

**Home Is Where You Hang Your Hat:
The Element of Desire in *Sister Carrie* and *America, America***

If we classify God's living creations into two things, we would end up with vegetation, and animals. Mankind would stand in the second category since we have the same characteristics with animals; except that we have minds. However, there is another thing that differentiates humans with animals. While animals would feel immediately satisfied after a meal, a man's desire would grow as they are fed. It's a known fact that humans always want more than what they've already been given.

But really, what is this 'desire' captured in both *Sister Carrie* and *America, America*? The first time reading these novels, as a person who grew up with already established values accepted in the society, I figured Carrie (Sister Carrie) and Stavros (America, America) wanted only wealth. From my point of view, it seemed that money and material possessions are important and have such significance for them in their lives. However, I read the books for the second time, and after a lot of considerations, I found out that it's not only about material indulgences, but also about the desire of finding happiness, themselves, and peace in their lives.

Humans have a natural interest in making their lives better. So do Carrie and Stavros. Both Carrie and Stavros wanted to leave their rural homes and find new lives. Caroline Meeber left Columbia City and found herself in Chicago. She wasn't content with the way she was living. She felt that something was missing from her rural life. In the meantime, Stavros Topouzoglou risked almost everything to get to the United States.

He had had enough with the oppression of the Attaturks towards the Armenians in the country. According to history, the Attaturks even shoot churches that are used by the Armenians and the Greeks to pray. Ultimately, the two characters decide to make their entrance into new worlds at very young ages.

In the 1900s the economy changed from agricultural to industrial-based economy. In reality, the industrial-based economy started by women who spun cloth, made clothing, linens, and soap, which very much became the crucial goods that developed factories. Contrary to the model of stay-at-home wife and mother, in the early 1900s, the labor of women was important. We could also see this in *Sister Carrie*; her life changes from time to time. She was an ordinary country girl who was expected to stay in the country and do house works; but in her journey through life in Chicago, she found a shoe factory and applied for a job there. The goal was simple, to have money. But later in the story we found that she had to support for Hurstwood and herself. Hence, we can see that for the people of America, as well as for the people around the world, the change of the economy system also meant a change in the relation between men and women. History shows that in 1890 –one year after Dreiser wrote *Carrie's* arrival in Chicago– fewer men were needed or employed by factories. In fact, women made up seventeen percent of the national labor force, with women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four forming the largest proportion of this group. Obviously, the migration of women to big cities was a national trend at that time.

Nonetheless, the migration of people like Stavros to America was a growing international trend. While conditions in nineteenth-century Europe worsened for millions of citizens, the United States seemed to offered prosperity. Millions of Europeans, who

suffered through the Industrial Revolution, economic depressions, and famines, began to see America as a land of absolute opportunity. Huge numbers of Italians, Greeks, Jews, Russians and others came to find work in industrial cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit. During 1890-1914 alone, 15 million immigrants were reported to have entered the United States. The numbers increase more and more even until after the World War I, when the government released a regulation to restrict the number of immigrants.

By the turn of the 20th century, the promise of the 'American Dream' had begun to lure substantial numbers of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Stavros is one of them. Living in Turkey, Stavros must face the reigning authorities like the Attaturks spread conflicts by discriminating the Armenians and the Greek. So like most Europeans, he wanted to find a new land of hope, perhaps a utopia like Shangri-La or El Dorado to lead a new life. He turned to the United States to seek liberty from the hands of the dictators in his country. He came to America for freedom, for an identity as an individual.

Individuality is a basic characteristic of human beings. As human are basically were born to stand on their own two feet, Carrie and Stavros try to prove that they can manage their lives. It is 'every man for himself', although it means they have to do things that seemed controversial and corrupted. What may seem to be a cursed deed to do, it is actually plain normal if we consider the situation surrounding the two characters. The two have to struggle. They have to strive to get their goal. Carrie's affair with Hurstwood and Stavros' first kill was just part of their survival strategies in their journey through life

that's full of competition. As Charles Darwin had declared, it's 'survival of the fittest' as they know it.

In those days, in order to survive you have to be the fittest. Automatically, in an industrial environment, being the 'fittest' means you have got to have money. After all, a new life for Carrie and Stavros who are used to live adequately in a country means they should live a life that's fullest in the metropolitan area. However, this point of view makes it seem that the two were never really satisfied with what they already have in their hands. As a start, their migration to the big cities while Carrie could live just fine in Columbia City and Stavros had never been a direct victim of the Attaturks.

Stavros didn't have anything to begin his journey with. He never had money, the only thing he had was a dagger given by his grandmother; which eventually he used to kill a 'friendly' thief named Abdul. Money was a big matter for Stavros since he is so determined to go to America. When his grandmother refused to give him the money, Stavros became quite angry. In fact, when she said the money is with her under her clothing, Stavros felt like he could murder his grandmother right then – but didn't.

Carrie first came to Chicago as a poor, unskilled girl from the country, so she's consider lucky when she got the job at the shoe factory. However, spending her time to get to know the lives of the women of the city, the fashion, and especially money, she gave up to the temptation of earning more. Earning more means quitting the shoe factory and start doing something else. Knowing that a woman's body can be an asset, she decided to become an actress; she went to an agent and even pay him money to get her a job as an actress with the hope of living in a luxurious lifestyle.

Both have always wanted more than what they already have, and for some people, the deeds they do seem sinful. Carrie's love affair with Drouet, and then with a very married Hurstwood may seem like she was only taking advantages from her relationships with those men. While Carrie was busy having flings with Drouet and Hurstwood, Stavros also kept himself busy by having an affair. On the vessel carrying immigrants to America, he found himself enticed by the money offered by Sophia Kebabian and thus became a gigolo for her.

