

RECLAIMING THE HEROINE: APPROPRIATING “NEGATIVE” REPRESENTATIONS  
OF WOMEN FROM ÉMILE ZOLA’S NANA AND THEODORE DREISER’S SISTER  
CARRIE

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## ABSTRACT

MELODY L.G. MARLOW: Reclaiming the Heroine: Appropriating “Negative” Representations of Women from Émile Zola’s Nana and Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie  
(Under the direction of Diane Leonard)

As the Academy tries to balance the traditional canon with today’s demands for canon reformation, this thesis offers an alternative for balancing the two. Since, the majority of texts taught in today’s literature courses are written by men, it is important for instructors to find methods for teaching these texts that will make them accessible to today’s students.

Applying Nancy K. Miller’s poetics for feminist writing to male-authored works is one way to bring these texts to today’s woman reader. This essay illustrates how women readers can apply this method in order to create positive feminist readings of novels written by men. This essay provides an example of how Miller’s poetics can be applied to the male-authored text, by employing them to two naturalist novels, Émile Zola’s Nana and Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie.

To my husband, Ben,  
whose love, support, and patience made this thesis possible.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

From the Suffragettes to today's fight to keep *Roe vs. Wade* from being overturned, feminism has been waging wars on many different fronts, with the university as an important battlefield. Faced with the fight for women's rights, equal education for women and minorities, and canon reformation to include "lost" women writers, academe has been in a struggle between the standards of the old guard and a desire to broaden horizons and thus embrace new viewpoints and new identities. Because this battle is ongoing, women's role in the academy is a challenging one. Women are fighting for more change without endangering the change that has already been wrought. We are seeking the balance between the old and the new. The goal of this essay is to suggest one method for finding this balance and to then illustrate how it can work as a tool for examining the old through a new lens.

The "images of women" method, or as Elaine Showalter terms it "feminist critique," which was a popular form of feminist criticism in the 1970's and 80's, provided a means for discussing women in texts written by men. This method involved analyzing the women characters in novels to identify the authors' stereotyped presentations.<sup>1</sup> Two of the feminist

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<sup>1</sup>However, the effectiveness of this method was often a subject of debate for feminists; critics claimed that examinations of stereotypes informed the reader only of the patriarchal constructs into which women were supposed to fit, and exposed nothing of woman's "real" life. Thus, towards the end of the 90's, the "images of women" method was largely replaced in feminist theory by concepts about how to produce feminist readings of women writers and how to create, and/or recognize, feminist writing.

critics who brought about this evolution were Josephine Donovan and Elaine Showalter. In her article, “Beyond the Net: Feminist Criticism as a Moral Criticism,” Donovan provides a diagram<sup>2</sup> useful for understanding the stereotypic female characters in male-authored novels and presents an important critique of the “images of women” approach. Donovan claims that male-authored texts can be dangerous for feminist readers unless women consciously “read with perspective that recognizes the sexism inherent in [the texts’] moral vision” (214). In “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” Showalter adds to this argument: “One of the problems of the feminist critique [or “images of women” method] is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women [...] we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be” (216). The question becomes how, in an academic setting, where male authors are still the predominant writers taught, women readers can re-appropriate these texts for a contemporary feminist understanding, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls about which Donovan and Showalter have warned.

This essay will not attempt to provide guidelines for reclaiming all male-authored novels for feminism. However, naturalism, in its objective of portraying everyday life accurately and in an unprejudiced manner, seems to have attracted male authors who write about women characters in a more realistic way. Thus the works of naturalist writers are likely to represent women characters who are defined less by society’s literary patriarchal ideals and more by the reality of their positions in that society. These works would therefore appear to be more conducive to a positive feminist reading than their more conventional counterparts

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<sup>2</sup>The diagram shows the dualisms of Western literary stereotypes of women (213):

spiritual		material
spirit/soul		body
virginal ideal		sex object
Mary		Eve
inspiration		seductress
good		evil



whose stories consist in identifying and re-enforcing morality through their use of negative stereotypes. The two male-authored naturalistic novels that this essay examines through the feminist lens are Émile Zola's Nana (1880) and Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900).

Pizer notes that “No one can deny a connection between (say) Zola and Norris and Balzac and Dreiser, but what is the nature of this connection? What often goes unnoticed in this discussion is the fact that Norris and Dreiser shared a historical moment with Balzac and Zola...” (62). Besides coming out of the same time period, these writers have in common their desire to portray society as it is in reality through the lens of naturalism. However, I would argue that there is an even stronger connection between Zola and Dreiser. The connection between the two authors' novels becomes more remarkable as one reads the naturalist novels that Dreiser was publishing in America and notes the similarities between his works and those of Zola. Here are two men coming out of the same moment in history, both writing naturalist novels. The most striking similarity is the subject matter of their novels, specifically Zola's Nana and Sister Carrie by Dreiser, each author examining the ordinary (yet extraordinary) life of his heroine.

A number of questions are raised by these similarities: was Dreiser re-writing Zola? Had Dreiser read the French copy of Nana, originally published in 1880, or perhaps a translation published earlier than the one documented in his library? Or were both authors merely observing and reporting similar situations and behaviors occurring in a space of twenty years, in two different countries, on two separate continents? It is impossible to know for sure. However, according to W. A. Swanberg's biography of Dreiser, Dreiser's boss at the Republic newspaper advised that he “[g]et in all the touches of local color...remember Zola and Balzac” (47). Dreiser was thus encouraged to write like Zola. He owned twelve Zola

novels in English, one of these being Nana in a 1924 translation (Mulligan). Of special interest for this study is the fact that “The Athenaeum [which seems to be a literary journal or newspaper that published book reviews] compared Carrie with Zola’s Nana” (Swanberg 96). This comparison in the Athenaeum is important because it demonstrates that Dreiser was familiar with Zola’s work and that the similarities between Sister Carrie and Nana were strong. It is thus possible and even probable that Dreiser read Nana before he began writing his novel Sister Carrie in 1899. This is especially true because the similarities between the two novels are striking: they can be found in the topics each chose to write about, in their treatment of the fallen woman, and in their efforts to write a naturalistic history for their heroines.

I believe that Zola’s novel, Nana, is an excellent text through which to examine the ways in which a naturalist approach can foster a feminist reading. In his effort to depict the world of the theater and that of Parisian prostitution, Zola creates characters and a social setting that fit into Nancy K. Miller’s feminist poetics<sup>3</sup> while at the same time working against them, providing the reader with a striking mix of reality and morality. The clash between the realism that Zola wants to portray and the morality-tale ending of the novel creates a fertile space for the reader to begin applying the feminist lens to the older, male-authored, canonized text. Thus the reader may be encouraged to look for moments in the text that represent ‘real’ women’s experiences and to differentiate these from the moments in the text

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<sup>3</sup>In her critical text, Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing, Nancy K. Miller provides her audience with a poetics for feminist writing which includes these four levels:

At a first level, then, feminist writing articulates as and in a discourse a self-consciousness about women’s identity...both an inherited cultural fiction and a process of social construction. Second, [it] makes a claim for the heroine’s singularity by staging the difficulty of her relation as a woman in fiction to Woman. Third, it contests the available plots of female development or *Bildung* and embodies dissent from the dominant tradition in a certain number of recurrent narrative gestures, especially the modalities of closure that Rachel DuPlessis has called “writing beyond the ending.” Finally, through an insistence on singularity, feminist writing figures the existence of other subjective economies, other styles of identity. (8)

that are more conventional, for example the tension between Nana as good mother and as neglectful, debauched mother in comparison with Georges' mother and with the ideal mother of that time. Hopefully, the reader, seeing the juxtaposition between society's ideal and the character that the author creates, will begin using this view to question her own beliefs about motherhood. Following this approach should ideally provide the reader with a new understanding of the text, its author and his time.

