheless, the way in which Maggie is judged by her relatives may imply a certain influence of these ideologies, or at least some concern regarding what their neighbours may think of them. Although in origin a very restricted and radical group,

some of the puritan ideas had a deep impact within American Society. They believed themselves to be predestined to create a perfect society, blessed by God. The so-called "Robber Barons", helped by the connivance of the state, took advantage of the puritan ideology in order to develop their massive production systems. As Zinn explains: "The purpose of the state was to settle upper-class disputes peacefully, control lower-class rebellion and adopt policies that would further the long-range stability of the system" (238).

Other ideological tendencies can also contribute to understanding the social environment that surrounded the two heroines. For instance, Jeremy Bentham's and John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism, which supported the idea that actions are right in proportion when they tend to promote happiness and wrong when they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. Another ideological tendency in this respect is John Dewey's pragmatism, which is dealt with in his book *Knowing and the Known* and states that each person can have his/her own moral rules. Dewey's pragmatism did not accept universal principles and left the field open for the individual to try and look for the good (success) and avoid the bad (failure). This is exactly what both heroines try to do in the texts, although only Carrie obtains (economical) success. These tendencies provided even more ideological support for the "Robber Barons".

2.3 Naturalism as literary genre

It was within this context that some new literary genres or sub-genres, such as naturalism, emerged. The foundations of literary naturalism were established by French writer Emile Zola in his essay *Le Roman Experimental*. In this work, Zola suggests the application of a scientific, experimental method to the novel following the example of

Claude Bernard's experimental method in the medical field. Zola considered that the novelist was both an observer and an experimenter. In other words, the novelist, after observing reality, presents the facts just as they are and then experiments with the characters of the story that he is narrating. Usually, he does not establish a clear-cut distinction between "goodies and baddies", although a third person narration such as this often implies involuntary judgements about events or individuals. The novelist's task is to try and prove that the events that he/she is narrating happen because they have been predetermined beforehand.

Naturalism relies heavily on positivism, which states that the only possible knowledge derives from positive facts (those which can be perceived through the senses and can be tested by experience). In fact, positivism is the origin of the basic doctrines of naturalism: determinism, Darwin's theories of evolution and Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism. The determinist ideology declares that all events are determined by a certain reason. This implies that the concept of fate does not exist and that we are not fully capable of making decisions freely. As the narrator in *Sister Carrie* explains at the beginning of the novel, "half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman" (2). According to this philosophical position, human conduct would be the consequence of genetic heredity and the past events that have given shape to it. There is a really good example of genetic heredity determining character in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, when the narrator describes Jimmie's rise to become the head of the family: "Jimmie grew large enough to take the vague position of head of the family. As incumbent of that office, he stumbled upstairs late at night, as his father had done before him. He reeled about the room, swearing at his relations, or went to sleep on the floor" (14).

For its part, Herbert's Social Darwinism is dealt with in essays such as "The Social Organism", which suggests that certain cultures, social classes or races possess values or abilities which place them on top of others. As a result, for the sake of survival, they can legitimately employ their superiority and exercise dominion over the less able or the weakest ones. These ideologies, particularly Social Darwinism, were at the service of powerful minorities such as the "Robber Barons", who found in them a moral justification for their enterprises. Moreover, these currents of thought allowed them to keep on oppressing the disadvantaged majorities.

3. MAGGIE VS CARRIE: DETERMINED LIVES WITH DIFFERENT DESTINIES

Initially, both Maggie and Carrie are presented as beautiful and innocent young girls, unaware of the world's goings-on, easily impressionable and prone to be manipulated. This is quickly exposed in the very first page of *Sister Carrie*: "She was eighteen years of age, bright, timid and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth" (1). Just a few lines afterwards, the narrator anticipates some traces of the determinism that pervades the novel while describing Carrie's initial situation in one of the most memorable quotations of the novel:

> 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. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility. (1-2)

In the case of Maggie, we have to wait a couple of pages until finding a depiction of her, as the focus is put on her brother Jimmie at the beginning. Crane's first

allusion to her goes as follows: "A small ragged girl dragged a red, bawling infant along the crowded ways. He was hanging back, baby-like, bracing his wrinkled, bare legs" (4). Although not an excessively detailed description, it already offers some hints of Crane's distant and stark style of writing, much more focused on the external appearance of the characters than Dreiser's. This brief depiction of Maggie, still a girl, suggests a deterministic, desolated and impoverished environment, an idea which is corroborated immediately afterwards and that critics like George T. Novotny have underlined, "Crane was frequently interested in the concepts of fate and determinism in his works" (227).

