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*Women's Work: The Bildungsroman of
Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie*

“A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing,” Marx cautioned his readership, a caveat to approaching the concept of commodity fetishism.¹ The “secret,” “mystical character” of the commodity stems from its dissimulation of the social characteristics of labour as “objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves.”² Theodore Dreiser, “the American writer whose commodity lust and authorial investments and attitudinizing are most reminiscent of Balzac,” as Fredric Jameson once postulated,³ was the first author to commit American realism and the Bildungsroman to exposing, characterising, and dramatising the “secret” processes of commodification. In his attempt to project the sensorium of the market through *Sister Carrie*'s central character and Bildungshelde, Carrie Meeber, Dreiser modified the ideological function of the Bildungsroman genre, which Hegel had cynically summarised:

For the end of such apprenticeship consists in this, that the subject sows his wild oats, builds himself with his wishes and opinions into harmony with subsisting relationships and their rationality, enters the concatenation of the world and acquires for himself an appropriate attitude to it.⁴

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser's style marries the sensual aesthetics of romance to the verisimilitude of realism, and this union propels the Bildungsroman to a textual surface where we begin to feel the seductive, vertiginous, and unrestrained effects of commodity culture upon textual production in form as well as content.

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Middlesex and New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 163.

² Marx, *Capital*, 164-5.

³ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 145.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume One*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 593.

Under Dreiser's charge, the utopian drive of the Bildungsroman genre adapts its aesthetics to the seductive and destructive market forces of mass culture, a world where true individuation no longer seems possible except in the fictional language of consumerism: "I buy, therefore, I am." Naturalist authors of the Chicagoan School, including Dreiser, had sought new ways to substantiate the "density of urban life and factory work" that had shattered the Bildungsroman's bourgeois dreamscape of individual "*little worlds*" by forcing "people into increased contact with one another."⁵ The work-leisure dialectic of urban life nevertheless encourages greater psychic division between workers, and eclipses the possibility for true individuation.

This paradox of proximity and division comes to the fore in Dreiser's theatres of realism, overturning the Enlightenment philosophy of *Bildung*, where the socialisation of the self through work and marriage, essentially the limiting of true individual freedom, was part and parcel of "happily" belonging to bourgeois society. Yet, the acquisition of the commodity, rather than one's vocation, grows to define the individual's character and status as the economy shifts into high capitalization. As Siegfried Kracauer would later observe in his survey of the salaried masses of Dresden, the results of which compare to Dreiser's Chicago, educated school-leavers of petit-bourgeois origins were most likely to aspire to commercial employment, to a "non-manual job, preferably in sales, work that's light and clean"; that is, to a service position that was not considered physically demanding or psychically draining.⁶ However, their "rosy dreams do not all come to fruition," for it is "not enough to feel the call, you must also be chosen—chosen by the authorities driving forward the economic process that drives them" in an evolving division of labour characterised by increasing automation and economic selection.⁷ "Jobs are precisely not vocations tailored to so-called personalities, but jobs in the enterprise, created according to the needs of the production and distribution process," Kracauer advises.⁸ Thus, it would

⁵ Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 38-9.

⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1998), 33.

⁷ Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 33.

⁸ Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 35.

take an extraordinary event of individual exceptionalism to prevail against this current.

I propose that Dreiser dramatises just such an extraordinary event in *Sister Carrie* by observing the same sociological dialectic between vocation and social value in a highly unrealistic way: through the realist Bildungsroman. Dreiser brings the genre's "rosy dreams" of individuation staked through meaningful vocation into tension with the teleological models that determine how "masses" of individuals enter the capitalist workforce through reproductive networks of race, class, and gender. Dreiser sublates the bourgeois anxiety surrounding industrial vocation and deindividuation by embroidering the characterisation of the youthful Carrie with a particular affective drive: commodity fetishism, the eroticisation of capital and exchange as a compulsive affect, as in Carrie's orgasmic "relief" to "hold the money in her hand."⁹ As Carrie becomes more and more successful in both social mobility and her career, against the grain, the novel's form and content turn upon one another, reversing the Bildungsroman's dialectic between work and leisure. Dreiser's Bildungsroman feels the tension in the roots of its bourgeois pedigree twisting against the machinery of deindividuated modernity. Inevitably, the form's delicious escapisms make themselves known as artificial distractions to what lies beneath the surfaces of character: capitalism. Realism, perforce, succumbs to Romance; but the knife of this negative dialectic cuts deep and both ways, resulting in a searing critique of America's reproductive centres.

I will designate this formal gearshift in the generic understanding of labour and reproduction as the premise of Dreiser's *Bildungsromance*. Dreiser allegorises the capital-relation at the expense of developing a coherent realist protagonist with at least the illusion of interiority, a notion that requires some initial defence. Unlike the *Bildung* doctrine of Schiller, for whom "personal flourishing implied the highest pitch of intellectual refinement and sociality,"¹⁰ British America had developed its own utilitarian script for the narrative of individual formation in

⁹ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1959), 60. Subsequent references to page numbers hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

¹⁰ Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 105.

the “story of remarkable rise from humble origins.”¹¹ The text of *Sister Carrie* reforms even as it recontains these essential aspects of the genre, engendering a curious negative dialectic between the sensuous and automated aspects of “work.” To critique capitalist ideology from within, Dreiser simulates the psychosocial symptoms of aspirational capitalism, using the Bildungsroman script but voiding all characters of interiority and agency, thereby exposing capital’s alienating effects. Where commodities take on an erotic and seductive characterisation, speaking in their own sensuous language throughout *Sister Carrie*, industrial labour in turn objectifies the workers who appear throughout the novel as dehumanised and de-eroticised figures, particularly female workers. Through the triangulation of Carrie’s three reproductive roles (factory girl, “kept woman,” and celebrity actress), Dreiser offers a critique of the venality of these aspirational ideologies regarding labour and the will to both affluence and unique individuality, to disambiguate the real socioeconomic forces these ideologies mask.