My analysis of Zola will lead into a discussion of Dreiser's novel, Sister Carrie. In its portrayal of Caroline Meeber, this text reveals how naturalism, in breaking away from morality tales, can further a feminist reading. While Zola's heroine suffers an ignominious end, in Dreiser's final pages Carrie is looking to a bright future of her own making. Miller's poetics have a smoother fit with Dreiser's novel than with Zola's precisely because of Dreiser's break with conventional plot. And while the break permits the reader to fit Miller's poetics more closely to the novel, the better fit allows us to explore the novel's feminist potential more rigorously. Thus, we gain a more effective understanding of the underlying feminist narrative than is possible with Nana.

This study attempts to create a feminist critique of the texts through the "images of women" approach; however, instead of focusing on the stereotypes in the authors' works, as the old 'images of women' method does, it will examine where these works defy traditional constructs. By analyzing the authors' works through Miller's poetics for feminist writing, we can better understand where and how the novels undermine patriarchal constructs as well as how they reinforce them. This process should engender a new reading of the two novels, giving the male-authored canon a feminist twist.

## CHAPTER II

### NANA

In 1871, Émile Zola published La Fortune des Rougon, the first novel in his famous Rougon-Macquart series, which would grow to encompass a total of twenty novels. In his ninth novel in the series, Nana, Zola tackles the problem of prostitution in Paris. Creating the quintessential *femme fatale* in his heroine, Zola manages to rewrite the trope of the prostitute. In this rewriting, Zola plays with the division between prostitute and mother, as well as the separation between the classes. Nana is both the good and bad mother, constantly neglecting her son but in the end nurturing him on his death bed at the risk of her own life. In his rewriting of class divisions, Zola blurs the lines between the groups, writing about aristocratic women's illicit affairs and showing how common prostitutes can ascend the ladder through advantageous marriages. One should note that while Nana has plenty of opportunities to make successful marriages, she chooses to remain unmarried. It is in his attention to detail and desire to represent people and society truthfully that Zola follows the poetics of feminist writing as they are set out in Nancy K. Miller's text, Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing.

Miller claims, "at a first level, then, feminist writing articulates as and in a discourse a self-consciousness about women's identity. I mean by this both an inherited cultural fiction and a process of social construction" (8). In his novel Nana, Zola is working to reinvent the inherited cultural fiction of romantic novels, such as Alexander Dumas *fil's*' novel about a

young, beautiful courtesan, La Dame aux Camélias. While in Nana Zola is reinventing the trope of the prostitute as well as that of the courtesan, he is also reinforcing the process of social construction of the girl who becomes a prostitute or a courtesan. In his depictions of Nana as a loving mother and in those moments when Nana dreams of running away with Georges and living in a family with him and her son, Louis, Zola is rewriting the traditional story of the prostitute. In his treatment of Nana's sexuality and her baseness, Zola re-enforces the negative construction of the common streetwalker. Nana in her career is both a prostitute, selling her body for money and a courtesan, mistress to a man of wealth who becomes her benefactor in exchange for sex and the right to claim this highly desirable woman as his own. Because Zola believed that people were the products of their environments, he did not accept the idea of free will. It is this lack of free will and social development of character that re-invents the prostitute in ways that fit into Miller's poetics. But the moralistic ending of Nana's disfiguring and gruesome death, which denies her free will, runs counter to Miller's guides. Zola creates a woman who cannot be blamed for her transgressive behavior, thus going beyond society's mores that blame and punish. And yet at the same time because she has no control over her choices and behaviors, Nana's power is taken out of her hands: she cannot be blamed, nor can she be praised, for breaking these norms.

To better illustrate how Zola's writing fits Miller's first level in her poetics, we must explore his theories for composing a naturalistic novel, since they will show how he writes about women with a consciousness of the cultural fictions and social constructions at work in his time. Zola's well-known theoretical text, Le Roman expérimental, lays the foundations for how one should go about writing the naturalistic novel. There are two sciences that play a part in Zola's definition of naturalist writing, the first being the experimental method as laid

out in Claude Bernard's work, Introduction à l'Étude de la médecine expérimentale, the other Darwin's theory of evolution (Zola, Roman 1). Zola chooses to follow the model for the experimental method because, as he writes, "medicine, in the eyes of a great number of people, is still an art" (1); but in transferring these principles to his writing, he in turn makes the creation of a literary text into a scientific procedure.

Evolution in Zola's work is consistent with that of other naturalistic texts: "While the naturalistic novel presumes the reality of evolution, it often works in terms of devolution: degeneration and personal decline are embedded in most naturalistic fiction" (Lehan 48). Seeing himself as a scientist in literature, Zola feels that his task is to detail the ways in which a person's circumstances act negatively upon him/her, predetermining the eventual decline of the individual and denying him/her any free will.

Naturalistic writing, according to Zola, is a way of applying the scientific method to literature. One puts imagined characters in a given situation and then 'stands' back and observes how the characters react (Zola Roman 1-7). However, since writing literature is also an act of creation, the author anticipates those reactions based on his observations of the society, and on his understanding of the theory of evolution. In Le Roman expérimental, Zola praises a realistic moment in Stendhal's Le Rouge et le noir: "Il faut songer à l'époque où le roman fut écrit, en plein romantisme, lorsque les héros s'aimaient dans le lyrisme le plus échevelé. Et qui s'aiment enfin comme tout le monde, sottement, profondément, avec les chutes et les sursauts de la réalité" (217).<sup>4</sup> Reality is the key word here: Zola is privileging a moment in Stendhal's work that reflects what Zola himself has observed in the natural world.

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<sup>4</sup>"You must bear in mind the epoch in which the novel was written; it was the very height of romanticism, and heroes made love in the most disheveled lyricism. Yet here is a young man and woman who love each other just as we all do, foolishly, deeply, with the ups and downs of reality" (Zola Novel 75).

Zola is trying to evolve past romanticism by reshaping the novel so that it mirrors the real world and real world experiences.

In his Le Roman expérimental, Zola asserts that “Faire mouvoir des personnages réels dans un milieu réel, donner au lecteur un lambeau de la vie humaine, tout le roman naturaliste est là” (215).<sup>5</sup> He then proceeds to explain how an author begins to do exactly that: “Un de nos romanciers naturalistes veut écrire un roman sur le monde des théâtres. Il part de cette idée générale, sans avoir encore un fait ni un personnage. Son premier soin sera de rassembler dans des notes tout ce qu’il peut savoir sur ce monde qu’il veut peindre” (214).<sup>6</sup> The astute reader of Nana will recognize that this is precisely what Zola has done in his own novel. This recognition is further validated by the note cards Zola kept<sup>7</sup> and the fact that both the novel and the theoretical text were published simultaneously.<sup>8</sup>

Zola also followed his last criterion for naturalistic writing by visiting the theaters that he wrote about. At the end of his discussion of how one would conduct research for the naturalistic novel, Zola writes, “[And finally] il visitera les lieux, vivra quelques jours dans un théâtre pour en connaître les moindres recoins, passera ses soirées dans une loge d’actrice...” (214-5).<sup>9</sup> As for visiting the locale, Zola’s work as both playwright and theater

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<sup>5</sup>“To give your reader a scrap of human life, that is the whole purpose of the naturalistic novel” (Zola Novel 74).

