

Commodity, Performance, and Social Identity in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

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Theodore Dreiser's novel is an exemplary text of social identity's performativity. The crucial role of the commodity in constituting an individual's social identity clearly demonstrates how identity is discursively performed. Social identity is depicted as the value of commodified human subjects, which is not an innate value but a social product as commodities are according to Marx. This performativity of social identity is further reinforced by the novel's strong interest in theatrical and social acting. The commodity and acting in *Sister Carrie*, however, do not represent two different worlds, with the former's materiality opposed to the latter's illusoriness. They are both, instead, shown to be components of a social construct--that is, individuals' performance of their social identity. In *Sister Carrie*, the characters' sense of self is both constantly enacted as a theatrical role and based on money and the other commodities they possess.

While identity is both performative and commodified, the same social structure that enables products of labor to perform as valuable commodities erases the line in social life between living and acting, reality and performance. Since social identity is performed, shrewd performances in both the theater and the social world can constitute reality in the sense of elevating one's social identity. From this perspective, the line between illusion and reality in the novel does not exist, and social identities are as much performed as theatrical roles on stage. By structurally juxtaposing Carrie and Hurstwood in a story about "rising and falling"--symbolized by its recurrent image of the rocking chair,¹ the

novel directs its reader's attention to the efficacy of performances on and off stage. In the novel's pretentious and commodified society, the differentiation between true and sham identities is no longer meaningful. In terms of social identity, there is only the difference between effective and ineffective performances. Carrie's successful social-climbing and Hurstwood's downfall and suicide are, therefore, results of the former's intuitive understanding of identity's performativity and the latter's ignorance of it.

I

Sister Carrie does not give Carrie much time in Chicago before she is made aware what social position she is in. At age eighteen, full of illusions about city life, Carrie leaves her hometown to stay with her sister in Chicago. There she finds herself welcomed not by the merriment and amusement she comes for, but the grimness of work and hardship her sister and brother-in-law's life makes unmistakable. After only two days in the city, she is compelled to seek a job in the vast wholesale and shopping district. In the metropolitan landscape's "high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep" (12), Carrie discovers her social identity as an unemployed working woman-- "As she contemplated the wide windows and imposing signs, she became conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was--a wage-seeker" (13).² This identity not only tells her who she was but also condemns her morally. There is "a certain indefinable shame" in her identity which she feels when looking for a job or comparing herself to better dressed girls (13). It is to her immoral to be poor and have nothing.

In the first few chapters of the novel, the novel vividly exemplifies the phenomenon of what Marx calls the fetishism of the commodity and its relation to identity. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, the first chapter in Part I, Book I of Marx's *Capital* is "a

meditation on the mysteries of identity" (*Late Marxism* 23). In his analysis of commodity and money, Marx contends that commodities have a dual nature: a natural form and a value form. Whereas nature form is the physical form of commodities' use-values as material goods, value-form is their exchange-value socially constructed to define the relation between two commodities. Exchange-value is therefore the abstract third term that makes the comparison (identification) of value between two incomparable objects possible. Purely social and ultimately adopting the universal form of money, exchange-value, as Jameson observes, "constitutes the primordial form by which identity emerges in human history" (23).

Although Jameson is discussing identity as a general philosophic notion with reference to Theodore Adorno, his association of identity with Marx's definition of exchange-value remains pertinent to our contemplation of the human subject's social identity. In societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production, human relations inevitably become commodified. Marx uses the term "fetishism" to describe the phenomenon of commodities' assuming an autonomous life of their own--"[the commodity-form] is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes . . . the fantastic form of a relation between things" (165). Though human labor-products, commodities are able to influence human life in much the same way as religion does. Lukács further stresses that the fetishism of commodities is "the central, structural problem of capitalist society" which deeply penetrates human consciousness (*History and Class* 83). Human beings become part of the world of commodities they produce, completely at their mercy rather than being their masters.

Social identity like class in advanced capitalist society is performed as the exchange-value of commodified human subjects. Although identity describes the subject in verbal terms, its primary function is to mark his/her value in relation to other subjects. "A wage-seeker" does not merely identify Carrie with a certain class of people; but it tells her their value in society. As commodities are fetishized, human beings also become

commodified. *Sister Carrie* vividly illustrates the commodified human relation Marx and Lukács sketch out through Carrie's understanding of her relationship with others--they have jobs, she does not; they are rich, she is poor. In other words, having no job and no money, Carrie finds herself a less valuable and less significant person than those who do. The relation between the commodities owned becomes her relation with others--that is, her identity.

Although an individual's identity in this sense is judged purely by how much money one has to Carrie, it is also understood by her as one's innate quality. To her mind, unattainable commodities such as magnificent buildings and wealthy people demonstrate "evidence of power and force which she does not understand" (12). Attractive commodities within her purchasing ability, on the other hand, speak to her "tenderly and Jesuitically" (75). Commodities in *Sister Carrie* are fetishized and mystified to such an extent that they threaten, shame, and persuade as forcefully as do living beings.

While identity in *Sister Carrie* is unmistakably defined by commodities, it is also presented as role-playing. To live a social life for the characters in the novel is to act and watch others act. From daily routines such as dining and walking on the street to intimate love affairs, the novel details the theatricality of identity in almost all aspects of life, highlighting it by using the theater as its primary thematic element, its central metaphor, and the "prime mover" of the plot (Garfield 223). Drouet seduces Carrie by first taking her to theaters. Hurstwood makes up his mind to have Carrie "even if it [takes] his all" in a theater (140), where his downfall begins. Carrie, on the other hand, obtains her sense of confidence both on and off stage through her performance in *Under the Gaslight* and later achieves her stardom on Broadway.