By reassessing Dreiser’s novel of female development as stemming from the traditional masculinist models of Bildungsroman, this article puts pressure on the gendered dialectic between pleasure and labour in the evolving mode of production that undergirds the Bildungsroman form. Dreiser produces a Bildungsroman that reconfigures the sexual logic of the genre’s relationship to Eros—the human drive to reproduce—into a sensuous depiction of monopoly capitalism’s reproduction itself, in conspicuous consumption and mass culture. He does so at a time when the modernists turned to the figure of arrested development to reflect the seismic shift in thinking about subjective formation and its reflection of national time, as Jed Esty argues of the European Bildungsroman; this was also a period when women writers in particular were transfiguring the Bildungsroman in order to redress and “expose the ideological underpinnings of the bildungsroman as a genre of male destiny and heroic modernization.”¹² It is in no way incidental that Dreiser selects a female protagonist for his task; Carrie’s apprenticeship boils down to a dialectical interplay between alienated labour and the sensuous romance of capital as a

¹¹ Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 105.

¹² Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23.

substitution for the courtship plot. Dreiser uses the homology of the unanchored female protagonist, and what her position reveals to us about the new urban American fabric, to problematise the possibility for realist literary representation to accurately bear witness to modernisation.

By casting *Sister Carrie* as Bildungsromance against the genre's traditional masculinist discourse of meaningful apprenticeship, which seems increasingly anachronistic by 1901, we may observe with greater accuracy how its form romanticises the generic conception of female labour, and brings this into tension with the naturalistic worldview of capitalist reproduction in Dreiser's realism. If work-as-being underlines the primary model of self-cultivation (*Bildung*) in the masculinist Germanic roots of the Bildungsroman genre, this article considers how Dreiser explores female labour without "closing the circle"¹³ of productive and non-productive work, or capitalist and *noncapitalist* bourgeois reproduction, even whilst the novel goes through the motions of Carrie's individual "apprenticeship."

The Novel of (Economic) Development

Dreiser had "one story to tell," Jackson Lears insists, "and he never tired of telling it"; a young person from "the American hinterland flees from provincial boredom," seeking "a new life in the city."¹⁴ Dreiser returns *ad nauseum* to the Bildungsroman and its elevation of unformed characters to explicate the historic coordinates of American macroeconomics through formulaic allegory, reimagining an expedited process of urbanisation as it is sensuously experienced by young, unremarkable, but highly impressionable members of the white-collar, middle class workforce: Chicago's resident "clerks and shopgirls."¹⁵ Dreiser's stereotype *du jour* always succumbs to a reversal of fortune. This peripeteia typically culminates in her revelatory disillusionment with the excesses of urban society and unresolvable dissatisfaction with the division of labour in the first

¹³ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), 29.

¹⁴ Jackson Lears, "Dreiser and the History of American Longing," in Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 63.

¹⁵ Lears, "Dreiser and the History of American Longing," 63.

machine age. This formulaic plot turn enables the novelist to explore the socioeconomic dimensions of modernity at every level of their hierarchy, as well as the human response system to the evolving mode of production through a naturalistic lens.

In response to Marx's apodictic outline of commodity fetishism, Georg Lukács raised the question, "how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society?"¹⁶ In Dreiser's Bildungsroman, commodity exchange penetrates all levels of society, resulting in the totalization of inner and outer exchange, and revealing the homology between character and culture guided by this logic. Carrie's character appears to mythologise not only the role of women in that division of labour; she furthermore signals the changing mode of production modifying the division of labour itself, by feeding a stereotype grounded in a certain simulation of social and economic relations under capitalism. In the period from 1880 to 1930, when Dreiser produced the majority of his novels, the American female labour force expanded by 307 percent, despite the fact that the adult female population had only increased by 171 percent; by 1930, "one-quarter of all adult women and over half of all the single adult women worked in the wage labor force."¹⁷ In this same period, a one thousand percent increase of female presence in Chicago's workforce occurred: the increase from 35,600 to 407,600 was "three times as great as the rate of increase of the female labor force for the nation as a whole."¹⁸

The "woman adrift" stereotype, unfettered to any nuclear family in this industrialised urban space, found its ideal prototype in the "young, single, native born, and white" Carolyn Meeber. The prevalence of this feminine stereotype ascended despite census data of the 1880s which reflected a "strikingly heterogeneous group" of racially and religiously diverse women of various marital and vocational statuses, and between fourteen and eighty-seven.¹⁹

¹⁶ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1968), 84.

¹⁷ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 5.

¹⁸ Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*, 5.

¹⁹ Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*, 6.

Chicago was better connected and less socially hegemonic than ever, at least at the level of data, even if these are the least observable transformations in the text; towards the novel's end, Hurstwood's participation in the Brooklyn strikes opens a slim corridor for the reader to bear witness to these tides of migration. Time-zones were standardised; webs of railroads contracted space, whilst telephone cables likewise collapsed communicable distances. Yet modernity's valences play out in the text's narrative force field in a dialectical current, resolving in favour of an extremely narrow perspective on that diverse social fabric, giving credence to Lears's assessment that Dreiser "was never very good at bringing the big picture into focus."²⁰ More accurately, that palpable alienation between the sociological "big picture" and the individual "worker" upon whom the narrative focalises forms the dialectic driving Dreiser's novel of development.

Sister Carrie evidences how "industrialization and urbanization were altering the way in which individuals worked, lived, and [...] conceived of themselves and the world,"²¹ which brings the novel into friction with the philosophical roots of the Bildungsroman. Moretti argues that "the 'harmony' that characterizes work" in the Goethean tradition only succeeds in that it eschews a "strictly economic logic"; that concept of work is

necessarily indifferent to the subjective aspirations of the individual worker. Instead of forcibly sundering an "alienated" objectification and interiority incapable of being expressed, work in the *Bildungsroman* creates continuity between external and internal, between the "best and most intimate" part of the soul and the "public" aspect of existence.²²

The individual whose primary enterprise is to seek out a meaningful vocation falls cannot map on to a society where capitalistic work "degrades humanity," and the "god of profit" effectively "betrays the very essence of work, what it is

²⁰ Lears, "Dreiser and the History of American Longing," 64.

²¹ Stanley Corkin, "*Sister Carrie* and Industrial Life: Objects and the New American Self," *Modern Fiction Studies* 33.4 (Winter 1987): 606.

²² Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 30.

‘in and for itself.’ Beautiful. Ennobling.”²³ If this is the case, then the Bildungsroman genre cannot accommodate the reality of *fin de siècle* Chicago, the environment which Dreiser tasks himself with reflecting. Modernity’s subjective vicissitudes, the psychological effects of a highly financialised economy, metropolitan closed living conditions and industrialised labour, disrupt the continuity between interior and exterior lives upon which the genre depends. Dreiser circumvents this disruption by appealing instead to the fantasmatic conventions of Romance, supplementing the verisimilitude of realist psychological interiority with plasticised representations of female labour, reproduction, eroticism, and consumption. Carrie characterises, moreover, a tectonic shift in the engendered character of labour and reproduction in that period of American industry, which coincides with Chicago’s great naturalist moment.