<sup>6</sup>“Suppose that one of our naturalistic novelists wishes to write a novel on theatrical life. He sets out with this general idea, without having as yet a single fact or a single character. His first care is to gather together in his notes all that he knows of this world which he wishes to depict” (Zola, Novel 73).

<sup>7</sup>The content from the note cards for the different characters is provided by Henri Mitterand, the editor of the Pléiade edition of Les Rougon-Macquart volume 2, in the Études section, on pages 1675-1678.

<sup>8</sup>According to Charles Bernheimer, “Zola’s Le roman expérimental...was published in the same numbers of the journal Le Voltaire as the first installments of Nana (October 16-20, 1879)” (214).

<sup>9</sup>“Finally he visits the places, lives a few days in the theater, so as to gain a perfect knowledge of all its recesses; he passes some evenings in an actress’ rooms, steeping himself as much as possible in the surrounding atmosphere” (Zola, Novel 73).

critic would have given him many opportunities to study the theater in all its many aspects; however, it has been documented that he also “visited the Variétés in 1878 and took extensive notes” (Bernheimer 225).

Zola’s second rule is that the naturalist author should consult with experts in the field. According to Graham King, he did exactly this: “Paul Alexis records a story of Zola asking him about prostitutes: ‘Tell me, Paul, how does one pay a street woman? Does one settle the bill before or after?’” (125) Further proof of this type of collaboration can be found in excerpts from Zola’s notebooks, published in an edition by Henri Mitterand (Carnets d’Enquêtes: Une ethnographie inédite de la France). In “Les Cocottes (Nana),” these notes provide pieces of his conversations with Edmond Laporte, Ludovic Halévy, Louise Taillandier, and Henry Céard as part of his research for the novel. Also included are Céard’s short sketches of a young prostitute.

After interviewing experts, the next step is to turn to written materials. It is probable that Zola, who advocated “lisant tout ce qui peut lui être utile” (Zola, Roman 214),<sup>10</sup> may have consulted several published works that dealt with Paris’ prostitution ‘problem’. Two works that may have directly influenced his writing of Nana, according to Bernheimer, are De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris, written by Alexander Parent-Duchâtelet in 1836, and one of the works that Parent-Duchâtelet was criticizing, Restif de la Bretonne’s Le Pornographe, published in 1769 (8-33).

Zola seems to have been inspired by texts such as De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris to create a realistic vision of a city struggling with the nature of the prostitute. Parent-Duchâtelet and Bretonne both viewed prostitution as “an inevitable evil” and were attempting

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<sup>10</sup>“Reading up all that [the author] thinks will be of the slightest service to him” (Zola, Novel 73).



in their texts to offer a solution to the Parisian government that would allow for prostitution without condoning or legalizing it. Parent-Duchâtelet's conclusions about the evils of the clandestine working girls, those who were not registered with the police and who did not reside in one of the *maisons de tolérance*, is scrutinized in Zola's account of Nana's history. Parent-Duchâtelet was apparently very concerned about the dangers that the 'clandestine' or '*insoumise*' class of prostitute posed to Paris—such as sexually transmitted diseases and lesbianism.

To create a realistic history of a Paris prostitute, Zola works from seemingly opposing sources. Drawing on the conversations he had with his peers and his knowledge of certain events in lives of real prostitutes/courtesans, Zola fleshes out the character of Nana and her history. Charles Bernheimer claims that Zola "is known to have gathered information about all of these famous courtesans [Anna Deslions, Cora Pearl, Valtesse de La Bigne, Delphine de Lizy and Blanche d'Antigny]" (230). I would argue that to a certain extent he modeled Nana after them. Nana is both a prostitute who exchanges money for sex as well as a powerful mistress to Count Muffat. However, as Zola rewrites a more naturalistic portrait of the prostitute and the courtesan, he shows in the characters of Nana how these positions can be blurred. She is both and neither. Although I must note that I do agree with Bernheimer that Zola breaks with the "*courtesan* myth" in that he doesn't represent Nana as possessing the level of education that these women had. The similarity in the names Anna and Nana suggests an overlap here of fictional woman and real woman, as does the likeness between Zola's notes on Anna Deslion and his descriptions of Nana: "Cette Anna courtisane magnifique, superbe créature, bonne fille, se donnant aux amis. Le mot de Valtesse surprise par un amant avec un jeune homme. 'C'est vrai, j'ai eu tort, mais je ne puis refuser ça à mes

amis pauvres.”<sup>11</sup> We hear Zola’s own words in Nana’s mouth when she tells Count Muffat, who catches her with her young lover Georges, “Eh bien, oui, j’ai eu tort... C’est très mal, ce que j’ai fait... Tu vois, je regrette ma faute...Vois-tu, chéri, il faut comprendre...Je ne puis refuser ça à mes amis pauvres” (Zola, Nana 1432).<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, it appears that Nana’s dinner party in chapter four is a reconstruction of Céard’s account of the dinner party at Lucy Lévy’s apartment (Zola, “Les Cocottes” 317-321). Zola re-imagines such details as Lucy/Nana greeting her guests, taking on the role of the lady of the house. In his notes, Zola writes, “à côté ordurier et jouant la femme du monde” [putting aside the filth, and playing the woman of the world] to describe Lucy (“Les Cocottes” 317). His description of Nana is strikingly similar, “du coup, elle devint très distinguée” (Nana 1167). “[She] rushed away to greet Rose Mignon in an extremely genteel voice” (Parmée, Nana 79). “She immediately assumed an extremely genteel manner” (Bair, Nana 82). La Faloise’s missing handkerchief, Foucarmont’s playful/malicious butchering of the other man’s name, the recitation of “*Le Sacrifice d’Abraham*” in the Alsatian dialect, as well as the pouring of the champagne into the piano, are all embellishments on moments described in Céard’s anecdote. The use of this anecdote allows Zola to create a scene that fits within his definition of naturalistic writing, showing a slice of life. It is possible that some of Zola’s readers would have been familiar with the actual event, either having been there themselves or, like Zola, having heard about it from someone who was there. It is within this reconstruction of an actual moment that Zola begins to develop the personal histories of the

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<sup>11</sup>Émile Zola, “Les Cocottes (Nana)” 312.

“Anna, this magnificent courtesan, superb creature, good girl, gave herself to her friends. In the words of Valtesse on her lover catching her with a young man, ‘This is true that I’m wrong, but I cannot refuse this to my poor friends.’” [my translation]

““Ok, yes, it was wrong of me, very wrong...You can see how sorry I am for what I did...It makes me feel dreadful because it’s made you cross...Oh come on, be nice too, tell me you forgive me...’ [...]‘You see, darling, you must try to understand...I can’t turn down my friends if they’re poor...’ ” (Parmée, Nana 367).

women characters in the novel. Situating their fictionalized lives within this real milieu, Zola challenges the reader to differentiate between fiction and reality. His writing shows not only an understanding and a consciousness about the world, but also about these women's places in that world, both the fictional heritage that describes them and the social construction that defines them.