Identity's theatricality is revealed in the characters' public and private life. Drouet, for example, always selected a table close by the window when he dines, for he loves "the changing panorama of the street--to see and to be seen as he dine[s]" (44). Similarly the afternoon walk on Broadway is a "showy parade" New Yorkers take "purposely to

see and to be seen" (227). Dresses become costumes on the big stage of social life. If daily activities are conducted as shows, personal experiences in private are lived as plotted dramas. Characters pretend and sham constantly, adopting different roles and often names according to different scripts of life. Hurstwood's triangular relationship with Carrie is very much a carefully scripted and performed melodrama. With "the elegance of a Faust" (136) and the eloquence of a Don Juan, Hurstwood plays different parts to deceive Drouet and wins Carrie's heart. Even at the most intimate moment of their love-making in a rented carriage, as Ellen Moers points out, both he and Carrie experience sensations through the medium of the theater:

Carrie appears to be acting a role. Hurstwood's "silence controls" the situation; she feels a "climax pending"; he speaks with "eloquence" and "pathos". . . . When Hurstwood's eloquence reaches its climax Dreiser does more than compare it to the swell of a covering orchestra; Hurstwood's voice actually becomes theater music. It "trembles" with a "peculiar vibration"; it goes "ringing home"; it "drops to a soft minor"; it "strikes a chord" to which Carrie must respond. (106-07)

The novel reinforces this theatricality of identity by using expressions such as "air", "show(y)", "act", "scene", "play", and "theater" in referring to life. City lights are also constantly compared to theater lights. It is, however, in the character of Hurstwood that identity is most vividly portrayed as social performance. A saloon manager, Hurstwood wields considerable social influence in Chicago. Though a "great American upper class" (34), his social status is not achieved by his wealth, since he has no financial control over the saloon and all his property is under his wife's name. It is rather by his "solid, substantial air" composed of "his fine clothes, his clean linen, his jewels, and above all, his own sense of his importance" (33). In other words, he "look[s] the part" of someone who owns "a mine of influence and solid financial property" (129) and is respected as such.

The pivotal importance to understand social identity as performative in *Sister Carrie* can be highlighted by showing why it is impossible to meaningfully distinguish money's reality from the theater's illusion in terms of the construction of social identity in the novel. Critical comments on Dreiser's juxtaposition of the two notions of identity have been predominantly concerned with the contrast between illusion and reality. The theater, especially melodrama, is traditionally considered to be illusory, while money and other commodities bear the cold reality of life. The difference between the melodramatic representation of life and the reality of it is surely enormous. Melodrama, as one critic puts it, is essentially "a simplification and idealization of human experience" and provides its audience with "an escape from real life and a dramatization of it as it ought to be; uncomplicated, easy to understand, sufficiently exciting to sweep away petty cares" (Booth 9). The world of money, on the other hand, is the world of work and worries to make both ends meet. It is the world in which human relations are understood in monetary terms--the life actually lived by the great majority of people absent in melodrama.

This contrast between melodrama as illusion and the real world of toil and money is best exemplified for many critics in Carrie's infatuation with the theater and her conception of the theater as without illusion. Carrie is not only depicted as devoted to the theater but repeatedly portrayed as obsessed with its "wondrous reality" (280). Before her performance in *Under the Gaslight*, Carrie is astonished by the splendid display of objects for makeup in the theater's dressing-room. Their richness seems so accessible that the "paraphernalia of disguise" becomes the most wonderful reality she had ever felt:

Since her arrival in the city many things had influenced her, but always in a far-removed manner. This new atmosphere was more friendly. . . . She had wondered at the greatness of the names upon the bill-boards, the marvel of the long notices in the papers, the beauty of the dress upon the stage, the atmosphere of carriages, flowers, refinement. *Here was no illusion.* (128-29; my emphasis).

Carrie's memories of her shame at needing a job and the "grimness of shift and toil" (8) as a shoe factory laborer were still vivid. They are now, however, unreal and false compared to the "paraphernalia of disguise." Similarly, when Carrie goes to see *A Gold Mine* in New York, she "[is] soon lost in the world it represented" (229). Watching the overdressed actors and actresses engage in the melodrama's sentimental love and jealousy in gilded settings, Carrie takes it to be the best life there can be. She "long[s] to be of it . . . or failing that, at least to simulate them under such charming conditions upon the stage" (228). One would indeed have no other word to describe such an understanding of life if not illusory.

Carrie's abnormal attitude to the theater illustrates the negative influence of the theater's illusion. Hugh Witemeyer argues that the theater helps Dreiser "characterize the mental processes" of American dreamers and illuminate "the ironic discrepancy between such dreams and unaccommodating realities" (236). Deborah Garfield likewise contends that the futility of Carrie's pilgrimage in social life "rests in her inability to distinguish between symbol and reality, between the 'representation' of the theater and true fulfillment" (235). For both of them, the theater belongs to the category of "representation," "symbol," and "dream."

Witemeyer's and Garfield's views are two expressions of a long tradition of mistrust of the mimetic form as deviation from Truth or acting as representing what one is not. Sandy Petrey, on the other hand, emphasizes the incompatibility between the sentimental illusions and the reality of life as embodied in the two irreconcilable narrative styles of *Sister Carrie*--the language of realism and the language of false consciousness. Sentimental language and moral passages are juxtaposed with the plain language and unpretentious descriptions of the real world of money and class-struggle. This juxtaposition shows moral declamations and melodramatic emotion in the novel to be false consciousness. Their sentimental language--alluding to melodrama, the novels of

Hurstwood's final words, "What's the use," reveal correctly the alienation in capitalist society, while the narrator's sentimental soliloquy is embarrassingly out of context.

