Sister Carrie and the Prospects for Individualism in the Capitalist Modern America

Yunjin Lee

I. Urban Contact and Individuality

Portraying the vast transformation of both a physical and a psychological landscape of modern America in its capitalistic phase, Theodore Dreiser’s first novel, Sister Carrie (1900), provides many significant observations for understanding the discourses and logics which American modern cities embraced at a given cultural moment. One of the significant aspects of Dreiser’s urban representation in Sister Carrie is the attention he draws to a radical re-conception of the process of identity and social interaction in modern America. While he visualizes new conditions of modern urban society and its cultural facts that modified in myriad ways the cognitive and desiring capacities of the individuals, Dreiser attempts to rehabilitate the idea of individualism within the context of urban society and suggests a completely new vision of American identity. In this paper, I will analyse how Dreiser characterizes these new forms of self-construction and the new mode of existence and social intercourse in modern America, and how he demystifies the
possibility for individual’s social and psychological growth and self-actualization in the capitalist urban world.

Elaborating the characteristic of social interaction in the metropolis, in his essay, “Sociology of the Senses: Visual Interaction,” the German sociologist Georg Simmel gives particular attention to the predominance of the visual sense in the urbanite contact. With the growth of population and increased pace of the modern city, he notices that “the interpersonal relationships of people in big cities are characterized by a markedly greater emphasis on the use of the eyes” (151). Especially referring to the urban crowd, he further notes, “the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity of the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impression: These are the psychological condition that the metropolis creates” (410). Actually, the individuals in the urban world are placed in the company of the significant number of anonymous others who are only known to the individual through what can be inferred about their appearances or visual impressions. In this urban world dominated by innumerable visual images, it is one’s eyes that actually serve as a vehicle for recognizing, acknowledgement, or for understanding of the anonymous others in the metropolis. Accordingly, in this pattern of social intercourse, the role of “mere visual impression” becomes significantly increased.

For Dreiser as well as for Simmel, this visual intercourse is crucial for describing the urban experience. Calling attention to urban dweller’s perceptions and experiences of the metropolis, Dreiser also underlines this visual form of social intercourse as one of the distinctive features of the modern urban life. In Dreiser’s representation of urban society, the visual contact of urbanites actually emerges involving the visual experience of spectacle-displays on the city streets: for people are physically thrown together while they remain socially and emotionally apart.1) Carrie’s experience of the city streets in New

1) Illuminating this contrast between apparent closeness and actual isolation in Dreiser’s urban environment, Louis Wirth thus points out in his article, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” “the