In this scene the courtesans engage in a lively discussion about their children. By reminding the reader that these women were mothers and lovers at the same time, Zola explodes the conventional opposition between mother and prostitute or courtesan. This contrast is highlighted by the fact that, before the women begin discussing their experiences of motherhood, the narrator has just come out of Georges Hugon's thoughts: "Georges songeait qu'il avait assisté à des dîners plus gaies, chez des bourgeois d'Orléans....Il les [les amies de Nana] trouvait 'popote', il avait cru qu'on allait s'embrasser tout de suite" (Zola, Nana 1173).<sup>13</sup> A dinner party, composed of upper class men and lower class actresses (and part-time prostitutes and courtesans) is not the erotic affair that Georges, and the reader, has imagined it would be. Instead it resembles the dinner parties of the middle classes. This evocation of middle class values is only strengthened by the shift to the women's discussion of their children, how tall they've grown and how smart they are: "D'ailleurs, la conversation sur les enfants continuait. La Faloise, rempli de trouble par le voisinage de Gaga, lui demandait des nouvelles de sa fille[...]Lili se portait bien, mais elle était encore si gamine" (1175).<sup>14</sup> The husband of one of the actresses, Rose Mignon, even has his say. Mignon and Rose are even described as a most middle class couple: "On n'aurait pas trouvé un ménage

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<sup>13</sup>"Georges was thinking to himself that he'd been present at livelier dinner parties in middle-class houses in Orléans. They all seemed terribly humdrum; he'd imagined they'd all start kissing each other straight away" (Parmée, Nana 86).

<sup>14</sup>"Meanwhile the topic of children was still being pursued. Greatly excited by sitting so close to Gaga, la Faloise was enquiring after her daughter [...] Lili was well but still such a little monkey" (Parmée, Nana 87).

plus bourgeois ni plus uni” (1174).<sup>15</sup> The only other male voice to directly participate in this conversation is Count Vandevres, who inquires after one of the children. It is noteworthy that the men who participate in this conversation are Mignon, who has children of his own, La Falois, who is enquiring after Gaga’s children in an effort to woo her, and Count Vandevres, who perhaps is acting on a social prompt. It is probable that in polite society he would have been expected to make small talk with women, and children are a fairly reliable topic for conversation.

In particular, Nana’s maternal instincts are brought into play throughout the novel. Her double (or complex) nature is emphasized throughout. At moments, Nana is the traditional self-sacrificing mother, and at others she seems to fall back into the stereotype of the sexual predator. She is a contradiction, a vessel creating life and also destroying it. Nana vacillates between the doting mother and the negligent one. In the second chapter of the novel, in order to earn enough money to get Louis back from the wet nurse, Nana accepts a rendezvous set up by Madame Tricon, a madame in the true sense of the word. To be a good mother, meaning to be able to pay the wet nurse and claim her son, Nana must prostitute herself, whether literally, by ‘turning a trick’ for Madame Tricon, or by accepting ‘help’ from one of her male admirers, with the knowledge that there will be strings attached. At the end of the novel, Zola again shows the nurturing, self-sacrificing side of motherhood in Nana’s selfless care of her smallpox-afflicted son. Returning from abroad to find her son dying from the disease, Nana neglects her own safety to nurse Louis. By choosing to care for her son, Nana also chooses to risk death. Thus Zola works against the fictional heritage and instead presents the reader with a more complicated social construction of the *femme fatale* by showing her as a mother.

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<sup>15</sup>“You couldn’t have found a more middle-class or more united couple” (Parmée, Nana 87).

At the same time, Zola complicates the fictional heritage of the mother figure by invoking the trope of the bad mother as well as the one who sacrifices her life for her son. Nana is a mother who is neglectful of her son most of the time, only remembering him when it is beneficial to her to do so. For example, Nana forgets him at the races, so caught up is she in the victory of the horse named Nana. Louis is almost a set piece to his mother, nice to have in the background completing the domestic picture that she likes to see for herself, and useful to be able to bring out and show off when it is convenient for her. He is an amusement like Georges, someone she can pamper. He is a playmate when she is bored, much like her dog, with which he plays on her bed in the mornings. Louis is a topic that allows her entry into conversations with other mothers. And in the end he is someone that she can sacrifice herself for, completing one of her favorite roles, the maternal, nurturing, loving woman rather than the man-eating angel of death that she so often seems to be.

Zola moves into Miller's second level of feminist poetics when he locates Nana in the position of reader, a *voyeuse* of her own life. The two scenes that focus on Nana as a reader set her in an interesting and slightly uncomfortable relation to the real world woman reader. This mirroring of Nana and the reader show how Zola fits the requirement that "feminist writing make[] a claim for the heroine's singularity by staging the difficulty of her relation as a woman in fiction to Woman" (8).

This remarkable narrative strategy is revealed in chapter seven with Fauchery's article on Nana, "La Mouche d'Or," in which Nana reads her own story in the newspaper.<sup>16</sup> Nana is

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<sup>16</sup>"La chronique de Fauchery, intitulée La Mouche d'Or, était l'histoire d'une fille, née de quatre ou cinq générations d'ivrognes, le sang gâté par une longue hérédité de misère et de boisson, qui se transformait chez elle en un détraquement nerveux de son sexe de femme. Elle aviat poussé dans un faubourg, sur le pavé parisien; et grande, belle, de chair superbe ainsi qu'une plante de plein fumier, elle vengeait les gueux et les abandonnés dont elle était le produit. Avec elle, la pourriture qu'on laissait fermenter dans le peuple, remontait et pourrissait l'aristocratie. Elle devenait une force de la nature, un ferment de destruction, sans le vouloir elle-même, corrompant et désorganisant Paris entre ses cuisses de neige, le faisant tourner comme des

both the heroine of Zola's novel, which is being read by the real world woman, and she is the heroine of Fauchery's article, which she herself has read – with pleasure once her hairdresser, Francis explains that the article is actually about her. Clearly Nana believes that all publicity is good publicity: “Elle était flattée qu'on s'occupât de sa personne dans *Le Figaro*” (1267).<sup>17</sup> Later she gives the article to her lover, Count Muffat, to read, increasing her audience by one more admirer. This mirroring extends to the reader as well. Thus, perhaps the real world woman reader is also the heroine of Zola's novel, reading her own story.

“La Mouche d'Or” is a summary of Nana's history in Zola's novel L'Assommoir. It is in this novel that Zola first introduces his character, Nana, the daughter of the heroine, Gervaise. In L'Assommoir, Zola shows Nana as the daughter of a drunkard, growing up in poverty, who must live with the knowledge that she, even as a little child, managed to destroy the people around her.<sup>18</sup> In his preface to L'Assommoir, Zola writes : “Au bout de l'ivrognerie et de la fainéantise, il y a le relâchement des liens de la famille, les ordures de la

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femmes, chaque mois, font tourner le lait. Et c'était à la fin de l'article que se trouvait la comparaison de la mouche, une mouche couleur de soleil, envolée de l'ordure, une mouche qui prenait la mort sur les charognes tolérées le long des chemins, et qui, bourdonnante, dansante, jetant un éclat de pierreries, empoisonnait les hommes rien qu'à se poser sur eux, dans le palais où elle entrait par les fenêtres” (Zola, Nana 1269-1270).