However, the simple contrast between illusion and reality as embodied in the dichotomy between the melodramatic world of sentimentality and the real world of money that Petrey and Althusser foreground is exactly what is absent from Dreiser's novel. Unlike *El Nost Milan*, in which the dichotomy is absolute, *Sister Carrie* presents a world in which acting and living are inseparable. Appearance and reality merge in the novel; the world of money and commodities is sentimentalized while the world of the theater is commodified. The narrator's sentimental language such as "Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart!" (369) may be rendered verbiage and false consciousness in comparison to his concise descriptions. However, Carrie's sentimental longing for money--"Ah, money, money, money! What a thing it was to have." (51)--is nevertheless a correct understanding of the absolute desirability of money. As Amy Kaplan correctly points out, Carrie translates her desire for change and revolt into "the sentimental language of acquisition" (148). Her sentimentality, however, does not prevent her from seeing clearly her social situation.

Sentimentality is part of the characters' lives in *Sister Carrie*. The issue of reality and false consciousness is an important one, but their difference is not a simple distinction between the theater and the monetary world or between sentimentality and straight realism in thought or language. By ending with Carrie's blind longing in her rocking chair in her comfortable hotel apartment instead of Hurstwood's bleak death, the novel dissociates itself from the standard plot of the nineteenth-century Realistic novel, in which the young protagonist from the provinces is defeated by the reality of society. The intertextual link to Balzac's *Father Goriot*, which Ames recommends to Carrie, provides a good comparison. Unlike Rastignac, whose idealistic notions of life are shaken by what he experiences in Paris, Carrie rises to stardom and becomes a celebrity in New York. Her illusions are in a sense confirmed.

the "Sentimental Love Tradition," and the maudlin songs his brother Paul Dresser was known for--is labeled false by "the contiguous standard of language which responsibly and intelligently expresses the nature of existence in concrete historical moment" (111).

Petrey's interpretation is informed by one Marxist approach to the issue of reality and false consciousness represented by Louis Althusser in his "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht: Notes on a Materialist Theatre." In his redemptive reading of the Milan "Piccolo Teatro" production of Bertolazzi's *El Nost Milan*, Althusser argues that the play is not a "mélodrame misérable" as some Parisian critics accused it of being. Although it does contain melodramatic elements, the play simply criticizes them by confronting them with the real conditions of world. Althusser reads the play as juxtaposing two unrelated worlds to contrast "the real world without illusions with the wretched illusions of the 'heart'," that is, the real world of money (*Capital*) and the melodramatic world (134). Its asymmetrical and decentered structure may serve as a good model for any theatrical effort of a materialist character since its "internal balances and imbalances of forces" are "the basis for a true critique of the illusions of consciousness" (142-43).

Althusser's analysis of Bertolazzi's play provides a good paradigm for Petrey who points out the stark contrast between the false consciousness in the narrator's philosophizing verbiage, poetic lamentation, and the sentimental love on stage on one side, as well as the correct understanding of the materialistic nature of society, the power of money and the reality of work, poverty, and misery for the lower class on the other. Melodramas such as *Under the Gaslight* and *A Gold Mine* indeed say nothing about the grim life of the working class like Minnie and Hanson, the unbearable working conditions in the shoe factory where Carrie works, the oppression of the street car workers strike, or the sufferings the homeless Hurstwood experiences. Minnie, for instance, is correct about the stupidity of Carrie, when Carrie uses up her meager wages to buy a pretty umbrella, for she now would have no means to provide for her rent and food. Similarly,

II

Merging theatricality and reality, *Sister Carrie* gives a commanding illustration of identity's performativity by associating it with both the commodity and acting. A quick review of some characteristics of modern consumer society will reveal how commodities also enact their value in order to sell. In her book, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, Rachel Bowlby describes how the image and display of commodities assume great importance as modern commerce shifts to consumer capitalism. The birth of the department store and grand scale exhibition in Europe in the mid nineteenth century, together with the institutionalization of advertising, brings forth the new era of so-called *nouveau commerce*. Under the principle of open entry, commodities are further fetishized as they are put on show in large display windows and under a theatrical form of lighting. New desires to buy more of the attractive commodities are invented as more goods in more types are produced and offered for sale. The new type of commerce, Bowlby observes, transforms "selling into industry" on the one hand, while making "industry into a shop window" on the other (6). Shopping becomes a new bourgeois leisure activity in which people, with no predetermined objects in mind, let themselves be lured into buying by the attractive appearance of commodities.

As the image of a commodity becomes its sole value, the image of a human subject, predominantly created by commodities worn or owned, becomes the quality or individuality of his or her self. Like commodities on display and with commodities on them, individuals perform their social identity. Following Jean Baudrillard's definition of "citizen of consumer society,"³ Bowlby contends that the citizen's identity

depends on the acquisition of appropriate objects: appropriate for the time (the season of fashion) and for the image which s/he is to project via the nuances of codes in dress and possessions--all the appurtenances of a 'lifestyle' that can be recognized by other members of the society. (28)

Individuals' identity is bestowed as images and lifestyles by the appropriate appearance of the commodities owned. Identity is closely linked to both the commodity and acting since it has to be put on, "enacted as an external appendage, owned as a property nominally apart from the bodily self" (Bowlby 28). For Bowlby, "the shopping window smashes the traditional illusion that there is a meaningful distinction in modern society between illusion and reality, fact and fantasy, fake and genuine images of self" (34). Carrie's understanding of her identity as a shameful wage-seeker is in this sense the same as Hurstwood's view of his social standing as an (im)posing manager. The former is no more genuine a notion of self than the latter. One hinges on money, the other on acting, but both are real. Both rely on the subject's image constructed by commodities, gestures, and other appearances. Social identity and commodity alike are visual signs at play in the semiotics of modern life. What matters is their signification instead of any essential truth they represent.

There is indeed no meaningful distinction between fake and genuine images of self, as Bowlby correctly points out. But the notion of identity as performative emphasizes that there is an enormous difference between effective and ineffective identities. It is one thing to maintain that life itself is dominated by images and signs; it is another to assert that in all circumstances these signs will be equally effective and real. Hurstwood is an imposing manager in Chicago. When he comes to New York, the first thing the narrator points out about him is that he has become "nothing," despite the same appearance and confidence in his same identity (214).