For Dreiser, and other Naturalists such as Stephen Crane and Frank Norris writing during the peak wave of Spencerian and Darwinian sociology, the natural world and its “natural processes were necessary to the proper functioning of the city,”²⁴ an ideal familiar to early realist Bildungsromane. The further society removes itself “from the biological rhythms of nature, of the land, the more grotesque our behaviour becomes.”²⁵ The “definitive stabilization of the individual, and of his relationship to the world—‘maturity’ as the story’s final stage—is therefore fully possible *only in the precapitalist world*,” argues Moretti, and only “far from the metropolis” can the “restless impermanence of youth be appeased.”²⁶ Dreiser, a sceptical apprentice of Émile Zola’s naturalism,²⁷ substitutes literary fate for material causality and socioeconomic “forces” (Dreiser’s fondest idiom).²⁸ These forces not only govern the lives of the principal characters of the Bildungsroman through the economic unconscious

²³ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 30.

²⁴ Richard Daniel Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 128-9.

²⁵ Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism*, 128-9.

²⁶ Moretti, *Way of the World*, 27.

²⁷ Donald Pizer, “Late Nineteenth-Century American Literary Naturalism: A Re-Introduction,” *American Literary Realism* 38.3 (Spring 2006): 190.

²⁸ Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby, “Introduction,” in Cassuto and Eby, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, 2.

built into the contextual mainframe of the novel; these fractured subjects all the more embody these forces. Chicago's exterior material conditions both govern and mirror the characters' interior lives and guide their emotional responses to phenomena and stimuli. By creating a character whose primary drive follows only the coordinates of her consumer lust, Dreiser reinstates the lost desire of "sensuous pleasure and luxury" and an intensity of experience into "fleeting facsimile[s] of ecstasy" that had been cauterised from everyday life in the modern workforce,²⁹ now substituted by the spellbinding rapture of consumption. More importantly, Dreiser also exposes consumption's alienating repercussions.

Carrie's "restless impermanence of youth" begins with this precise shift from the precapitalist world to the mechanical rhythms of a new urban environment, in a topos historically invested in the technologies of expansion and capitalism's will to power over nature: the railroad. Modernity's dynamo presses infrastructure against the last natural thresholds of the American frontier in a commonplace "establishing shot" of a young protagonist, boarding a train. In a camera-sweep movement, Dreiser's narrator titillates the fantasies of the "child," the "genius with imagination," and the "wholly untraveled alike" at the level of image, guiding their virginal excitation towards the city's sensorium of technology:

Streetcar lines had been extended far out into the open country in anticipation of rapid growth. The city had laid miles and miles of streets and sewers, through regions where, perhaps, one solitary house stood out alone—a pioneer of the populous ways to be. (17)

This Chicagoan image sequence "invents a feeling of pathos of the future" as much as to the "nostalgia and regret" of the past, Philip Fisher argues; Dreiser's Chicago is itself "a mediating term" that suggests, uniquely to America, a "practice" of incomplete, present actions only existent as "the preparation" for the unfolding future.³⁰ Chicago, whose infrastructure ever anticipates rapid growth and development, metonymises Carrie's "amoeboid, vaporous sense of

²⁹ Cassuto and Eby, "Introduction," 2.

³⁰ Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 129-30.

unlimited potential and possible agency,”³¹ which will become Carrie’s defining characteristic as a Bildungshelde. But Carrie also metonymises “the realists’ conception of the real” coming into contact with the “underlying real” of bourgeois desire, which “works under the surface of things, laying out miles of cable and bitumen, in order to co-opt the wishes of those caught in its mediating web—to create one seamless circuit of desire,” argues Julian Murphet.³² Realism’s pedestrian flâneur, that “ironic hero of high capitalism” is “usurped by the straphanger” of monopoly capitalism, young Carrie Meeber, who observes the streetcar line.³³ Her liminal position figuratively simulates the “suspension and transition between work and leisure.”³⁴ This streetcar line will also literally guide Carrie’s narrative from the natural threshold into the modern workforce.

These tracks foreshadow Carrie’s first encounter with the work necessary to fund her cover-charge into the exclusive bourgeois circuit of desire. The shift in focalisation from this steel web back to a disinterested Carrie whose primary interest lies in the ways the city “evidences” its “wealth” (32), demonstrates the homology between the development of industrial capitalism and the novel of development. This “zooming” focalisation, mediating close-ups of Carrie and wide-shots of her environment, sublimates the concealed narrative of class struggle and the unionisation rising against industrial capitalism during this period, including the blacklisted Chicagoan railroad strikers who were unable to contest the increasingly difficult conditions of their labour caused by the invention of doubleheader trains (twice the number of cars; no extra workers). Through the conspicuous negation of the labour that organised and arranged the city’s infrastructure, which the narrator painstakingly itemises in the above passage then discards, Dreiser encodes the triumph of the fat-pocketed railroad speculators, with their Congress land grants, as well as the streetcar capitalists

³¹ Charles Harmon, “Cuteness and Capitalism in *Sister Carrie*,” *American Literary Realism* 32.2 (Winter 2000): 127.

³² Julian Murphet, “A Desire Named Streetcar,” in David Bradshaw, Laura Marcus, and Rebecca Roach, eds, *Moving Modernisms: Motion, Technology, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 279.

³³ Murphet, “A Desire Named Streetcar,” 279.

³⁴ Robert Seguin, *Around Quitting Time: Work and Middle-Class Fantasy in American Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 24.

who Dreiser returns to with searing gusto in *A Trilogy of Desire*, all of whom profited enormously from this transportation revolution.

