

A Comparative Study of Sister Carrie and Xiangzi Based on Environmental Determinism*

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Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi* are two classic novels. Both of them demonstrate the decisive influence of environmental factors on the characters' destiny. This paper tries to explore their tragic fates comparatively based on environmental determinism. Actually, the two protagonists of two novels were both dream chasers in social changes at first, and then they transformed into strugglers under the oppression of patriarchy and biological power, and eventually they became victims of the social values under the fateful role of the environment. Obviously, the fights between the two protagonists and the environment have certain enlightening effects on current human life and the process of urbanization.

Keywords: environmental determinism, Sister Carrie, Xiangzi, comparative study

Introduction

Sister Carrie and Xiangzi were protagonists from *Sister Carrie* and *Camel Xiangzi* respectively. As ordinary characters, both of them were completely powerless against their own social environments. Carrie had gone through "four major changes" for material desire and enjoyment. For the first time, she came to Chicago from the countryside for an ideal life. For the second time, she left her poor sister's house to be Drouet's mistress for basic living needs. For the third time, she abandoned Drouet and hooked up with richer Hurstwood. And at last, she abandoned the fallen Hurstwood and embarked on the path of a famous singer. Carrie had hesitated and struggled for a long time about these four major choices, many times she realized her behaviors were immoral, but she still chose money and material under the temptation of the social environment. Similarly, Xiangzi experienced "three ups and three downs" under economic, political and ideological persecution. At first, Xiangzi saved money through hard work for a long time, but finally the money was robbed by some military police. Later, Xiangzi sold several camels to accumulate wealth again, and unfortunately the money was blackmailed by greedy Detective Sun. At length, Xiangzi obtained a second-hand rickshaw at the expense of marriage, unluckily the death of his wife Huniu made him have to sell his rickshaw to get money to bury his wife. And afterward, the death of his beloved woman Fuzi made him lose his self-esteem and hope of life. Although both Carrie and Xiangzi ended tragically against the environment, they both experienced much struggle during their life. However, due to the powerful, mysterious and irresistible properties of environment

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and destiny, their characters as well as destiny were totally dominated by the environment and the social environment played a restrictive role in their characters and destiny, which corroborated the environmental determinism raised by Dreiser.

With reference to Dreiser's environmental determinism point of view, firstly, objective authenticity is the nature of the environment. As society, universe and destiny are mysterious, terrifying and wonderful, human beings can't predict their direction of destiny by themselves. Secondly, human life is purposeless, and human beings are just the victims of various powerful forces in the universe and unable to control their own destiny. So, they can only drift and fall painfully, inconceivably and tragically under the influence of various environmental forces. In other words, the tragic changes of people's fate are precisely due to the effects of various elusive but irresistible environmental forces, including social changes, social mood and social values. Thirdly, everyone's action is direct reflection of a series of internal impulses and external temptations, so no one can think carefully before making choices. Further, the environment no longer restricts desire, but fully stimulates the desire to be expressed as human's biological force, thus, desire itself ultimately cannot be satisfied (Du, 2011). Fourthly, Dreiser, who agrees with Darwin's theory of evolution, believes that human beings need to constantly struggle and evolve to survive. Survival of the fittest is also the result of adapting to natural selection (Ji, 2017). Dreiser clearly realizes that the constant pursuit of desire and material is human's shortcoming, while human tragedies are the inevitable results of the conflicts between human physiological needs and the ruthless reality of society.

Dream Chasers in Social Changes

The story of Carrie happened at the end of the 19th century, when drastic social changes took place in the United States. At that time, American industrial production had become the top around the world, and the US was transitioning from liberal capitalism to monopoly capitalism, so that most of wealth and power increasingly belonged to a few people. Besides, not only had the prosperity of economy changed Americans' traditional working modes and lifestyles, but the rapid development of industry and transportation also had turned rural areas into towns and towns into cities. By 1900, as New York, Philadelphia, Boston and so on had turned into cosmopolitan cities, thousands of people flocked there, in order to find a job in a factory and get an ideal return through their hard work (Du, 2011). It was in this great social change that Carrie, an 18-year-old girl, came to Chicago, a city full of desires. The bustling atmosphere in Chicago deeply stimulated Carrie's desires and the city naturally became Carrie's ideal dream-chasing stage.