Although Dreiser stresses the absence of the line between the theater and life in the society where appearance and reality merge, he nevertheless makes it unmistakable that

society alone determines which appearances are real and effective. Dreiser's association of performance and the commodity in the construction of identity therefore is generated less by an observation on the power of images than an insight into the social force that wields this power. The commodity and acting in *Sister Carrie* therefore do not represent two incompatible worlds in terms of social identity. In fact they share the same social process in their constitution of an individual's identity.

Commodities are material things; however, it is their abstract value produced by human beings' social relation rather than their material qualities that makes them the commodities they are. The importance of this social aspect of commodities is repeatedly emphasized in Marx's analysis of the commodity's exchange-value in *Capital*. He writes: "let us remember that commodities possess an objective character as values only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical social substance, human labour, that their objective character as values is therefore purely social" (138-39). Marx further finds language a good metaphor and analogy to describe the fetishized commodity:

Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a *social hieroglyphic*. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language. (167; my emphasis)

By describing the commodity as a "*social hieroglyphic*," Marx points to its existence as language. It is a sign and functions semiotically, just like language or any other social sign system. The value a commodity signifies as a sign is produced through social processes and is therefore a social product as language is.

The social processes that give commodities value are the same processes that bestow on Hurstwood's name and acting the social power they carry in Chicago. Hurstwood's social identity is unquestionably an influential one as demonstrated by his capacity to literally transform a company lodge's fund-raising into a formal social

gathering for the local upper classes. Through Drouet's encouragement, Carrie has her theatrical debut in the Elks' amateur production of Daly's *Under the Gaslight*. It would definitely have been an obscure event for the company to get some furniture for its lodge, had Hurstwood not determined to turn it into "a dress-suit affair" for his new love. On the night of the production, the novel skillfully juxtaposes Carrie's stage performance and Hurstwood's performance among his peers in the reception hall of the theater. Hailing a guest here and patting a friend there, Hurstwood's social performance--his "shrewdness," "assumption of dignity," and "intuitive tact in handling people"--is as spectacular as Carrie's theatrical performance on stage (29). His identity in the local society is reconfirmed to be above them in the social process.

Although the novel shows plainly that Hurstwood's identity, his "standing among the Elks," generates the social reality of the night, it nevertheless underlines theatricality by calling the social arena in which he shined like a "light" his "little theater" (131). The stress on performativity in Hurstwood's social identity does not call the reader's attention to its superficiality, falsity, or illusion. On the contrary, it highlights the social processes that make acted identity perform concrete effects in the society. The fact that Hurstwood has no control over the money in either the store or his house is commonly taken to indicate the powerlessness concealed behind his social performance. This episode nevertheless clearly illustrates that Hurstwood's performance as an imposing manager among the Elks is social power, as effective and substantial as having "a mine of influence and solid financial prosperity" (129).

Phrases such as "a solid, substantial air" used to describe Hurstwood therefore paradoxically underline the crucial role society plays in determining identity's efficacy. A person's acting or name can be as solid and concrete as money or other commodity form because the latter is a social sign just like the former. The title, "The Use of A Name," given to the chapter in which Hurstwood is introduced, does not diminish the

substantiality of his social identity. It reinforces the concrete power of the name he carries (32).

To drive the point home, Carrie's stage performance as Laura in Daly's *Under the Gaslight* is skillfully juxtaposed with Hurstwood's little social theater in the reception hall. The melodramatic world Laura is in has almost nothing in common with the one in which Carrie finds herself, except in the scenes in which the former is a temporary social outcast as Carrie has recently been during her job-hunting. As the chapter title "An Hour in Elfland" correctly describes, Carrie's stage identity as the noble Laura is as illusory and ephemeral as a short dream or fairy tale. The reader knows, as do Drouet and Hurstwood, that Carrie, though attractive, by no means comes close to the ideal heroine in this extremely sentimental play.

If Hurstwood's identity should be understood as false and insubstantial because it is acted out through his manner and assumption of importance, Carrie's impersonation as Laura is all the more so since it is performed on stage in a theater. However, the space that separates the stage from "real" life disappears when the audience takes Carrie's performed identity to be her essential value. Her performance attracts the audience's attention soon after her nervous and paralyzed first appearance. She portrays the bitterness in Laura's situation when expelled by society so well that her two lovers begin to see her in a new light. The sentimentality of the play and the sumptuous settings further increase her value in her lovers' eyes:

Both Hurstwood and Drouet viewed her pretty figure with rising feelings. The fact that such ability should reveal itself in her, that they should see it set forth under such *effective* circumstances, framed almost in massy gold and shone upon by the appropriate lights of sentiment and personality, heightened her charm for them. She was more than the old Carrie to Drouet. (137; my emphasis).

When Carrie finishes Laura's final soliloquy about sentimental love and sacrifice, she is literally transformed from "a simple maid" to Laura, "The Belle of Society" (128). Her theatrical performance is not just a performance, precisely as Hurstwood's name is not just a name or the settings just "paraphernalia of disguise;" they become value and produce concrete effect when accepted as valuable. After Carrie's performance, Drouet resolves that he will marry her by thinking, "by George! She was worth it" (139). Similarly, Hurstwood determines to get her regardless of the price he will have to pay. Although her identity as the belle is only a performed one with the help of make-up, fictional plot, and the lavish settings of massy gold, as long as it is effective, it is real in the sense that her social relation with Drouet has changed--"She was realizing now what it was to be petted. For once she was the admired, the sought-for. The independence of success now made its first faint showing. With the table turned, she was looking down, rather than up, to her lover" (141). Her performance on stage has made her the belle above her lover off stage.