Carrie's version of this history represses those workers who brought about the industrial expansion and facilitated the vast immigration to Chicago at the time, the threshold upon which the unremarkable individual Carrie literally and allegorically stands. This collective struggle dissolves into the narrative of one; for, Carrie's individual narrative and the city's collective unconsciousness, the latter of which is only given outlet by the recurrent sociologising of the omniscient narrator, intersect and journey onward from the moment she alights the train. One such as Carrie

could have understood the meaning of a little stonecutter's yard at Columbia City, carving little pieces of marble for individual use, but when the yards of some huge stone corporation came into view, filled with spur tracks and flat cars, transpierced by docks from the river and traversed overhead by immense trundling cranes of wood and steel, it lost all significance in her little world. (18)

Carrie instead clings to the city's smallest material semes as geographical, quasi-spiritual coordinates; reading and translating the language of commodities through the medium of Carrie, the reader is forced to follow suit, feeling their way through the sensorium of capital as in the instance of Carrie wandering about The Fair. For Jameson, Carrie transmits not a strictly novelistic "point of view" but rather a filmic one in this sense, instigating the "textual institution or determinant that expresses and reproduces the newly centred subject of the age of reification."³⁵ The gaze of the omniscient narrator pans over the shoulder of a protagonist who "pauses at each individual bit of finery," wandering aimlessly yet compulsively around Chicago's Fair, noting "the dainty concoctions of color and lace there displayed" before moving forward, compelled to seek out and linger in the jewelry department, to "see the earrings, the bracelets, the pins, the chains" (32). The narrator's gaze watches her eyes pan across each commodity, translating the message encoded in each object: exchange value. To read this department store scene is to observe the perfidious phenomenon Adorno

³⁵ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 146.

describes as the individual concentrated into “a mere reflection of property relations.”³⁶

With the narrator’s gaze firmly fixed upon Carrie, her “middle-state” of consumer indecision reflects the impossible “genuineness,” the “last bulwark of individualist ethics” against industrial mass production, at stake in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*; for as with “gold,” Adorno forewarns, so to “genuineness, abstract as the proportion of fine metal, becomes a fetish.”³⁷ A flâneuse of Fifth Street, cut off from the natural world, Carrie transitions into the role of a financial assessor; she notes people “counting money, dressing magnificently, and riding in carriages” with barely the “vaguest conception” of how industrial capitalism imbricates the materials, infrastructure, mode of production, market forces, and division of labour beneath this her desires (18). If Carrie’s commodity fetishism does not fit into the mould of the Enlightenment’s highest ideals of moral and intellectual refinement, the reader must seek out and map the “new” relevant coordinates of realist characterisation they encounter which are irrelevant to the metropolitan subject.

Carrie’s “appropriate attitude” to what Hegel sceptically calls the “concatenation” of this new Bildungsroman “world” is guided by the heteroglossic “voices” of financialised capitalism.³⁸ The peculiar free indirect narratology reflected in the following passage epitomises the dialectical voices residing within the consumer’s internal conscience, which tell her exactly what attitude she ought to take:

The voice of the so-called inanimate! Who shall translate for us the language of the stones? “My dear,” said the lace collar she secured from Partridge’s, “I fit you so beautifully; don’t give me up.” [...] She could possibly have conquered the fear of hunger and gone back; the thought of hard work and a narrow round of suffering would, under the last pressure

³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London & New York: Verso, 2005), 155.

³⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 155.

³⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 593.

of conscience, have yielded, but spoil her appearance?—be old-clothed and poor appearing?—never! (111-12)

This polyphony metonymises the reification America's "500 million dollars" increase in advertising outlays between 1867 and 1900.³⁹ The speaking commodities plead with her to eschew her working class roots. In an alarmingly recurrent prosopopeia, the "voice of the so-called inanimate!," commodities assume a persuasive agency separate to the lives of the characters, evoking Marx's own use of prosopopeia in relation to the speaking commodity: "If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects[.] We relate to each other merely as exchange-values."⁴⁰ In another instance, Carrie's heart surrenders not to Hurstwood's consoling words after an argument, but to the appeal of something far more disturbing: the speaking commodity.

In this conversation she heard, instead of his words, the voices of the things which he represented. How suave was the counsel of his appearance! How feelingly did his superior state speak for itself! (131)

The narrator sanctions Carrie's vain superficiality because "[p]eople attach too much importance to words," especially those words expelled from the mouths of the commodity (130). Carrie's "little world" of experience magnifies the city's inner *zeitgeist* in this sense; yet this can only be a mechanical simulation of spirit guided by the ideology driving this development, aligned to the profiteers who capitalise precisely upon the circuit of bourgeois desire with its short-lived memory, as well as the disorganisation of the alienated workers. Carrie, as an untethered and disinterested Bildungshelde, stands "above" the history of the workforce that supports her journey; she projects no historical awareness, class consciousness, or empathy for human suffering, such as the homeless man outside the restaurant whom Carrie "quickly forgot" (119), or even for Hurstwood. Thus she embodies the great anxiety of the age of capitalist mass culture that nothing in this mode of production, including youth, is made to last

³⁹ Cassuto and Eby, "Introduction," 3.

⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 176-7.

beyond the pleasure of *now*, whilst every commodity seems designed to prolong youth and self-absorption.

Where modernism proper would endorse interiority of character as a vehicle for reflecting such anxieties, *Sister Carrie*'s characters exist mainly as exterior surfaces. Any deep interiority of character Dreiser reserves for the city itself; and as the Bildungsroman structure frequently shifts its focus from individual characters to the complex infrastructure that governs their lives from beneath, it ironises the capital-relation which governs their lives from above. Her mirror reflection depicts an improved surface, a "prettier Carrie," even whilst her interior character remains underdeveloped, symbolising what Paul Giles calls a scopic "symbiosis between character and culture."⁴¹ The prevalent use of similes, imagery in which the identification of character consistently takes root, demonstrates this impulsion for all characters to "identify with what they are not," vacating their "interiority and rearticulating them as cogs within the city's financial machine."⁴² The mirror motif discloses a collective spirit of ideological self-absorption, the life force of capitalism, presenting enormous repercussions for the Bildungsroman genre in form and content. Walter Benjamin describes how the Romantic fascination with the mirror appearance, the *Erscheinung*, transfigured the "mirror image [*Bild*]" into a filmic device that "has become detachable from the person mirrored," "transported" to "a site in front of the masses."⁴³ In a similar sense, even prior to her stage career, her transformation into a reified *Bild* of mass culture, Carrie's pervasive "touch of vanity" (117) counteracts the Bildungsroman's typical moderate balance between individual desires and social constraints.

In etymological terms, Carrie's mirror reflects the allegorical "interplay of representation (*Bild*) and formation (*Bildung*)" as it internally "whispers the

⁴¹ Paul Giles, "Dreiser's Style," in Cassuto and Eby, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, 54.

⁴² Giles, "Dreiser's Style," 55.

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 33.

profound homology between pedagogy and aesthetics, the education of a subject and the figuration of the text" towards an aesthetic humanism and the ideological "version" of the literary absolute in German Romanticism.⁴⁴ Dreiser, not one for subtlety, brings the Bildungsroman's subterranean ideology regarding culture and character to the literal surface of things, thereby problematically exposing apertures into the underlying real of modernity.