“Entitled the ‘Golden Fly’, Fauchery's piece was about a tart, the offspring of four or five generations of alcoholics, her blood tainted by a long heredity of deep poverty and drink, which in her case had taken the form of unhinging the nervous balance of her sexuality. She'd been brought up on the streets in a working-class Paris slum and now, a tall and lovely girl with a magnificently sensual body, like a plant flourishing on a dung-heap, she was avenging the poor, underprivileged wretches from whom she'd sprung. While the people were left to rot in degrading circumstances, she would carry this pollution upwards to contaminate the aristocracy. She was turning into a force of nature and, without any intention on her part, a ferment of destruction; between her plump white thighs, Paris was being corrupted and thrown into chaos; she was making it rot in the same way as, every month, women make milk go sour. At the end of the article came the comparison with the fly; a golden fly, the colour of sunshine, escaping from its dung-heap and bringing with it the deadly germs of the carrion allowed to fester by the roadside; dancing and buzzing, as dazzling as a precious stone, it would slip through the windows of palaces and poison the men inside merely by settling on them” (Parmée, Nana 190).

<sup>17</sup>“She was flattered to receive any attention from the *Figaro*” (Parmée, Nana 187).

<sup>18</sup>Here I'm referring to her distracting Coupeau while he is working on the roof of a building, causing him to fall off. This fall is the beginning of the decline of Coupeau's character and the decline of the family that Nana has known. There is also a strong link between Nana and her grandmother's death, not so much that Nana caused it, but that she becomes obsessed with the dead body and death (373).

promiscuité, l'oubli progressif des sentiments honnêtes, puis comme dénouement la honte et la mort. C'est de la morale en action simplement" (373).<sup>19</sup> In Nana the girl, now an adult, gets her own novel in the Rougon-Mcquart series. When looking at both texts one sees that the venue shifts from the outskirts of industrialized Paris to the center of Paris itself, especially the social center; the novel follows a similar pattern, that of illustrating the depravity of promiscuity while at the same time indicting all of society in the crime.

In another challenging metalevel scene in chapter ten, Zola takes Nana out of the novel and locates her in his own reading public. She becomes the representative of Zola's detractors who labeled his works as dirty : "Elle avait lu dans la journée un roman qui faisait grand bruit, l'histoire d'une fille ; et elle se révoltait, elle disait que tout cela était faux, témoignant d'ailleurs une répugnance indignée contre cette littérature immonde, dont la prétention était de rendre la nature ; comme si l'on pouvait tout montrer !" (1369)<sup>20</sup> This mirror of Nana as heroine in Zola's text and as critic of that same text, the novel of the prostitute that claims to show everything, can be read through Miller's second level in her poetics. The portrayal of Nana as woman reader and her position as fictional heroine places her in a liminal space where she exists between that of real-world woman reader and fictional heroine. As with the newspaper article, with which she did not at first identify, Nana is incapable of recognizing herself in the text. This creates an uncomfortable space in the text where the knowledgeable reader will feel the need to look for herself in the novel in order to set herself apart from the unknowing Nana.

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<sup>19</sup>"Intoxication and idleness lead to a weakening of family ties, to the filth of promiscuity, to the progressive neglect of decent feelings and ultimately to degradation and death. It is simply morality in action" (Mauldon, L'Assommoir 3).

<sup>20</sup>"During the day she'd read a novel that was arousing a great deal of discussion, the story of a tart; and she was saying that it was appalling and quite untrue; she also expressed her indignation and revulsion at that sort of filth that claimed to give a true picture of life. As if you could put everything into a book, as if a novel should be written for any reason but a reader's entertainment!" (Parmée, Nana 298).

The passages in the novel where Zola makes Nana the reader and consumer of her own story accomplish at least two things. First, they identify the reader with Nana by forcing her to either agree or disagree with the heroine's reading of her own story. There is an interesting paradox that happens here. The conservative reader may desire to agree with Nana's reading, relegating the naturalist novel to the rubbish heap. However, this would put her in the uncomfortable predicament of identifying herself with Nana, a woman of questionable morals who lacks the finesse of the real-life courtesans with whom the reader of that era may have been familiar. Thus the heroine Nana and the woman Nana come face-to-face with the reader, the real-world woman.

The second accomplishment is that these moments interrupt the flow of the text, pulling the reader out of the novel and confronting him/her with his/her own act of reading. The reader is reminded that he/she is reading, reminded of the fact that Nana is not real, but is in fact a fictional creation, thus forcing the reader to face the naturalistic novel as such—a novel that is so realistic that it is possible one may someday read his/her own life in its pages. This raises the question of whether, if that eventuality happened, the reader would, unlike Nana, recognize her story in the pages of the text – or would she, like Nana, condemn her own story? Thus if the reader condemns the naturalist format, it would follow that she would be aligning herself with Nana and perhaps would make the same reading mistakes, unable to recognize herself in the text.

Both of these accomplishments would then logically lead to the same result: the reader would have to validate the conventions of the naturalistic novel or else she would have to accept the fact that by choosing the reading that condemns naturalism, she would be aligning herself with Nana, presumably one of the reasons she condemned the text in the first place.



This mirroring of Nana's life in the text she reads then becomes a mirror for the real reader, forcing Nana and the real-world reader into an uncomfortable and irresolvable conflict.

The third level of Miller's poetics claims that feminist writing "contests the available plots of female development of *Bildung* and embodies dissent from the dominant tradition in a certain number of recurrent narrative gestures, especially in the modalities of closure that Rachel DuPlessis has called 'writing beyond the ending'" (8). Zola resists the traditional plot lines in Nana's story in different ways: she is a mother without being a wife; she is a repugnant, unsympathetic mother; she chooses not to marry, finding empowerment in her deviation from the convention. Yet, even as he is resisting traditional social standards, Zola still tends to circle back on them: Nana is an actress, albeit not a good one, and she is a prostitute, perpetuating the stereotype of the actress who is also a 'working' girl. She is a transgressive woman, a sexual predator who destroys men and who in the end is punished with death.

Nana's death would seem to relegate her to a morality tale, the punishment for a life lived thus. In conventional works, a transgressive woman, especially one who breaks with society's mores through her sexuality, is punished through madness or death. By having Nana die at the end, Zola is inflicting a moral punishment on her; yet she is not dying of a sexually-transmitted disease, but rather from smallpox. This detail undermines the moral ending in that Nana's disease is not consistent with her crime; thus the punishment does not altogether fit the crime. One could argue that Nana is not being punished for her crimes of transgression, but rather for finally being a caring mother, by nursing Louis when he is dying of smallpox. Like the conventional fallen woman, Nana will die, but unlike the transgressive woman in novels concerned with moral endings, her death cannot be completely attributed to

her 'bad' choices. Unlike other novels, the deathbed scene in this text is completely removed from the heroine. The reader is out on the street hearing secondhand the accounts of Nana's illness and death: there are no deathbed throes, no confession, and no last-minute repentance.

Miller claims that "Finally, through an insistence on singularity, feminist writing figures the existence of other subjective economies, other styles of identity" (8). Zola begins to imagine other styles of feminine identity in *Nana*; however, just as he really starts to break free from the social constructions allowed for women during this time, he immediately undermines the identity he has drawn. He begins to create a new definition of motherhood through the mothers in the text. He complicates the identities of the virtuous woman and the prostitute. He imagines lesbian identities. But for each identity he starts to re-envision, he circles back on the characters with the social mores, seeming to punish them for their sins.