Similar to the social environment Carrie lived, the social environment Xiangzi lived was also in great changes, which was jointly promoted by feudalism, warlord forces and imperialism. Specifically, feudal thoughts followed people like shadows, and feudal forces exploited and squeezed the peasants. A large number of peasants, including Xiangzi, were separated from the land inherited from their ancestors, and then flooded into the cities to make a living (Liu, 2008). At the same time, the social turmoil in old China affected the stability of people's lives. Because some chaotic and unruly armies and spy organizations were unscrupulous and overbearing, often harming to people unexpectedly and devastatingly. It was under such a turbulent environment that Xiangzi yearned to realize his dream.

It was apparent that Carrie and Xiangzi had similar life experiences: both of them came from poor families in the countryside, arrived in a big city about 20 years old, and had much enthusiasm to stay there to realize the dreams at the beginning. Whether it was the corrupt capitalist society of the United States at the end of the

nineteenth century, or the turbulent old Chinese society at the beginning of the 20th century, these objective social environments exactly played an indelible role in the life trajectory of Carrie and Xiangzi. Although there were countless opportunities in big cities to realize dreams, there were indeed full of elusive and irresistible environmental forces. Their tragedies were doomed.

Strugglers Under the Oppression of Patriarchy and Biological Power

In *Sister Carrie*, the male-dominated rapid expansion of modern cities and the rapid development of urban industrial civilization occurred simultaneously with the alienation of female identity. The urban ecological environment, filled with material commercialization, spiritual vacuum and alienation of existence, had transformed many “Carrie” from simple country girls into “commodities” for sale. Those females all were dominated by male privilege, and were deeply trapped in an ecological ethical crisis (Zhu, 2006). In Drouet’s mind, women were just like goods displaying in shop windows. Moreover, Hurstwood was the representative of that era, who was well-dressed, had a luxurious life, and strived to satisfy own material and physical needs. He put aside his wife who had companied with him for many years and indulged in Carrie who was young and beautiful and satisfied his desires for possession and dominance (Obradović, 2018).

In *Camel Xiangzi*, the social system was of patriarchal control. Distinctively, in Xiangzi’s family, there existed huge economic gap between the two couples. And Xiangzi’s wife Huniu had masculine appearance and personality due to her special growing and living environment, which caused Huniu to possess an “alienated patriarchy” (In feudal society, it was originally a male privilege. But in Xiangzi’s family, it was possessed and executed by women) (Liu, 2008). With her bourgeois nature and strong ability, Huniu became the helmsman who controlled Xiangzi’s destiny and the executor of “alienated patriarchy”.

Patriarchy was a kind of social solidified concept as well as social mood that has been formed and existing over numerous years. As a factor in Carrie and Xiangzi’s living environments, patriarchy ran through all aspects of people’s life and utterly affected the life trajectory of the two protagonists. Even if Carrie and Xiangzi fought, their fates would only be to comply with patriarchy, and thus they would continue to live a purposeless life with destiny being controlled.

What’s more, many of their actions are direct reflection of a series of internal impulses and external temptations, and they always make choices without careful consideration. At this time, the environment no longer restricts desire, but fully stimulates the desire to be expressed as human’s biological power. Biological power is human instinct, that is a strong desire and impulse that humans inherited from their ancestors, such as hunger, fear, sexual desire, and so on. Psychologists believe that human desires are divided into different levels, from the low-level physiological needs for food and clothing, to the high-level needs for safety, belonging and love, self-respect, and self-realization. As far as Carrie was concerned, when she came to Chicago alone, her main desires were basic physical needs, such as food, house and warm clothes. After cohabiting with Drouet, her desired objects changed to more beautiful and more expensive new clothes, and to truly blending into Chicago. Later, her acquaintance with richer Hurstwood and her arrival in a more prosperous city New York gradually escalated her psychological desires. Conceivably, desires themselves ultimately cannot be satisfied. In the end, although Carrie became an illustrious singer, her desires were still not satisfied and she still felt lonely and empty. As far as Xiangzi was concerned, in that troubled era, his needs at all levels were not met. More unfortunately, he even lost the biological power which supported his struggle step by step. His food, clothing, shelter and transportation were threatened by the external environment at all times, which led him to