III

In relation to social identity, acting and the commodity are in no way opposed to each other as illusion and "reality." Objective reality is irrelevant to the function of identity in the commodified society Dreiser represents. As Hurstwood's social performance and Carrie's stage performance illustrate, the pivotal question regarding a social subject's identity is not whether it is real or performed, since in the final analysis all identities are performance of social signs. Carrie's identity shames her because, other than reporting her state, it situates her qualitatively in the relation between rich and poor and dictates how she is to be received. Similarly Hurstwood's identity is imposing because it demands appropriate respect from others in his society.

There is no abstract difference among identities individuals perform on or off stage, through wealth or acting. Society, as well as its class division, consumerism, and materialism, provide certain identities with power. Carrie's success and Hurstwood's downfall result from her intuitive knowledge of identity's performativity and his ignorance of it. They are both true citizens of commodified society, equally immersed in false consciousness and fetishized value. While Carrie gradually learns to play the game of identity-performance and gains power, Hurstwood, on the other hand, loses power and falls from his social status because he fails to perform the roles his identity prescribes. By juxtaposing Carrie and Hurstwood's different performance as well as its different effects, *Sister Carrie* provides two important insights into social identity's performativity. First, it shows that performance of identity is actually part of an individual's social life. Since identity is already discursively performed in society as ideological interpellation, each individual will always be performing one identity or another. Secondly, how well an identity is performed by an individual may significantly affect his or her social and material life.

Although performance of identity--such as proper dresses, gestures, speeches, etc.--may merely be a matter of social decorum or a show for vanity, both Carrie and Hurstwood depend on their excellent performance on and off stage to support their material needs. The novel's structural comparison of Carrie's successful social climbing and Hurstwood's degeneration therefore gives a clear picture of the different aspects of how identity can be performed in such a way as to elevate or degrade one's social standing and material condition. As Carrie and Hurstwood's different social careers demonstrate, successful performance of social identity involves not only proper acting but correct understanding of the power relations that constitute different identities and one's position among them. All requires attentive watching and imitating others' performances on and off stage and reading about the "social stage" one performs in.

Probably due to her recurrent image in the rocking chair, Carrie has been commonly associated with an unrealistic girl of sentimental longings. However, unsatisfied with her low identity and pushed by her economic need, Carrie undertakes active pursuit of her desires. Her two major desires--to own and to imitate--may reveal her vanity and "passivity of soul which is always the mirror of the active world" (117); they do not make her a dreamer or an idler isolated from the world outside. Her desire to own more commodities and her constant imitation of pretty women on the street and well-dressed actresses on stage imply an intuitive understanding that her identity is defined by nothing other than what she puts on and what she acts out.

Although Carrie's desires are sentimental, they are by no means unrealistic. She always keeps in mind her social position even in her most sentimental longings. This realistic part of Carrie is emphasized through her awareness of the "power" of both the commodity and performance in the society she lives in. She learns quickly that the sexual value expressed through her appearance attracts Drouet's attention and produces material support for her living. The first time she puts on the pretty outfit Drouet buys her, she finds herself attractive: "she [catches] her little red lip with her teeth and [feels] her first thrill of power" (58). When Drouet's seemingly moralistic reprimand of Carrie's dressing herself before the mirror, "I believe you're getting vain," is followed by his admiration, "Well, you're mighty pretty . . . I'll take you to the show" (81), it is hard for Carrie not to see that to be vain is to increase her sexual value and to be socially rewarded. Similarly the motivation behind Carrie's imitating those women whom Drouet admires is to satisfy his taste, taken as a public standard, so as to secure her relation with him, not so much emotional as material.

Carrie's craze for the theater, to a great extent, is motivated by her dissatisfaction with her social situation. Although melodramas depict a life far removed from her own, they are real to her because their image of wealth is in no way different from that of society. The sentimental plays Carrie watches, instead of taking her away from the real

world, always remind her of her material situation. To be more specific, Carrie is moved by the sentimental illusion of improbable or impossible love on stage not so much because of love but because of its ideal material conditions:

Such bon-mots are ever enticing to those who have all their days longed for such *material surrounding* and have never had them gratified. They have the charm of showing suffering under ideal conditions. Who would not suffer amid perfumed tapestries, cushioned furniture, and liveried servants? Grief under such circumstances becomes an enticing thing. (228; my emphasis)

For instance, after watching *A Gold Mine* in New York, Carrie finds scenes of richness and finery surround her on Broadway, like those she has just watched in the play. Elegant women buying flowers, candy, and jewelry with so careless a manner show her what life should really be like. Her own poor life becomes unreal contrasted to their ease, luxury, and endless pleasure. What she sees in theater and in Broadway is a deeply felt lesson that she "ha[s] not lived, could not lay claim to having lived, until something of this ha[s] come into her own life" (229).

Carrie's successful performance in *Under the Gaslight* also begins with a sentimental but socially conspicuous moment which vividly captures her recent experience in Chicago as an outcast. When Laura's supposedly low birth was discovered and she was expelled from the high bourgeois society represented by Mrs. Van Dam, her fiancée Ray comments, "Have you ever heard of the Siberian Wolves? When one of the pack falls through weakness, the others devour him. It is not an elegant comparison, but there is something wolfish in society" (134). The bitterness of the situation and the feelings of the outcast are keenly experienced by Carrie. Hardly hearing anything more, "save her own rumbling blood," Carrie is not so much consciously acting as unconsciously reexperiencing the days of her job-hunting in Chicago through the melodramatic play she performs in.