Zola also seems to be refiguring the identity of both the prostitute and the mother by merging these two seemingly opposing characters. Nana's identity as mother, actress, prostitute and courtesan forces the reader to reevaluate his/her preconceptions, based on both the societal definition and the fictional legacy, about prostitutes and mothers and to create a broader definition, one that encompasses both. Zola consistently links the women in the text with motherhood, with sexual appetites, and with using the body as a means for financial and social gain. None of the positions is clear-cut or final. None of the women, with perhaps the exception of Madame Hugon, is seen only in the role of the mother, but rather as a continuum.

The complex relationship between the virtuous woman and sexual predator is explored in the character Countess Sabine Muffat, the wife of Nana's principle lover. The Countess mirrors Nana and her character's development reflects Nana's evolution. From the first

chapter in which Sabine appears until the end of the novel, Nana and Sabine, while never encountering each other, are always seen to be in some crisscrossing relation. This connection is reinforced by Fauchery's notice of the mole on Sabine's cheek ; it is identical to one on Nana's cheek : "Mais un signe qu'il aperçut à la joue gauche de la comtesse, près de la bouche, le surprit. Nana avait le même, absolument. C'était drôle. Sur le signe, de petits poils frisaient ; seulement, les poils blonds de Nana étaient chez l'autre d'un noir de jais."<sup>21</sup> The use of the mole is important not only for linking Nana and Sabine, but also for literally marking them as 'prostitutes', as Charles Bernheimer illustrates: "Even aristocratic women are affected [by Nana's disease "the unrepressed sexual and excremental dross of the decadent aristocracy and affluent bourgeoisie" (217)]: Count Muffat's wife has a mole with curly hairs exactly like Nana does (hairy moles are a mark of degeneration in the female subject, present among 41 percent of prostitutes but only 14 percent of 'normals,' according to the pioneering fin-de-siècle fantasists of criminal deviance, Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero)" (218).

Sabine is initially shown as a mother and decorous lady of the upper classes. We see her in her drawing room playing hostess to a roomful of guests. This is followed in chapter four with Nana's own attempts at playing the gracious hostess. Throughout the first scene, Fauchery is continually trying to determine if Sabine is as virtuous as she appears. It is her role as mother combined with her relation to Madame Hugon, the quintessential mother, that makes it nearly impossible for Fauchery to accept that she is not what she seems: "Elle ne couchait avec personne, cela sautait aux yeux. Il suffisait de la voir là près de sa fille, si nulle

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<sup>21</sup>Émile Zola, *Nana* 1150.

"He was struck by the mole on the countess's left cheek, close to her mouth; Nana had an absolutely identical one. That was funny. Curly little hairs were sprouting out of the mole, but while Nana's were blonde hers were jet-black" (Parmée, *Nana* 60).

et si guindée sur son tabouret....Et Fauchery à voir là cette respectable Mme Hugon, cette figure maternelle éclairée d'un si bon sourire, entre ses larges bandeaux de cheveux blancs, se trouva ridicule d'avoir soupçonné un instant la comtesse Sabine."<sup>22</sup> The truth of Countess Sabine's virtue comes out in the course of the novel; she does indeed give in to her desires and is a sexual being, even though she is a mother. In fact, it is Nana, who becomes a story teller in her own right, when she opens the Count's eyes to his wife's infidelities. By the end of the novel, Sabine is allowing her sexual appetites to dictate her actions : "la comtesse Sabine, dans un détraquement suprême, venait de s'enfuir avec un chef de rayon d'un grand magasin de nouveautés, scandale affreux dont tout Paris causait déjà."<sup>23</sup> Sabine has switched realms, moving from the pampered lifestyle of the aristocracy to the lowly position of mistress to a working man. Sabine has in fact worked her way down the class ladder, from aristocratic life to mistress of a middle class man. This inverts the path that would have been used by 'successful' prostitutes, who wanted to become courtesans to wealthy men. For the very fortunate prostitute, she might even become a wife.

The etymology of the word "prostitution" is carefully broken down by Bernheimer into the following elements: the Latin *pro* meaning "in public" and *statuere* as "forth or forth in public." Bernheimer claims that Baudelaire may have had this in mind when he wrote that "art is prostitution" (1). This may also have something to do with society's past tendency to

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<sup>22</sup> Émile Zola, *Nana* 1150, 1153.

"So, she was definitely not sleeping with anyone, that was plain. You only needed to look at her, sitting next to her daughter, that little nonentity perched so stiffly on her stool.[...] And looking at Madame Hugon's motherly, honest face set between its large coils of white hair, Fauchery thought he'd been ridiculous to suspect Countess Sabine even for a second" (Parmée, *Nana* 61, 63).

<sup>23</sup> Émile Zola, *Nana* 1464.

"...in a final act of lunacy, his wife had just run away with the head of a department of a large drapery-and-fancy-goods store, an appalling scandal which was already the talk of the town" (Parmée, *Nana* 402).

"...Countess Sabine, in a supreme burst of madness, had just run off with a shopwalker in a dry-goods store, a horrible scandal about which the whole city was already talking" (Bair, *Nana* 417-8).

label actresses as prostitutes. One of the identities being refigured in Nana is this conflation of the actress and the prostitute.

Zola may have been inspired to tackle this particular story in part due to the 1879 arrest of a well known actress who was charged with prostitution: “The furor aroused by this obviously mistaken catch gave new fire to the anti-Moeurs crusade during the next few years; the abolitionist movement...was fanned by pamphlets, newspaper campaigns, and the publicized trial of an antibrigade activist (Harsin 3). It is unlikely that Zola would have not have been aware of this highly publicized event. On the otherhand, it is hard to say exactly how much of Nana it could have influenced, considering that it occurred within the same year as the text’s publication.

As Nana’s sexuality is detailed, it grows from a means of supporting herself and her son to an uncontrollable compulsion. While Nana ascends the social ladder in the novel, Zola reduces her to the level of an animal, characterizing her sexuality and physicality through the use of similes and metaphors that bestialize the heroine, as in the earlier example of Fauchery’s article, “la Mouche d’Or” (the Golden Fly). Another example is in the scene at the horse races where, in fun, people keep asking who is riding Nana the horse – but they could be asking about the woman as well.

When reading Nana through the lens of Miller’s poetics for feminist writing, it is imperative to remember that Zola’s indictment and punishment of Nana is not a moral lesson just for women, but that he was implicating a whole society. Everyone is guilty of the disintegration of the moral fiber of the society. Georges’ suicide is an example of an indictment implicating everyone, not just Nana. Nana’s unfaithfulness and disregard for his feelings has always been an issue for Georges, however; driven to despair by her affair with

his own brother, Georges kills himself in her room. His dramatic end is similar to those cases of suicide by fallen women whose lovers forsake them. This moral disintegration is symbolized in the tracking away of Georges' blood from Nana's rug:

Cette chambre devenait un carrefour, continuellement des bottes s'essuyaient sur le seuil ; et pas un n'était arrêté par le trait de sang qui barrait la porte... Zoé avait gardé une préoccupation de cette tache... elle n'entrait plus chez Madame sans dire :

“C'est drôle, ça ne s'en va pas... Il vient pourtant assez de monde.”