Women's Labour and the Courtship Plot: Romanticising Reproduction

Clare Virginia Eby argues that Carrie's "Bildungsroman of invidious comparison" cannot culminate with "the transcendent wisdom or stable marriage of its heroine."⁴⁵ Eby cites Annis Pratt and Barbara White's influential gendered definition of the Entwicklungsroman subgenre as the novel of "mere growth," in which the heroine "is radically alienated by gender-role norms *from the very outset*," resulting in "less a self-determined progression *towards* maturity than a regression *from* full participation in adult life."⁴⁶ However, as rehearsed above, Dreiser's naturalistic interest in connecting interior character to the exterior sociological backdrop of Chicago overrides this particular awakening as a substitute for maturation. Dreiser does ultimately destabilise the genre's ideological function to ratify the harmonious reproduction of bourgeois social ideals through meaningful vocation and reproduction (marriage). For, whilst full participation in adult life is made available to Carrie in a highly unrealistic way through her employment, Dreiser's novel still rests on the notion that capitalism, and its broader patriarchal apparatuses of reproduction both economic and biological, renders true maturity impossible from the outset.

Where Bildung should proceed, Dreiser instead allegorises and dramatises the process in which his protagonist works her way from the bottom of the division

⁴⁴ Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 38-9.

⁴⁵ Clare Virginia Eby, "The Psychology of Desire: Veblen's 'Pecuniary Emulation' and 'Invidious Comparison' in *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*," *Studies in American Fiction* 21.2 (Autumn 1993): 192-3, 195.

⁴⁶ Annis Pratt and Barbara White, "The Novel of Development," in Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 36.

of labour upwards into the role of a celebrity, a reified social commodity and a “plastic expression of erotic life.”⁴⁷ These two positions are not as unrelated as they may first appear. For Kracauer, the fantasmatic mediation of the female body inaugurated the vicissitude from Enlightenment culture to the mass culture of industry, as exemplified by the Tiller girls: “These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics.”⁴⁸ As factory-made celebrity figures, the Tiller Girls’ “plastic expression of erotic life,” which “gave rise to them and determined their traits,” exemplifies the “locus of the erotic”⁴⁹ embedded in Carrie’s apprenticeship.

As Larry W. Isaac contends, Carries “mobility dreams” (and, as I argue, Dreiser’s romantic indulgence of them) are both unrealistic and unsuited to the “working-class girl” narrative belonging to the “labor problem subgenre.”⁵⁰ By allowing wish-fulfilment to disrupt realism’s verisimilitude regarding female development, Carrie’s reification from an alienated worker to a celebrity reflects the American transition into mass cultural mode of production, thereby putting pressure on the association between Eros and reproduction. Carrie’s composition as a character compares to the homology between the limbs of Kracauer’s de-eroticised “American products” and the factory conveyor belt:

[T]hey demonstrated the greatness of American production... When they formed an undulating snake, they radiantly illustrated the virtues of the conveyor belt; when they tapped their feet in fast tempo, it sounded like *business, business*; when they kicked their legs with mathematical precision, they joyously affirmed the progress of rationalization [...] one

⁴⁷ Kracauer, *Mass Ornaments*, 75-6.

⁴⁸ Kracauer, *Mass Ornaments*, 75-6.

⁴⁹ Kracauer, *Mass Ornaments*, 77.

⁵⁰ Larry W. Isaac, “Cultures of Class in the Gilded Age Labor Problem Novel,” in Andrew Lawson, ed., *Class and the Making of American Literature: Created Unequal* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 120.

envisioned an uninterrupted chain of autos gliding from the factories into the world.⁵¹

Dreiser preconsciously assigns the female body itself as the locus of the proto-assembly line and mass reproduction in an image that pre-empts Kracauer's feminised automatons of American industry. Kracauer's mass ornament designates a fractured "female body and its component parts" that have been "de-eroticized" by the rhythms of mass production; and as "The Tiller girls reduced the erotic to a set of formal operations," the "operations and procedure of logic" have likewise formalised to the point of mechanisation.⁵² This operation mirrors Carrie's employment in the shoe factory early in the narrative:

The machine girls impressed her less favorably. They seemed satisfied with their lot and were in a sense "common." Carrie had more imagination than they. She was not used to slang. Her instinct in matters of dress was naturally better... They were free with the fellows, young and old, and exchanged banter in rude phrases, which at first shocked her. (37)

Upon this cultural conveyor belt, the erotics of language as a process collapses under the weight of its heavy desires; what the narrator calls Carrie's "innocence of mind" buckles beneath a linguistic (and generic) framework of "sexual prohibition."⁵³ However, the more complex inner life vouchsafed by the Bildungsroman emerges when Carrie distinguishes herself as exceptional, as the type of individuated bourgeois Bildungshelde; indeed, as the type of character who can only flourish in the pre-capitalist, non-metropolitan world which Carrie renounced at the beginning of the novel.

⁵¹ Quoted in Patrice Petro, "Perceptions of Difference: Woman as Spectator and Spectacle," in Katharina von Ankum, ed., *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997), 56.

⁵² Peter Wollen, "Cinema/Americanism/the Robot," in James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger, eds, *Modernity and Mass Culture* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 59.

⁵³ Florence Dore, *The Novel and the Obscene: Sexual Subjects in American Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 37.

In this sense, a Bildungsroman informed by the laws of capital presides over the realist Bildungsroman, in line with Walter Benn Michaels's durable insight that *Sister Carrie* discloses a "slippery" biological equivalency between feminine sexuality and capitalism's exploitation of fictional excesses.⁵⁴ This novel reminds us that "fictions may approve capitalism but also that the difference between the physical and the fictional is not so irreducible after all and that the production of a fictional excess has been one of capitalism's most successful strategies for transforming the economic reality its fictions claim only to represent."⁵⁵ Carrie's limitless consumerist desires inform the text's structure of feeling as a quest for power in itself—power which, as Michaels argues, Carrie equates to possessing money as social capital. However, if "money" to Dreiser's narrator is indeed "the symbol of labor,"⁵⁶ there is a case to be made that Carrie's romantic misrepresentation of female labour more acutely represents the precariousness of separating the physical and fictional excesses of capital. Carrie's course from underpaid factory worker, to her overpaid labour as a "kept woman" and later celebrity actress, characterises the relativisation of the value of labour as a type of fictionalisation.