Carrie's attitude toward the theater as "no illusion" is a correct perception of the performativity of identity in a society fixated on appearance. Carrie is not so vain and deluded as she seems in her attitude toward the theater "which has been synonymous with illusion since the beginning of Western culture" (Petrey 107). She has very good reason to see the theater as reality since her performance of Laura leads her to be petted as The Belle of Society. The fact that she quickly adopts the condescending role her new identity allows her toward Drouet shows her understanding of identity as constantly created through social interaction. For Carrie, to act on stage is to "compel acknowledgment of power" (117). As stage performances convey power when acknowledged by the audience, performed identities become real when accepted by social groups.

In this sense, Carrie's perception of identity is similar to her "popular understanding" of money as "something everybody else has and I must get" (48). The true significance of money, as the narrator comments, should be seen as the value of "honestly stored energy" (48) or what Marx calls "the equivalent form."⁴ To Carrie's reified mind, however, money is so fetishized that it becomes "power in itself" (48). Even its physicality, irrelevant to its being value according to Marx, appears to Carrie as part of this power. The two ten-dollar bills Drouet gives her have the magic power of making her feel "immensely better off for the having of them" (48). As the narrator indicates, even if Carrie were to be cast away on a desert island with a bundle of money, she would have no conception of its relative value. She would rather be concerned about "the pity of having so much power and the inability to use it" (47). Not unlike her failing to see that the theater is made up of "paraphernalia of disguise," Carrie is in the narrator's opinion deluded not to see that money will become a stack of useless paper outside the social context which bestows it with value. Nevertheless, having no means or inclination to imagine herself outside the social world, Carrie is not deceived at all to regard money as power in itself.

Contrary to the common view that calls Carrie a dreamer, it is Hurstwood who is immersed in illusions in *Sister Carrie*. He first falls into a sentimental infatuation with Carrie and neglects the performances essential for his social status in Chicago. Later in New York, he indulges himself in unproductive newspaper-reading and memories of the past so pathetically that he gradually excludes himself from society. Although Hurstwood's miserable life in his unemployed and homeless period reveals capitalism's general indifference to individual sufferings, it is also obvious that ever since his affair with Carrie he has lost his own ability to perform successfully in society.

The comparison and contrast between Carrie and Hurstwood is sustained throughout *Sister Carrie*. While Carrie always sees her current social situation in theatrical terms, Hurstwood is so enchanted by his affair with Carrie that he gradually loses his sense of the social world he lives in. Hurstwood is aware that, having no fortune in his hand, his social standing depends on his society's recognition. He also knows that scandals would immediately destroy his name and social prestige--"A man, to hold his position, must have a dignified manner, a clean record, a respectable home anchorage. Therefore he was circumspect in all he did. . . . He knew the need of it" (66). This need of circumspection, however, is soon neglected as Hurstwood is drawn more and more to Carrie and becomes convinced that the sentimental love portrayed in melodrama can be found in her. He becomes indifferent to his family life, the instability of which will affect his employment immediately; "the complete ignoring by Hurstwood of his own home [comes] with the growth of his affection for Carrie" (103).

In the novel's detailed description of the production of *Under the Gaslight*, Hurstwood, like Carrie, sees the theater as without illusion. While Carrie is repeating a sentimental cliché on stage--"It is a sad thing to want for happiness, but it is a terrible thing to see another groping about blindly for it, when it is almost within the grasp"--he takes it as Carrie's personal address to him:

He could almost feel that she was talking to him. He was by a combination of feelings and entanglements, almost deluded by that quality of voice and manner which, like a pathetic strain of music, seems ever a personal and intimate thing. Pathos has this quality, that it seems ever addressed to one alone. (137)

The difference between Carrie and Hurstwood is that she sees the materialistic aspect of melodrama and reflects upon her social situation, whereas he indulges in its pathos and is carried away from his immediate social environment.

Before the end of the melodrama, Carrie recites a most sentimental passage, "Let the woman you look upon be wise or vain, beautiful or homely, rich or poor, she has but one thing she can really give or refuse--her heart," and the punch line: "Her beauty, her wit, her accomplishments, she may sell to you; but her love is the treasure without money and without price" (139). In the commodified society in which the words "I have a million in my own right" are equivalent to "I love you" (333) and a love relationship like that of Carrie, Drouet, and Hurstwood is no more than deceits, intrigues, and egocentric behaviors, nothing can be more illusory and false than Laura's sentimental plea. Hurstwood nevertheless "suffer[s] this as a personal appeal" (139). His delusion is absolute. While *A Gold Mine* helps clinch Carrie's "convictions concerning her state" (229), the sentimentality of *Under the Gaslight* takes Hurstwood's mind completely out of his social life:

He forgot the need of circumspectness which his married state enforced. He almost forgot that he had with him in the box those who knew him. By the Lord he would have that lovely girl if it took his all. . . . He cursed the luck that could keep him smiling, bowing, shamming, when he wanted to tell her that he loved her, when he wanted to whisper to her alone. He groaned as he saw that his hope was futile. He must even take her to supper, shamming. (140)

In other words, Hurstwood forgets that shamming, which he detests so much now, is how he makes a living as an imposing manager.

Hurstwood's neglect of the exacting society is also his neglect of identity's performativity. He has been the master in his house until he has a fight with his wife after she discovers his affair with Carrie. Given that all his property is under his wife's name, Hurstwood's mastery in the family is in fact granted to him by his wife. He is ignorant of the fact that his mastery is effective only when his wife willingly accepts the traditional power relation defined by gender in patriarchal society. In his anger, Hurstwood says to her, "As long as I am in the house I am the master of it . . ." (159), as though identity were something timeless and innate. When his wife displays her power by reminding him of her legal position, he becomes like a "vessel, powerful and dangerous, but rolling and floundering without sail" (160). The image of a sailing boat here captures the crucial role of the social force that provides identity with its effective power. Without the support of law and his wife's recognition, Hurstwood's pompous words cannot perform any better than a vessel without sails or wind. It is his wife's final statement, "I'll find out what my rights are," instead of his, that "ha[s] its effect" (160).