Both heroines are also similar at the beginning regarding how easily they get fascinated by male seducers. Carrie is very soon spotted and courted by Drouet, who epitomizes that kind of man. The narrator uses a word which was popular during the 1880s to refer to that stereotype: "masher". This term is defined by the narrator as "[…] one whose dress or manners are calculated to elicit the admiration of susceptible young women" (3). Carrie is instantly attracted by Drouet's appearance: "The purse, the shiny tan shoes, the smart new suit, and the *air* with which he did things, built up for her a dim world of fortune, of which he was the center. It disposed her pleasantly toward all he might do" (6).

Similarly, Maggie is also attracted by Pete, Jimmie's older friend. Her world is so constricted that she magnifies and idealizes him, a violent and blasphemous bartender, up to a ridiculous extent: "[…] her eyes dwelt wonderingly and rather wistfully upon Pete's face […] Pete's aristocratic person […] Maggie perceived that he was the ideal man" (16). Maggie's fascination grows even further once Pete takes notice of her enchantment: "Maggie marvelled at him and surrounded him with greatness. She vaguely tried to calculate the altitude of the pinnacle from which he must have look

down upon her" (17). The narrator's use of irony is evident in these quotations and pervades the entire novella, as I will later explain.

Nevertheless, as time passes by, Carrie proves to be a more independent and ambitious woman than Maggie. First, he leaves Drouet when she becomes enchanted with Hurstwood, a more mature and interesting man. After Hurstwood loses his job, she realizes that he is not excessively determined to look for another one, thus becoming a burden for her incipient career as an actress. As a result, she decides to abandon him and moves with a fellow actress, Lola, not caring much about what is going to become of him. In this respect she is very far from the traditional role of the submissive woman. Carrie's independence and economic success suggests that she has fulfilled the canon of the American Dream. She is a "self-made woman", someone who has flourished in spite of her difficult beginnings in Chicago (mainly the harsh work in the factory and her brother-in-law's lack of empathy). However, it is true that she was economically sustained by both Drouet and Hurstwood at different stages of the novel. Thus, she took advantage of the status that those men could offer her but later on she got rid of them when she considered it necessary. In other words, she adjusts to the Social Darwinist precepts and is able to succeed by proving to be more determined than those who surround her. Carrie's difficult, unstable and often contradictory personality prompted some critics to accuse Dreiser of lacking the ability to provide his characters with a deep psychological insight. Literary critic F.O Mattthiessen suggests Dreiser possessed "[…] very little of the psychologist's skill in portraying the inner life of his characters" (in Riggio 23). Riggio delves even further into this subject:

> With Carrie Meeber, Dreiser set out to write a different and subtler story, one that demanded a more complex psychology than his psychological analysis could account for. Dreiser's problem was to draw a character for whom the regressive self-seeking need for the commodities and

> comforts that constitute 'the good life' is increasingly in tension with the positive, though often misguided, quest for 'beauty' and self expression. The contradictions in Carrie that disturb many critics were for Dreiser the central drama of her inner life. She is a character whose destiny is unclear because her identity, from beginning to end, is only in the process of being formed. (24)

In my opinion, Riggio is right in his analysis, as Dreiser's portrayal of Carrie reflects some inconsistencies due to the fact that her personality and character are not fully developed. Nevertheless, Dreiser seems to be much more at ease when dealing with male characters. For instance, his dramatic and detailed account of Hurstwood's downfall results as believable as devastating.

On the other hand, and unlike Carrie, Maggie's fascination for Pete does not diminish. She comes from such an impoverished background that she has developed a tremendous, illogical feeling of inferiority towards Pete. This feeling increases even further when she leaves her tenement for several weeks and moves with him, a decision for which she would later be despised and rejected by her family. Pete usually takes her out to the theatre and different shows, which are not excessively interesting but which cause a very powerful impression on her. She grows accustomed to it and becomes increasingly dependent on him: "The air of spaniel-like dependence had been magnified and showed its direct effect in the peculiar off-handedness and ease of Pete's way towards her" (40).

Maggie's enchantment ends abruptly when Pete meets Nellie, a girl that he used to know and to whom he is strongly attracted. The attraction Pete feels towards Nellie is as irrational as the one that Maggie feels for him. As a result of it, Pete rejects Maggie, first ignoring her when Nellie is present and later addressing Maggie in an explicitly hurtful way when she asks him for an explanation: "Oh, go to hell!" (49). Paradoxically,

both Pete and Maggie suffer a terrible decline following the end of their relationship, as they are trapped in a cruel, naturalistic atmosphere from which they cannot escape.