Certainly, the narrator in the above episode positions the reader to sympathise with the awakened protagonist who proactively frees herself from these crude collective conditions of labour, an environment without "the slightest provision" for the "comfort of the employees" (37). This focalisation reverberates ironically against the panoramic or peripheral view of the emotional lives of the other alienated workers. The narrator all the more glosses their hardship with a parody of excess; after little more than an hour on the job, a physically aching Carrie becomes frustrated with how their bodies endure mindless labour with such apparent ease and apparently without question. Clearly something humorous accentuates her "girlish" incompetency, despite the fact she is probably not much younger than the other factory women; her inefficacy here foreshadows Carrie's puzzled frown as she plays Laura upon the stage, a crude idiosyncrasy which the theatre audience find charming to the point of fetish: "All the

⁵⁴ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 58.

⁵⁵ Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, 58.

⁵⁶ Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, 32.

gentleman yearned toward her. She was capital" (370). Where capital reads as an assessment of the ability for something to provide both pleasure and economic revenue, Dreiser's pun dramatises the capital-relation within the frame of a realist theatre, and moreover, engenders it. All the while, the childish satire of Carrie's mind-numbing boredom with factory work belies the problematic disparity between essence and appearance in the present conditions of the mode of production; labour and comfort can no longer suggest or sustain mutual inclusivity, as they could appear to under philosophies of the Enlightenment. The narrator, in the performance of a peculiar and extraordinary narratological paradox, intrudes during the factory episode to equate Carrie's instinctive dissatisfaction as historically premonitory of the trades unions' later efforts, even as she displays contempt for and alienation from her fellow workers.

Consider the narrator's direct sidebar to the narratee, revealing how "the new socialism which involves pleasant working conditions for employees had not then taken hold upon manufacturing companies" (37). Dreiser both directly references the decades of labour protests in Chicago to increase workers' rights, and foreshadows Hurstwood's scabbing of the Brooklyn strikes at the end of the novel as the foil to Carrie's total removal from that working class. These narratorial intrusions form one of the ways in which the historico-political agendas of the narrator threaten to eclipse the narrative of the individual, disturbing the verisimilitude that upholds it; solipsistic character "identification" and individuation struggle against the narrator's tendency to sociologise. The alienation of the collective workforce suggestively corresponds to their obscurity within the novel and to the protagonist's alienation from her peers; Carrie feels "too timid to think of intruding herself" to seek out the company of the other girls, instead "[seeking] out her machine" and eating her lunch there instead (37). Her only connection here is with the machine. Guided by the generic forces of realist solipsism, Dreiser entreats us to observe the primacy of the individual over the collective in a secret act of fetishisation between reader and protagonist.

Like Kracauer's de-eroticised Tiller Girl assembly line, Harmon similarly locates the consuming culture's ambivalent response to mediations of female bodies and sexuality in Carrie's "cute", "girlish," "self-involved beauty," which rejects the role of the sexual object designed to stimulate the phallogocentric

gaze.⁵⁷ Despite Carrie “living in sin” by Dreiser’s contemporary standards for almost the entire novel, she inspires men’s pecuniary fetishism rather than Eros because her appearance, like any cleverly worded advertisement, belies her “purity.” The de-eroticised “machine girls” on the other hand become crudely sexuated instruments of reproduction, deindividuated and unexceptional, who speak in sexually explicit vernacular, yet are described in dehumanised, mechanical rhythms. Consider the violence in the language of the girl who mindlessly mediates the action of the machine: “It isn’t hard to do,” [the girl] said, bending over. “You just take this so, fasten it with this clamp, and start the machine.” (34) The machine itself then begins to think and speak its own language:

She suited action to word, fastened the piece of leather [...] by little adjustable clamps, and pushed a small steel rod at the side of the machine. The latter jumped to the task of punching, with sharp, snapping clicks, cutting circular bits [...] an average speed was necessary or the work would pile up on her and all those below would be delayed. She had no time to look about, and bent anxiously to her task. (35)

The gendered proto-assembly-line of Kracauer’s *Tiller Girls* takes root in the rhythms of this description. Action affixes to word, conjoining violent words with little clamps and rods of steel; the brute force of the machine sublimates into the according jagged disyllabic verbs: jumping, punching, clicking, cutting, all repetitive actions which extend beyond the control of conscious decision making. Here we feel the violence of the labour protests, of Haymarket, distilled into syllabic routine. Yet Carrie’s anxieties and even her “imaginings” succumb to its repetition, lulled into the alliterative “humdrum, mechanical movement of the machine” (35). The room darkens. The dank odour of leather thickens. When she makes the smallest error, the foreman descends upon her with sharp dogmatic imperatives: “Start your machine [...] start your machine. Don’t keep the line waiting” (35). The workers all toil until the point of “absolute nausea” (36), and once the bell rings for them to break, only then does “the common voice [sound] strange” against the “audible stillness” (37). As in Lukács’s construal of alienation, the worker loses their human attributes to the machine,

⁵⁷ Harmon, “Cuteness and Capitalism,” 126.

and their labour becomes “progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialized operations so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a specialized set of actions.”⁵⁸

The Bildungsroman itself seems unsure how to proceed in this environment, where the shadow of machinery eclipses human activity, where the scale of industry literally ascends beyond an individual's limited human scope, metaphorised by Carrie's bewilderment in observing the factory elevator during her job interview at the factory. Yet Dreiser's naturalist observations regarding mass cultural production swiftly return to the wish-fulfilment and escapism of the Bildungsroman; for here, Carrie miraculously awakens from her state of alienation. She realises that she, alone, is exceptional. The narrator's slippage into free indirect discourse reveals how only Carrie intuits the social valuations of commodities, and this style of narration becomes complicit in these estimates. She calculates what makes “the average feminine distinction between clothes, putting worth, goodness, and distinction in a dress suit, and leaving all the unlovely qualities and those beneath notice in overalls and jumpers” (38).

The phenomenon Carrie experiences, which catalyses this generic breakdown, exemplifies the capitalist process that objectifies labour; as Lukács might illustrate, she bears witness to the estranged, “disintegrating effect of commodity exchange,” which, “directed in upon itself shows the qualitative change engendered by the dominance of commodities.”⁵⁹ Despite the factory environment being specifically designed for working women with familial support, Carrie breaks easily out of the robotic existence of industrial labour. The Bildungsroman ideology and form chafe against the actuality of working-class labour; and that chafing in itself precipitates textual irony for Dreiser, the critic of capitalism.