Nana... faisait chaque fois la même réponse :

“Ah ! Dame, il faut le temps... Ça pâlit sous les pieds.”

En effet, chacun de ces messieurs, Foucarmont, Steiner, La Faloise, Fauchery, avait emporté un peu de la tache à ses semelles.<sup>24</sup>

Each of these men is partially responsible for Georges' attempted suicide; Nana is not solely to blame, just as the prostitute is not solely to blame for all the evils of society. The men's share of the blame is in part due to their own moral failings; if the men stayed with their wives, or waited until they were married, there would be no competition for Nana's love. In this case in particular, most of the men she was with, with the exceptions of Georges and Count Muffat, knew about her other lovers. Georges and the Count only suspect she has other lovers, but wanting to protect themselves, they believe the lies she tells them. They too are in part responsible for their own destructions.

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<sup>24</sup>Émile Zola, Nana 1458-9.

The bedroom was being made into a public right-of-way; lots of feet were being wiped on the doorstep and none was deterred by the blood-stain on the threshold. This stain had become a permanent challenge to Zoé[...].and every time she went into her mistress's bedroom she'd say:

“It's odd, it's still there... And it's not as if there aren't enough people walking over it.”

Nana [...] invariably made the the same reply:

“Well, it takes time... It *is* getting paler as people walk on it.”

Indeed, each of her men, Foucarmont, Steiner, la Faloise, and Fauchery, had taken away some of the stain on the soles of their shoes. (Parmée, Nana 396-7)

That bedroom was like a crossroads; boots were continually wiped on the threshold—and no one was ever stopped by the bloodstain in front of the door. In her concern for cleanliness, Zoé was still preoccupied with that stain. [...] She never went into Madame's bedroom without saying, “It's funny it still hasn't gone away.... And yet plenty of people come here.”

Nana [...] always made the same reply: “Oh, it takes time.... The footsteps are wearing it away.”

And indeed each one of the gentlemen—Foucarmont, Steiner, La Faloise, Fauchery—had carried away a little of the stain on the soles of his shoes. (Bair, Nana 411)

The aristocratic woman, the mother figure and the prostitute are all fairly equally implicated in this novel; another identity that Zola includes in the text is that of the lesbian. Nana's relationship with Satin, another young prostitute who grew up on the streets of Paris, develops into a lesbian obsession and eventually leads to Satin's destruction. Nana is not just the destroyer of men, but of all sexual beings. The fear of lesbianism was the basis for some of the laws regarding the *maison de tolérance*: "Each woman had to have her own bed, a regulation motivated not by hygiene but by the fear of lesbianism" (Harsin 40).<sup>25</sup> The evils that the society feared from women sharing a bed seem to be given credence at the end of chapter eight in Nana. Nana, having been kicked out of her apartment by her lover Fontan, has, in her anguish, turned to her friend Satin. Satin finds them a room in what is probably a "*maison garnie*, or *hotel garnie*" (Harsin 33). Once in the bed, Satin

prit tout de suite Nana entre ses bras, afin de la calmer. Elle ne voulait plus entendre le nom de Fontan ; chaque fois qu'il revenait sur les lèvres de son amie, elle l'y arrêta d'un baiser, avec une jolie moue de colère, les cheveux dénoués, d'une beauté enfantine et noyée d'attendrissement. Alors, peu à peu, dans cette étreinte si douce, Nana essuya ses larmes. Elle était touchée, elle rendait à Satin ses caresses. Lorsque deux heures sonnèrent, la bougie brûlait encore ; toutes deux avaient de légers rires étouffés, avec des paroles d'amour. (Zola 1319)<sup>26</sup>

At this moment they are interrupted by the police banging on the door. At this time in Paris, police could raid lodging houses looking for unregistered prostitutes. Satin and Nana represent two of the largest fears of the Parisian society of the day, the clandestine prostitute (*l'insoumise*) and the lesbian.

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<sup>25</sup>In her footnote, Harsin writes: "The 'one bed, one prostitute' rule was established in 1824, according to Parent-Duchâtelet, De la prostitution, I:167."

<sup>26</sup>"Once they were in bed, she immediately started cuddling Nana and soothing her. She didn't want to hear Fontan's name ever again; every time Nana said it, she cut her off with a pretty little pout of indignation and a kiss on her lips; her hair was hanging loose and she looked like a charming affectionate girl. Cuddling in her soft arms, Nana gradually dried her tears. Feeling affectionate herself, she started kissing and hugging Satin too. When the clock struck two, the candle still hadn't been put out; they were both billing and cooing and stifling their giggles" (Parmée, Nana 245).

The threat of the lesbian to society is played out in the course of Zola's novel. Satin appears first in chapter one outside of the Variety Theater, when everyone is anticipating the performance of Bourdenave's most recent find, Nana. And even Nana, at the beginning of her affair with Satin, is disgusted by lesbianism. After Nana's betrayal by Fontan and introduction to same-sex love, Satin becomes a fixture of Nana's home and to Nana's way of thinking a possession. Nana begins to flaunt their relationship in front of Count Muffat, forcing him to accept her affair with Satin or be abandoned himself. Sexual appetite, that of the men and of the women in the novel, as well as the desire to participate in a world of conspicuous consumption, ends by destroying Nana, Satin, and most of the male figures in the narrative. The last time we see Nana alive she is kissing Satin goodbye at the end of Chapter 13.

It is the carnage that trails behind Nana and her disease-ridden death that makes it tempting to readers to label Nana as a simple morality tale of a fallen woman who ruins all that she touches and who, in the end, is punished for her sins. However, it would be incorrect to read the novel completely in this vein: it ignores the fact that Zola's writing is supposed to be read as observations of experiments as well as the principle of evolution that he was trying to document. Both of these facts are what allow a broader reading of the text, one that can encompass a feminist perspective, to a certain extent a positive "spin." By applying Miller's poetics for feminist writing, we are able to give a less reductive reading yet at the same time make the reader acknowledge the fact that, while Zola does break free from the conventional tropes in certain ways, he also loops back in others, both empowering and undermining the heroine in the same turn. Miller's poetics encourages the reader to remember the goal of Zola's naturalism, the portrayal of 'real' life and not just the depiction of stereotypes. It also



engages the reader to identify with the heroine and other characters. Finally, it makes careful readers question their expectations for the heroine's plot development and exposes them to the new identities the author is trying to portray.

### CHAPTER III

#### SISTER CARRIE

When Theodore Dreiser began writing one of his most well-known novels, Sister Carrie, in 1899, it is probable that he was not writing with a feminist agenda in mind, but rather with a social one: “literary realists, and much more naturalists, felt charged on behalf of objective fact to scrutinize the professed standards for sexuality and, most egregiously, for courtship and marriage” (Pizer 30). However, these two different categories overlap and merge in ways that allow for feminist readings of the novel. Here, too, using contemporary theories on practices of feminist writing and reading can lead the modern reader to new and insightful interpretations of the text. Miller’s poetics for feminist writing proves to be a useful tool in the development of the argument for a feminist reading of Dreiser’s novel, giving modern readers a glimpse, perhaps, of how this novel might have been inspiring to a woman in the early twentieth-century.