Another key difference between both heroines has to do with the way in which they are treated by the community in response to their adulterous relationships. On the on hand, Maggie is immediately despised by her family and neighbourhoods once it is known that she has spent several weeks away from home with Pete. When she comes back to the family tenement, her mother and brother shout blasphemously at her: "Dere she stands! Ain' she purty? Look ut her! Ain' she sweet, deh beast? Look ut her! Ha, ha! Look ut her!" (45). Maggie's mother "tremendous railing […] brought the denizens of the Rum Alley tenement to their doors. Women came in the hallways. Children scurried to and fro" (45-46).

On the other hand, Carrie seems to escape criticism although she has had two adulterous relationships. A plausible explanation for this lack of public scrutiny is that, traditionally, the world of the theatre and acting in general has been associated to sexual liberty and loose moral behaviour. As a result, Carrie's "entourage", mainly composed of fellow actors, actresses and artists, is rather tolerant with her regarding this issue. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that Maggie's world is much more enclosed than Carrie's. Therefore, Carrie manages to live a more or less anonymous life in both New York and Chicago, whereas Maggie is chained to the oppressive atmosphere of Rum Alley, a place where privacy is not an option. Most probably, Carrie would have been judged almost as severely as Maggie if she had opted for staying with her sister and her brother-in-law.

Curiously enough, a palpable similarity that both girls present is the fascination that they feel for clothes and their tendency to consumerism. In the case of Maggie, she cannot afford to buy any expensive clothes, but she invests what she has in order to

make a stronger impression on Pete. For instance, "She spent some of the week's pay in the purchase of flowered cretonne for a lambrequin. She made it with infinite care […] She wanted it to look well on Sunday night when, perhaps, Jimmie's friend would come" (18). Moreover, she sometimes expresses her desires to improve her appearance: "She began to note with more interest the well-dressed women she met on the avenues. She envied elegance and soft palms. She craved those adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women" (22).

Regarding Carrie, this crave for consumerism and constantly acquiring better clothes is even more explicit, as she has been exposed to more advertising and her economic possibilities, particularly when Hurstwood is still financially solvent or when she acquires fame as an actress, are notably higher. As Phillip J.Barrish puts it:

> […] in the decades following the Civil War, business leaders and economists came to view perpetual increases in consumption. […] As manufacturers sought to stimulate consumption of their products, the marketing and advertising industries gained a previously unprecedented importance in the US. […] The lower prices of some goods meant that the phenomenon of 'conspicuous consumption' […] became an important signifier of status not only among the very rich but at lower levels of the nation's class structure as well. (121)

Carrie's desires and needs throughout the novel increase proportionally to her income and ambition. As Barrish elaborates: "No matter what clothing, luxuries, and public recognition Carrie garners over the course of the novel, she never goes long without finding something else to crave, as she yearns for the one last thing will finally make her success and indeed *herself* complete" (122). As we can see, she is a victim of incipient consumerism in a capitalist society that began to settle down at the period. She

seems unable to satisfy her needs. Although she has achieved fame, independence and money, she is by not means happy, as the narrator in *Sister Carrie* recurrently implies and explicitly narrates at the very end of the novel, strangely addressing Carrie: "Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone […] shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel" (487). Thus, Carrie enters into the "fittest" group according to the social Darwinist theories, as she has been able to make a living for herself among a harsh urban environment. However, this does not mean that she is satisfied.

Yet another similarity concerns the fact that both heroines worked in a factory for some time. Maggie works in the textile industry making collars and cuffs, whereas Carrie works as an "underpaid, assembly-line worker in a dingy, airless shoe-making factory" (Barrish, 121). There, Carrie has to endure the mocks and obscenities of male workers (who earn considerably more money) and the envies of fellow females. Her harsh experience at the factory, where she worked for hours earning a ridiculous wage, was probably an important factor in the development of her ambition and personality. The fact that both girls worked in such conditions is a clear portrayal of the reality of the turn of the 20th century, when conspicuous consumerism required mass production, which needed, in turn, an enormous amount of low quality jobs that were often taken by those who had fewer resources and who dreamed of becoming consumers themselves. The powerful owners of these companies were tremendously benefited, as the production and selling of goods grew dramatically while the salaries remained insultingly low.

4. MAGGIE VS CARRIE: DIFFERENT NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Although both novels are fairly similar regarding the themes they deal with, the time in which they were written or the literary genre to which they belong, their narrative techniques are completely different. The most obvious reason for this concerns the length of each of the texts. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is a novella, as it is notably short and concise. On the other hand, *Sister Carrie* is considerably long (almost five hundred pages) and the succession of events that it narrates occurs rather slowly.