Yet even when Carrie finds her next remunerated position as the beautiful accessory firstly belonging to Drouet, then to Hurstwood, her “happiness” is won at the expense of realising any true personal autonomy. Dreiser self-consciously

⁵⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 88.

⁵⁹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 85.

allows fantasy and Romance to disrupt both the realist and naturalist norms of the *Bildung* process in order to critique the conspicuous consumption which stems from the production line she has escaped. Thus, whilst the coarseness of the machine girls binds them to their fate of hard labour, Carrie's economic will to power brings her into a (presumably) sexual relationship with two men, for which she is not rebuked, as the fate of a "working class girl" narrative traditionally necessitated (such as Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*). Indeed, Doubleday, Page, and Company attempted to renege on Dreiser's contract in 1900 precisely because the novel upset these moral expectations of realism;⁶⁰ Carrie was neither a virtuous girl rewarded, nor a corrupted innocent who receives her just desserts.

In light of such a remarkable break with realist norms, where certain means demand expected ends, Dreiser arguably forges an immanent critique of both capital and realism at the expense of pursuing any progressive feminist objectives regarding women and labour. Even whilst Dreiser promotes a certain fixation with the sexuality of unattached working women in the 1890s, he distils this eros into the sensual language of consumer lust when it comes to Carrie, rather than verbally explicit bawdy of her proletarian peers. Laura Hapke frames this sexual division of labour in *Sister Carrie* as the barter of women's sexual services in exchange for socioeconomic ascension within the novel, cast against the historical canvas of the literary representation of prostitution.⁶¹ Dreiser's peculiar position in this literary corridor exposes the explosive fantasisation of the cultural myth surrounding "self-protective" nature of "feminine economic activity" in the proletariat.⁶² Dreiser's justification for the novel's escapist sublimation—indulging the Bildungsromance fantasy of aspirational capitalism, and using feminine desire to fuel that fire of conspicuous consumption—is to clarify that Carrie is no *laundress*; Carrie is merely sexually vulnerable to the factory floor harassment faced by a pretty working girl. The "mild light" of Carrie's eyes betrays no "calculation of the mistress," in Hurstwood's estimation; her "diffident manner was nothing of the art of the courtesan" (106).

⁶⁰ Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*, 117.

⁶¹ Laura Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 156.

⁶² Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 156.

Her simulation of uncorrupted youth (virginity), distinguishes her as a viable commodity in the libidinal economy; only if the narrator veils Carrie's actions behind the façade that she is not really exchanging sex for money may she obtain the means to fund her promotion in the division of labour via that very means.

Dreiser's social radicalism is thus compromised by focalising the narrative lens only upon Carrie as a fetishised individual worker, whose cultivation (*Bildung*) plays a more vital role in the narrative than any other's. By allowing Carrie's capitalist romance to override any realistic account of female labour, he creates a double standard of presenting sex as labour power, and in doing so, he "decouples women and work."⁶³ Building upon Hapke's notion that Dreiser makes the same claim here as the Shirtwaist strikers—that "women are vulnerable under industrial capitalism, and those without economic independence are in danger of sexual exploitation"⁶⁴—I move to intersect the reading of sex and labour relations within Dreiser's appropriated *Bildungsideal*. Her non-eroticised sexual labour power motorises Carrie's vocational autonomy, in opposition to the eroticised mechanisations of industry from which she escapes; whilst her role as an actress, where she performs a role of plasticised eroticism, projects a fetishistic reproduction of female character that inevitably strips her of even the illusion of genuine agency. That is to say, it reveals the conceit of *Bildung*, which is only the realism of maturation through the fulfilment of meaningful labour and/or reproduction.

The issue of sexual legitimacy and the illegitimacy of women's work apropos Carrie's second position of "employment" as domestic mistress here also requires some remarks regarding the double entendre of "reproduction" in relation to the female *Bildungsroman* and its reliance upon the courtship plot. This novel not only satirises mores associated with that tradition; it furthermore parodies the collective anxiety surrounding population growth and reproduction at the *fin de siècle*. The intrusive narrator informs the reader that his narrative observations are morally impartial to Carrie's provocative behaviour because human morals are at an "infantile" stage; but his misgivings are reflected in the tension between the indicative statements and the hyperbolic romantic imagery:

⁶³ Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 156.

⁶⁴ Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 157.

In light of the world's attitude toward woman and her duties, the nature of Carrie's mental state deserves consideration [...] Answer, first, why the heart thrills; explain wherefore some plaintive note goes wandering about the world, undying; make clear the rose's subtle alchemy evolving its ruddy lamp in light and rain. In the essence of these facts lies the first principles of morals. (101)

Whatever coded passion and affective alchemy Dreiser manages between his principal characters, *Sister Carrie* contains no traditional domestic scenes; domestic agreement presents itself in theatrical farces that parody the traditional moral terrain of women's Bildungsromans. With Drouet and Hurstwood, Carrie settles for a *cortigiana* role, in which the ruler's-mistress exchanges pleasure of some variety in return for assets. Whilst Carrie plays at being wife, without ceremony or any legally binding documentation, Dreiser foils this courtship role-play against the jilted Mrs Jessica Hurstwood, who shrewdly considers her legal and economic rights within the institution of marriage. Other foils include Carrie's childless sister and brother-in-law, who are void of parental mannerisms, as well her fashionable but barren female friends, and the "machine girls" who speak coarsely of non-reproductive intercourse. In this sense, the entire narrative of Carrie's apprenticeship fashions her into a commodity of bourgeois desire for economic reproduction, rather than a biological reproducer necessary to reproduce the bourgeoisie itself.