The difference between Carrie's constant concern for her social situation and Hurstwood's neglect of it leads to their very different attitudes facing crisis in their lives. The novel skillfully juxtaposes Hurstwood's break with his wife and Carrie's with Drouet. They now face the same future, losing their shelter and financial source of living. Without Drouet's support, Carrie feels at once "the threat of the world outside, in which she had failed once before" (166). She understands perfectly that "action--immediate action --[is] imperative" and she must look for work (180). Her desire for the ideal love and gilded settings in melodrama does not make her forget that, in her own words, "I need to make a living" (183).

Hurstwood, on the other hand, is blind to this simple but crucial fact in his sentimental obsession with Carrie. Although he thinks about his situation after his quarrel with his wife, his mind is soon occupied by Carrie: "Through all this thoughts of Carrie flashed upon him, and the approaching affair of Saturday. Tangled as all his

matters are, he [does] not worry over that" (170). He does not take care of the problem between him and his wife. Naively he imagines that as long as he can secure Carrie's love for him, his problem will disappear just as happy endings always come at the end of melodramatic love stories. After receiving the letter from Carrie he has been waiting for, Hurstwood forgets the letter from McGregor, James and Hey, his wife's attorneys, and think if "he could only have Carrie, perhaps he could get out of the whole entanglement--perhaps it would not matter" (187).

The celebrated Naturalistic force that closes the safe in Hurstwood's office while he has the money in his hand therefore merely forces him to take a radical solution to the social problem he is already facing. It impells him to leave the society from which his sentimental illusions and inaction have already excluded him. Leaving Chicago with limited money, Hurstwood leaves both a comfortable life and the social status he once enjoyed. In New York he turns from an imposing manager to "nothing." Not realizing that identity changes as one's social relations are altered, Hurstwood's downfall is inevitable.

Hurstwood's mentality is highlighted throughout the latter part of the novel by the narrator's insistence on using his former title "the manager" or "the ex-manager" (302). When looking for a job after the closing of the saloon he investes in, Hurstwood is taken to be better off than he is because of his fine appearance. It gives him pain, however, not because it hindered his search for a job, but because he is "ashamed to belie his appearance by incongruous appeals" (251). The same appearance had brought him admiration and respect in Chicago, yet it can not find him a job in New York.

It is not merely his vanity that makes Hurstwood choose the ineffective identity his appearance shows, instead of appropriate appeals that might help get him work and income. Another factor is his blindness to identity's performativity. Hurstwood firmly believes that he is still the same manager and that his new work should not compromise his high social status. Although he knows that he might easily be employed as a

bartender, he refuses even to consider it as a possibility. His disgust for such a low position is vividly captured in the narrator's free indirect discourse of his thought--"Bartender--he the ex-manager!" (252). Hurstwood's sentimentalism expels him from the social world in Chicago; his ignorance of his identity's inefficacy costs him the opportunity of securing a job in New York.

Hurstwood's downfall is doomed, for he does not only refuse to perform his new social identity as a job-seeker but he gradually stops performing any respectable social role at all. As the manager of the saloon in New York, he already reveals his impetus to perform as he did in Chicago--"Slowly, exceedingly slowly, his desire to greet, conciliate, and make at home [the] people who visited the Warren Street place passed from him" (241). Soon he begins to avoid social contacts and dream about his past performances instead. The scene in the hotel lobby where he used to stay for the afternoon during his search for a job presents a sharp contrast with the scene in the theater lobby in Chicago: "Well-dressed guests moving to and fro over the thick carpets carried him back to the old days. A young lady, a guest of the house, playing a piano in an alcove pleased him. He sat there reading" (268).

Hurstwood's newspaper-reading, however, is not an active engagement with the social world in order to perform a better identity. He reads for "the relief from walking and thinking" about the world outside his comfortable apartment (252). In other words, he reads the paper as drinking "Lethian waters" (252). The difficulties in life vanish in the items he avidly reads. Gradually Hurstwood does not even pay attention to the immediate social world in his own apartment--and soon loses Carrie, who provides for his material needs (256). In no time, Hurstwood becomes one of the class that owns least and requires least performance--the homeless beggar. Unable to perform effectively, he has to rely on others' charity to survive. Later when Hurstwood gives up reading and begins to "close his eyes and dream of the other days" (336), he also gives up his life.

If Hurstwood perishes as a result of his inability to perform in society, Carrie achieves stardom and becomes a celebrity through her performances on the stage. Her intuition that the theater is wondrous reality is reaffirmed by her success in her theatrical debut. When Hurstwood fails to support her, Carrie is determined to seek a position on the stage. Her strong desire to become famous and rich in life is a sharp contrast with Hurstwood's pathetic and passive reading and daydreaming of the past. The novel depicts vividly this desire on her first day of work in the theater:

She saw a large, empty, shadowy play-house. . . . The wonder of it awed and delighted her. Blessed be its wondrous reality. How hard she would try to be worthy of it. It was above the common mass, above idleness, above want, above insignificance. People came to it in finery and carriages to see. It was ever a center of light and mirth. And here she was of it. Oh, if she could only remain, how happy would be her days. (280)

Carrie first finds herself to be "nothing" in the theater as Hurstwood is in New York (283). But unlike him, she is always actively observing in order to perform better. She "note[s] how poorly some of the women of alleged ability [do]" (283). She carefully observes the way her competitors perform and the audience's expectation.

The novel once again juxtaposes Hurstwood's bad performance in the strike and Carrie's first big step toward success in a comic opera. Since the company accepts anyone who applies for a job, Hurstwood gets the job as a motorman without any effort. This job, however, does not give Hurstwood a sense of identity: when asked about his identity by the hiring clerk, Hurstwood answers that he is not a motorman, he is "not anything" (300). Hurstwood does rehearse and try to perform "as" a professional motorman. However, only knowing that the companies would take in any man, Hurstwood is aware of neither the "change of temper" (306) in the strike nor the effect his position as a strikebreaker will have on him. Hurstwood, in other words, does not know the rules of the stage in which he performs as a strikebreaker. That he is injured,

therefore, is not surprising, since he even chooses to ignore the reported violence he has read by saying, "you can't go by what the paper say" (299).