Focusing on *Maggie*, the most relevant aspect regarding narrative technique is Crane's explicit and detached use of language. He sticks to the role of the naturalist observer, describing events and situations from a detached position. Furthermore, the vocabulary that he uses is well-chosen and remarkably elevated. His choice of words often involves a great deal of irony, as we have previously seen when the narrator makes reference to Maggie's blind admiration for Pete or in the following quote where the narrator describes Pete once again: "Here was a formidable man who disdained the strength of a world full of fists. Here was one who had contempt for brass-clothed power; one whose knuckles could ring defiantly against the granite of law. He was a knight" (17).

Another interesting detail about the narrative style is that the text contains plenty of allusions to animal symbolism, most of them pervaded with irony as well. For instance: "The little boy fell to the ground and gave a tremendous howl" (2), "Maggie […] ate like a small pursued tigress" (6), "In him grew a majestic contempt for those strings of street cars that followed him like intent bugs" (12), "Happy Germans, with maybe their wives and two or three children, sat listening to the music, with the expressions of happy cows" (19). This animalization and the abundance of this sort of

imagery may be an implied allusion to the desperate fight for survival that urban life represented in the US during those days, and which is usually associated to the animal world. Crane, probably due to the brevity of the novella, uses symbolism and draws static characters, stereotyped and deeply marked by an environment from which they cannot possibly escape.

Unlike *Maggie*, *Sister Carrie* is a rather long novel. Its narrative style is, in general terms, simple, and the vocabulary that Dreiser employs is for sure not as ostentatious as Crane's. In fact, Dreiser was criticized for the excessive length of the novel. Furthermore, he was also accused of "bad writing" because the book contained "annoying anachronisms and blunders in English" (12), as Donald Pizer notes in the introduction to his compilation *New Essays on Sister Carrie,* quoting an article from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* dating form 1901. Criticism of the work and of Dreiser's writing style continued for several decades, up to a point that, as Pizer indicates quoting Irving Howe's words, Dreiser's work was considered "a symbol of everything a superior intelligence was supposed to avoid" (17). This tendency, according to Pizer, came to an end by the early 1970s, when "[…] it had become possible to discuss the movement outside of the a priori assumptions of inadequacy established by the New Critical and anticommunist critical contexts of the previous generation" (13). Those critiques may contain some truth, since it is obvious that *Sister Carrie* does not stand out for the quality of its prose. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the main asset of the novel is that it dealt with subjects which had not been approached before in literature, such as the new culture of consumerism that emerged as a direct consequence of the establishment of the American capitalist society and the concept of the American Dream in a deterministic society. Moreover, the novel was also innovative in its portrayal of the birth of a new type of woman or the accurate image that it offered of urban life during that period. In

addition, the way in which the narrative voice shifts between the mere narration of events and the direct addressing of the main protagonist, Carrie, does also suggest that the novel is more complex than what many of its detractors believed.

5. CONCLUSION

As I have already mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the opposite endings of these two works are rather surprising if we take into account that the texts are contemporary, their authors were influenced by similar ideologies and both of them aimed to be critical with the society of the period in which the texts were written. Apparently, Maggie is portrayed as a victim of a society in which those who are not strong or wealthy enough have very few chances of survival. She had the misfortune of being born in an impoverished neighbourhood where those chances are even scarcer, especially for an innocent girl such as her. It seems that her fate was marked even before she was born, and that she could have done very little in order to change the course of events. On the other hand, Carrie learns how to adapt to urban life and exploit her qualities. She succeeds because she realizes that the only way to make a living in such an environment is to take advantage of others and leave them behind if necessary. At the end of the novel, Carrie has a comfortable economic position and has fulfilled her dream of becoming an actress. She is famous, admired, rich and independent. She is a perfect example of the American Dream. Nevertheless, she does not give the impression (and the narrator corroborates it at the very end) of being happy in spite of her success. She feels lonely, after all, because most of her friends and acquaintances are just a consequence of money and fame. In some way, she has sacrificed happiness and personal well-being for money and material possessions. In other words, she is a

product (or a victim) of capitalism, a system which spreads the idea that the richer you get, the happier you will be. Thus, if we consider Carrie's sadness as a relevant question in *Sister Carrie*, it is possible to think that both endings are not so different after all. Crane and Dreiser used different narrative techniques and plots but shared a common aim: to criticize a society in which the only way to improve required to get rid of moral values and follow the rules that those in power imposed, as Carrie does. Those that do not are trapped by their deterministic environment, which can only lead to misfortune or even death as we see in the case of Maggie. Two very different destinies but the same ideological message.

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