pursue basic physiological needs repeatedly; meanwhile, he was also constantly trying to realize his high-level needs of self-realization which is to own a rickshaw. Furthermore, the woman Fuzi not only was the sustenance and carrier of Xiangzi's spiritual needs for belonging and love and self-dignity, but also had become the "last straw" that crushed Xiangzi's hope. In brief, through the description of the desires of the two that could never be satisfied, it can be seen that when the environment no longer restricted desires, human desires were forced to become endless. And in order to satisfy desires, they even couldn't think and could only act and live by instinct. As a result, Carrie and Xiangzi were all alienated by the biological forces in their bodies and became captives and driven by the environment.

Victims of the Social Values

As the social environment changed, social values also altered. Whether it was American capitalist society at the end of the 19th century or Chinese old society at the beginning of the twentieth century, a person's economic status determined how comfortable his life could be, how much respect he may receive, and what social rights he could own. As a result, money occupied a dominant position in people's minds, and everyone wanted to climb to the peak of success. Consequently, life became a meaningless pursuit of material. And the supremacy of money and material became social values, concurrently greed became a common disease of mankind.

It was under this kind of social value that Carrie and Xiangzi were alienated by biological instincts and environmental forces after struggling many times, finally became captives and victims of environments. Carrie was finally bulldozed by capitalism into a singer as well as a hedonist with greater desire and money, but still felt lonely in thought; Xiangzi's life ideals were completely shattered, eventually he was in despair and fell into a selfish and individualistic "urban garbage".

Their whole stories were the process to realize their own desires. They were constantly struggling, taking risks, falling and coming back again. But only "desire" cannot explain in depth their various motives and their driving forces behind their behaviors. Instead, their fate was the result of their environments, and they were victims of the social values. Explicitly speaking, the extravagant atmosphere of capitalism and the social values of money and material supremacy were what Carrie accepted since childhood. As the saying goes, people are the products of society. So, if Carrie wanted to survive in the big cities, she must abide by the default rules and values of that society, otherwise she would be excluded from the capitalist society. And eventually extravagant social values led Carrie to define money as: "Money: something everybody else has and I must get" (Claudia, 2017). Correspondingly, the fundamental reason for Xiangzi's gradual demise was that he was forced to lose the money or the rickshaws three times. Obviously, it was money that brought him down. In that era, most of the people would never learn that you couldn't get without any labor. It was obvious that people's living ways, social values and interpersonal relationship largely depended on money and wealth superficially. And Xiangzi's personal fate was undoubtedly influenced by the social values of money and material supremacy through the evil deeds of different evil characters. Therefore, their stories fully embodied the environmental determinism. They were unable to capture and resist the environmental forces to control their own destiny. Instead, they could only follow tragically and aimlessly to fight for survival, succumb to natural selection, and be alienated by the environment. Their own physiological needs must compromise with the ruthless social reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the era of social changes, the entire society is materialized and human spirits are contorted. The endings of Carrie and Xiangzi are the results of social evil edification and persecution. However, their life trajectory and life direction are typical in that era. Because in the chaotic era they lived, the cities achieve a decisive victory over the countryside, the material also achieves an absolute victory over the spirit. After all options are eliminated, only the sinful and depraved path is the path that suits them best. Therefore, it is reasonable that they choose to succumb to the environment and be in compliance with natural selection, in order to meet the needs and desires that the environment urged them to produce. That is, the environment plays an irresistible role in their life direction and dooms their destiny. Both Carrie and Xiangzi are typical examples in social changes and they are epitomes of masses, so the problems they face are typical social problems the masses face, the effect of the environment on them also affects all the human beings. Therefore, how to deal with the stumbling caused by the environment, how to cope with the opportunities and challenges correctly, and how to dispose of the darkness, loneliness and greed have been becoming issues worthy of consideration for all mankind.

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