While Hurstwood's Brooklyn venture was "an error of judgment" of the social situation (313), Carrie gets a promotion by courageously interpolating a line which successfully produces the comic effect she anticipates. Carrie's success is not accidental at all. It is rather her "experience and belief in herself" which make her daring (314). Besides, unlike Hurstwood, who reads newspapers for escaping the social world, Carrie reads newspaper to better understand the theatrical society, to imitate and excel--"She longed to be renowned like others, and read with avidity all the complimentary or critical comments made concerning others high in her profession. The showy world in which her interest lay completely absorbed her" (322).

Carrie's experience in the showy world serves two functions in the novel in relation to social identity's performativity. On the one hand, it is a story about how she achieves a relatively high social identity through performance. Since social identity is performed, Carrie's stage career is also her social career, her success as an actress in theater is also the elevation of her identity in society to being a celebrity. On the other hand, the novel contrasts her effective performances with Hurstwood's ineffective ones. Where Carrie does best in terms of her reading and performance in the showy world is exactly where Hurstwood fails in his social world. Carrie successfully performs her way into stardom and wealth, whereas Hurstwood reads and dreams his into insignificance and death.

IV

Carrie's successful performance inevitably confirms the capitalist ideology of identity which commodifies human subjects. But it will be neglecting the potential discursive power of Dreiser's own performance of identity in *Sister Carrie*, if one follows Walter

Benn Michaels' view to argue that the novel is an "unabashed and extraordinarily literal acceptance of the economy" of capitalism (35). Although *Sister Carrie*, as Michaels correctly contends, is not so much concerned with the scathing pictures of the conditions of capitalism, it by no means accepts its economy of excess wholeheartedly. The image of the successful Carrie, with one hundred and fifty dollars in hand but not able to think of anything particular to do, is a strong criticism of that economy embodied by Carrie's "popular understanding" of money:

It does not take money long to make plain its impotence, providing the desires are in the realm of affection. . . . In itself, as a tangible, apparent thing which she could touch and look upon, it was a diverting thing for a few days, but this soon passed. Her hotel bill did not require its use. Her clothes had for some time been wholly satisfactory. Another day or two and she would receive another hundred and fifty. (335)

The narrator's next observation that for Carrie to do better or move higher materialistically she must have a great deal more may seem to imply Carrie's desire. But when the novel ends with her sitting in her rocking chair lonely and dreaming, Carrie is no longer longing for more money, but for the "change" into serious play, suggested by Ames (357). What she originally desires has now "grown trivial and indifferent" (368). It is clear that the lack of meaningful affection in capitalist society has made the hotel she stays in no different from the island, described earlier. Money is impotent in both. Money would be worthless for Carrie alone in the island because, deprived of any social relation, she would not be able to use it. As Carrie no longer has any material need in the hotel, she finds her money impotent because it cannot satisfy her emotional needs.

The conditions of capitalism do not have to be represented in scathing pictures, as 19th-century Realist novels tend to do. Through his representation of Carrie and Hurstwood's different understandings of identity and their interactions with the social world, Dreiser performs two criticisms of them. First the conditions of capitalism are

criticized for the way they construct social identity as the value of commodified human subjects. It is these conditions that make human relations and identity commodified. Secondly, they are criticized for creating Carrie's need: they delude her into desiring and possessing more and more by promising her "life's perfect enjoyment" (335). On the margin of the novel one also finds that these conditions are depicted as to systematically produce the deserted class of the unemployed and homeless Hurstwood eventually joins. In both Carrie's success and Hurstwood's decline, the presence of social force dominating the individual's life is unmistakable--successful or failed, they are both loners in capitalist society.

The ending of the Doubleday, Page edition, featuring Carrie's loneliness, unhappiness, and discontent, proves a better version than the new Pennsylvania edition, from the perspective of its criticism of capitalism. By ending with Hurstwood's suicide, the novel may become more tragic than it was before, but not necessarily "infinitely richer, more complex" or "a serious work of art" (as though it was not), as the editors of the new edition claim (579). Sentimental language can express social conditions as conspicuously as traditional realistic prose. The original ending in the Doubleday, Page edition highlights a different picture of capitalism's poison and undesirability. It proves the dreams of happiness in an economy of excess to be illusory and false. What can be more compelling, in this regard, than to have its favorite citizen Carrie, after a successful pursuit of her dreams, end as lonely and alienated as Hurstwood in his dark boarding room?

Notes

Phillip Fisher forcefully argues that the rocking chair, like the Ferris wheel of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, "displays none of the linear motion of progress and exploration but rather rising and falling" which captures the dominant motion in *Sister Carrie* (260).

Unless otherwise indicated, the edition of *Sister Carrie* used is the Norton critical edition, which is based on the 1900 Doubleday, Page edition. Most of the arguments made in this chapter will remain true for the new Pennsylvania edition, except probably that about the intertextuality in relation to Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight*. I prefer the old edition because of its popularity and terseness.

According to Baudrillard, "*Chacun se doit d'être 'au courant', et de se recycler annuellement, mensuellement, saisonnièrement dans ses vêtements, ses objets, sa voiture. S'il ne le fait, il n'est pas un vrai citoyen de la société de consommation*" (149).

In his discussion of the simplest value-relation--"x commodity A is worth y commodity B"--Marx refers to the two poles of the expression of value as "the relative form" for the former and "the equivalent form" for the latter. According to him social custom makes the specific natural form of gold into the universal equivalent form, which gradually becomes the money-form (138-63).

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