When the narrator repeatedly indicates how "empty" this type of modern woman feels, the narrative approaches—and quite problematically so—the central underlying concern of America during the *fin de siècle*: the emptiness of the womb, and the deferral of the labour performed by the white female as America's reproductive centre. President Roosevelt would presently demand of the American masses that they, "Work, fight and breed!"⁶⁵ This anxiety spread moral panic regarding "fallen women" and the rise of city brothels, fuelling the public fear of venereal diseases and conflating them with the working classes and black communities in any number of panicked gendered, classist, and racist public fantasies. These included "devils [who] snatched innocent daughters off

⁶⁵ Quoted in James A. Marone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 273.

the family farm, dragged them to the dangerous city, and chained them in brothels till they perished.”⁶⁶ Despite “a lynching holocaust” in which thousands of black men were massacred for even the rumour of sexual fraternisation with a white woman, the *American Journal of Public Health* could declare that young white men would inevitably exploit black female sex workers in order to “sow their wild oats,”⁶⁷ echoing Hegel’s term for the “Philistine” Bildungsroman trope without irony;⁶⁸ however this oat-sowing threatened the purity of “our innocent [white] daughters” these white men would eventually marry.⁶⁹

Whilst this turmoil leads Marone to claim that in *Sister Carrie*, “Americans could have read something about the future of their sexual mores,”⁷⁰ the implausible wish-fulfilment of Dreiser’s Bildungsromance itself undercuts the successful realisation of a fully engendered subject. Carrie’s boredom homologically suggests there can be no fully liberated subject, male or female, under capitalism. Allison Pease suggests that male modernists often equated female narratives with nihilism to be overcome, creating narratives of “deadness, meaninglessness, blankness, and the unknown,” featuring women who are “trapped in meaningless machinery.”⁷¹ These novelists (her list includes Lawrence, Forster, and Wells, to which I add Dreiser) attempt to “show how a woman can come to realize a self”; yet this selfhood rarely “equates with what it means to be an individual.”⁷² In order to abnegate Victorian culture by denying the “strictures on female behaviour,” these modernists substituted the achievement of a true feminist Bildung, or the “intellectual freedom of development and will,” with the realisation of the female self as a sexual being, where only sexual development vouchsafes authentic “psychological relief.”⁷³ Dreiser certainly appears guilty of perpetuating this “archetype of male wish

⁶⁶ Marone, *Hellfire Nation*, 260.

⁶⁷ Marone, *Hellfire Nation*, 273.

⁶⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 593.

⁶⁹ Marone, *Hellfire Nation*, 259-60.

⁷⁰ Marone, *Hellfire Nation*, 273.

⁷¹ Allison Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 40.

⁷² Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom*, 45.

⁷³ Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom*, 45.

fulfilment”⁷⁴ by committing a similar substitution in Carrie’s development, only so long as we read Dreiser’s primary goal as creating an unapologetic sexual female subject as a kind of bourgeois “liberation” from Victorian mores.

Yet such conclusions hastily dismiss the text’s broader sociological agenda. And this precise tension, in itself, demonstrates the formal lens and lever between realism’s tendency towards rendering the ordinary individual exceptional, and naturalism’s sweeping tendency to recontain the individual within superstructural forces of the historico-material environment. Dreiser sublimates his protagonist’s realisation of sexual autonomy by displacing her erotic impulses to unbridled consumer lust, her compulsive consumerism, and commodity fetishism, which prevents her development. Like the mediation of Kracauer’s *Tiller Girls*, the compulsive rhythms of the machine sublimate into the image of a “rocking chair” in which an entropic Carrie repeatedly meditates, caught in a new web of meaningless machinery. The rocking chair motif mutually informs the psychological conditions of alienation driving sexual and economic reproduction under the auspices of mass culture. Public commentary of influential men of the era, from Clark University psychologist G. Stanley Hall to Roosevelt himself, suggests the rocking-chair ought to be read as a masturbatory device, where independent women and their rocking chairs were seen to be sublimating their maternal duties with “self-gratification.”⁷⁵ Moreover, the self-gratification of the rocking-chair becomes homologous to the alienating effects of mass reproductive culture’s compulsive rhythms of unproductive labour upon the consumer.

Her alienated “middle-state” supplements the suffering the genre ought to enforce for her immoderate behaviours and resistance towards interior self-improvement, even whilst her commodity lust for the perennial fashions of capitalism becomes a saleable service, packaged as her socially reproductive performance as an actress. Dreiser, in this sense, reinstates the masculine *Bildungsideal* of work as ennobling to a character’s social value; it seems a rich coincidence that Carrie’s ambitions for the stage reflects the exact desideratum

⁷⁴ Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom*, 55.

⁷⁵ Jennifer L. Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 185.

of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, the genre's ur-Bildungsheld, before he enters the Society of the Tower. Yet, Carrie's performance, guided by the erotic directives of the male gaze, continues even once the curtains close; she is as much an actress by nature as by trade, such as the moment she begins appraising other women's garments that Drouet admires: "If that was so fine, she must look at it more closely. Instinctively, she felt a desire to imitate it. Surely she could do that too" (112). As Dreiser's fantastical final thrust into the carcass of teleological realism, Carrie becomes more than a chorus girl or character theatre actress; she becomes a renowned lead actress, a reproducible celebrity brand and mass ornament. The circle of labour and reproduction is closed, and yet its implications for individuation are intensified.

As the consumption rituals alienate the young individual, they coagulate the "congruence of formation and socialization" that reinforces the classical Bildungsroman.⁷⁶ Carrie's successful Bildungsromance paradoxically leads to dissonance, which allows Dreiser to dialectically convey what the human condition will increasingly succumb to under capitalism. The mouthpiece of the narrator articulates these tidings: "Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilization is still in a middle age" (83). The forces of capitalist mass culture have larger authority than social mores and traditions which stylised the Bildungsroman's ideological mainstay. Dreiser appears less interested in emancipating the female protagonist and worker, so much as a reflecting the American *zeitgeist* of youth into which she is artistically integrated. The Bildungsroman genre's representation of the little worlds of "full and happy men" devoid of any aspirations to reflect "universal aims" or "what may be gained for the world as a whole"⁷⁷ forms the perfect vehicle for deriding the discourses of consumerism that target the individual as the centre of their own "little world" regardless of *das Ganze*.

As an elegy to these misgivings, the narrative remediates into a strange sing-song voiced in the second-person, the novel's final tonal and passionate gesture of melancholy and lost innocence streamed as a form of mass culture. The final line

⁷⁶ Moretti, *Way of the World*, 30.

⁷⁷ Moretti, *Way of the World*, 31.

reads as the chorus of a tragedy (the dramatic genre into which Carrie seeks to refocus her acting career), or perhaps as music heralding the ending of a film, one final cadence of sensuous and commercial expression collapsing into one: “In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.” (418) The rocking suggests a perpetual middle state between tradition and progress, an impossibility to realise the paradoxical aesthetic finitude beyond “becoming,” for both the individual and for the Bildungsroman genre itself as it approaches the modernist cultural dominant. If Camus insisted upon imagining Sisyphus happy, Dreiser advises that we envision her wealthy and numb.