It is human nature to desire something more, even if they don't know what 'more' is. On his way to Constantinople, Stavros was given chance to be a rich man. He met Aleko Sinyosoglou who would provide him a great deal of money if Stavros would only marry Thomna, his daughter. He was given the money, yes, after agreeing that he would marry her, but his dream of going to America took hold of him and it wasn't letting go. He used the money to buy himself a one way ticket to Constantinople instead and elope, leaving Aleko and Thomna behind. He could've lead a wealthy life, yet he still wanted more, though he could never be sure of what he's going to do over in America.

Carrie's desire for 'more' is bluntly given in the book: "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....If anything she wanted to do better or move higher she must have more – a great deal more."(362-363)

Up until this point, money and wealth seemed very significant in both stories. However, in reality, it is normal to want something more; because we are human beings. We are creatures that are given 'the mind that feels' by God. We are given desires, and the minds to decide what we should do about these desires.

In these books, the two main characters had no one to hang on to, so it is really important to make a choice by them selves. They were constantly reminded that the new worlds they are entering are full of competitions and options, so it is necessary for them to just 'seize the day'. They have to grab life and take every opportunity available. If anything, *carpe diem* is the perfect motto or tagline for them right then

Both Carrie and Stavros are very decisive people. Although they appear to make very impulsive ones, they always make them for themselves. They were determined to reach their dreams. At 18, Carrie decided to jump on the opportunity of moving to Chicago; while at 20, Stavros made the decision of leaving his home and took a journey towards America. They were ready for a change, and a totally new set of lives.

A lot of decision makings are involved in these books. After a while of spending time alongside Abdul – the 'friendly' thief – Stavros decided in an instant to kill him while he was doing his evening prayer. Granted, he steals from Stavros in a subtle way that no one knows he's a thief, he was worth the kill. Carrie's first decision was to exchange names with Drouet. Not because she liked him, but because she liked the way he is dressed; and this is not a normal thing for people to make decisions for something as important as names and addresses by only looking at the things someone's wearing.

In the meantime, we must salute them for they both actually found work in the city to earn their money. The fact is, it is almost impossible to get started in a new place – especially in the city – when they have non whatsoever reference and skill. Still, they handled with the situation very well and got their jobs. Stavros, although started off picking left over dinner from an alley behind a restaurant he managed to work in a kitchen for a huge restaurant. Carrie, accepted a job offer in a shoe factory, and then

became an actress. These scenes show us how determined they are and how they would do anything to reach for their dreams.

Another evidence of determinacy is that they won't allow anyone to prevent them from reaching their goals. Stavros killed Abdul, and then left Thomna and Aleko, and got very mad to Garabet and Vartuhi took his money. Carrie never took extreme measures like murdering someone, but when she saw her sister and her husband's apathies towards wealth and what she saw as a better life, she left their house and only leaves behind a single note. Another thing that Carrie did was getting Hurstwood out of the way when she realizes he's only gambling their money away. She left him a note saying, "Dear George, I'm going away....I wouldn't mind helping you, if I could, but I can't support us both, and pay the rent. I need what little I make to pay for my clothes."(348) Seems like the readers would be rooting for Carrie since Hurstwood gave no contribution to their domestic life. But to her, luxury still matters. She sees that with Hurstwood she won't get any of the nice things: expensive clothes, fulfilling meal, and recognition. That's why getting rid of Mr. George Hurstwood might be the best decision Carrie's had ever made to get what she wants. She becomes more and more successful as an actress, and the pay isn't bad either. "Men sent flowers, love notes, offers of fortune. And still her dreams ran riot. The one hundred and fifty! The one hundred and fifty! What a door to an Aladdin's cave it seemed to be."(361-362)

But really, this so-called 'desire' of wanting something more of material wealth, in fact, was never the real issue for Stavros and Carrie. Deep down inside, they knew that the money is just a tool, a medium to get to what they want. And what do they want? In *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser explains that she didn't really want money. "Chicago,

New York; Drouet, Husrwood; the world of fashion and the world of stage – these were but incidents. Not them, but that which represent, she longed for."(397) A couple of paragraphs later, the narrator also said, "in her walks on Broadway, she no longer thought of the elegance of the creatures who passed her"(398). This proves that Carrie no longer envy other people for the expensive clothes and jewelry. Stavros' story does go a little bit different. He spent his money on a one-way ticket to America, so right until he gets to America, his only money was his 50 dollars given by Sophia. He was content, yes, to have the money, but even more content by the fact that he got to America at last. Moreover, as he walks down the red carpet of the immigration shed, he went down on his knees and kisses the ground. This comes to prove that neither Carrie nor Stavros were looking for money in the first place.

So what is it were they looking? So here are Carrie and Stavros. Each had traveled far and experienced a lot of things. In the beginning poor, unsophisticated, and emotional. They both knew what the city could offer them, but Carrie found "the city offering more loveliness that she had ever known, and instinctively, by force of her needs alone, clung to it,"(397) while Stavros was amazed by the curves on Coney Island –the roads built through air— and was sure that those curves represent the endless possibilities waiting for them in America.

In the end, I would like to offer a concept of peace, and I do believe that they were looking for peace. Without their journeys, none of them would know who they really are. If they stayed in their rural homes with their families, things would never have changed for them. Carrie would be stuck forever with the farm, while Stavros would always be goody-two-shoes. Carrie would never know she could be an actress, while

Stavros could end up being killed by the Attaturk regime. They were looking for their own sanctuary; a Shangri-La. They were looking for comfort that can be found by looking at the beauty of tall buildings and roads, tranquility far away from the Attaturks, finding a hidden talent, finding themselves. But most of all, finding a home to hang the straw hat on.

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