The opening page of Sister Carrie illustrates the first two levels of Miller’s poetics for feminist writing. Miller writes: “At a first level, then, feminist writing articulates as and in a discourse a self-consciousness about woman’s identity. I mean by this both an inherited cultural fiction and a process of social construction” (8). In order to examine Dreiser’s writing within this framework, it is necessary to examine his autobiography as well as the biographies he writes which tell the histories of his sisters. This approach should enable us to see how in developing Carrie’s character, he is writing with a consciousness of woman’s

position in society. We may begin to see how Dreiser engages with women's social construction. Combining this with an examination of some of the plots from the more traditional works coming out of the Victorian period, we can piece together the ways in which he is rewriting women's possible histories, both the fictional as well as the social.

In his beginning, Dreiser sets the stage for his discussion of women, which continues throughout the entire novel. He uses a combination of generalizing statements about women and their condition, the voice of society at large, and Carrie's personal development to engage both the cultural fiction with which the reader would be familiar and the social constructions which Carrie's character development seems to rewrite.

On the first page of his novel, Dreiser writes: "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility" (3). In offering his readers this truism, Dreiser fulfills Miller's first level of feminist writing; he is defining woman's identity based on the cultural assumption that an eighteen-year-old girl's social construction can only develop along two lines. The narrator voicing this generalization seems to represent the voice of society at large, as is illustrated in Priscilla Wald's essay:<sup>27</sup>

... the similarity between [a sociologist's] description [of the development of the single, American woman] and the plot of Sister Carrie attests to a cultural narrative, a story that

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<sup>27</sup>W. I. Thomas's observation in his article "The Adventitious Character of Woman" as quoted by Wald on page 177:

The girl coming from the country to the city affords one of the clearest cases of detachment. Assuming that she comes to the city to earn her living, her work is not only irksome, but so unremunerative that she finds it impossible to obtain those accessories to her personality in the way of finery which would be sufficient to hold her attention and satisfy her if they were to be had in plenty. She is lost from the sight of everyone whose opinion has any meaning for her, while the separation from her home community renders her condition peculiarly flat and lonely; and she is prepared to accept any opportunity for stimulation offered her, unless she has been morally standardized before leaving home. To be completely lost sight of may, indeed, become an object under these circumstances – the only means by which she can without confusion accept unapproved situations – and to pass from a regular to an irregular life and back again before the fact has been noted is not an unusual course. (42)

seems familiar because it is retold in a variety of contexts from the pulpit to the press, from novels and plays to medical and sociology journals. At first glance, in fact, it reads like one of the oldest of cautionary tales, a fallen woman story. (178)

Thus the narrator's generalization provides the reader with the majority viewpoint as it has been reinforced both in the society itself as well as in the literature it has produced.

When reading this third paragraph, the reader should recall the description of Carrie from the very first paragraph: "It was August 1889. She was eighteen years of age, bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth" (Dreiser 3). Thus, Dreiser begins to define Carrie for the reader. By following these statements with his maxim on the fate of young women in the city, Dreiser also sets Carrie in relation to all other women and to women in fiction. The use of the narrative generalization as the voice of society, compared or contrasted with the descriptions of the heroine, provides Dreiser with a space for explaining, or calling into question, the limited character and social development possibilities that are available to all women in this society and therefore to Carrie.

The requirements for Miller's first and second levels of feminist writing are both met in this style. On the one hand the social proverbs that Dreiser creates illustrate an understanding and a consciousness about the "inherited cultural fiction and...process of social construction" that Miller addresses in her first level. Dreiser's depiction of Carrie, both in the ways she fits the generalizations and in the ways she differs from them, allows him to call these constructions into question even as he rewrites them. Carrie's refusal to fit herself perfectly to such generalizations emphasizes her singularity, placing her between the fictional woman of the social fable and the real women in society, as will be seen in the discussion of Dreiser's use of biography.

In her first interactions with Drouet, Carrie's naïveté is juxtaposed to the sophistication of the city woman: "She realised that she was of interest to him from the one standpoint which a woman both delights in and fears. Her manner was simple, though for the very reason that she had not yet learned the many little affectations with which women conceal their true feelings. Some things she did appeared bold. A clever companion—had she ever had one—would have warned her never to look a man in the eyes so steadily" (7).

While her naïveté distances her from Dreiser's image of the archetypal woman, her material desires connect Carrie to that same image. Dreiser claims that:

A woman should some day write the complete philosophy of clothes. No matter how young, it is one of the things she wholly comprehends. There is an indescribably faint line in the matter of a man's apparel which somehow divides for her those who are worth glancing at and those who are not. Once an individual has passed this faint line on the way downward he will get no glance from her. There is another line at which the dress of a man will cause her to study her own. This line the individual at her elbow now marked for Carrie. She became conscious of an inequality. Her own plain blue dress with its black cotton tape trimmings, now seemed to her shabby. She felt the worn state of her shoes. (6)

By aligning Carrie with his idea of woman in general, Dreiser is defining the trap which Carrie will fall into and by which she will be consumed, the same one that he foregrounded in his first chapter. If a woman falls into either "saving hands" or destroying hands, as the opposite would seem to be, then something must propel her into those hands—partly chance, as in Carrie's encountering Drouet on the train, and partly circumstances, such as Carrie's own financial struggles and lack of job opportunities. However, it is also in part due to some character trait in herself: Carrie's desire for a lifestyle that neither she nor Minnie and Sven can afford. A careful reader will begin to see where Carrie's weaknesses are and how she is manipulated.

Nevertheless, the fact that Carrie's desires make her an easy target and precipitate her fall also sets her apart from Woman in general, at least the city woman that Dreiser is defining.

With a “city” woman, Drouet would “find out her name, her favourite flower, where a note would reach her, and perhaps pursue the delicate task of friendship until it proved unpromising, when it would be relinquished. He would do very well with more pretentious women, though the burden of expense was a slight deterrent” (6). Because of her naïveté, her desire for a better way of life, and her feelings of sheer helplessness about providing these things for herself, Carrie is an easier mark than the pretentious woman; she may require expense, but she will also give more away.

However, Dreiser does not just create a fictional Carrie to pit against the social constructions and fictions of women’s development; he also creates a real Carrie, a composite of real women’s experiences. Based on Dreiser’s personal history, one can make the argument that he is writing from a point of consciousness about woman’s identity in his society. In juxtaposition to the narrator’s generalizations, Dreiser uses the individual experiences of the people he knows<sup>28</sup> to write a fictional history that is more representative of his understanding of reality than of the fictional constructs of traditional literature. In fact, Carrie Meeber’s story seems to be a composite of those of two or more of Dreiser’s sisters, and perhaps Carrie’s path through life is Dreiser’s rewriting of his sisters’ lives.

Compared and contrasted to society’s sweeping generalizations is Carrie’s own story, which can be read through the lens of Miller’s second level of feminist writing. Miller argues that “feminist writing makes a claim for the heroine’s singularity by staging the difficulty of her relation as a woman in fiction to Woman” (8). I am interpreting singularity to be two-fold, representing the heroine’s individuality or distinctiveness from all other women as well as signifying her deviation from the societal norm. If Dreiser’s generalizations speak to

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<sup>28</sup>He also uses his own life as material for his novels. If anyone is interested in this angle, The ‘Genius’ is considered to be his most autobiographical novel.

Miller's first level of feminist writing, then it would seem that the use of individual histories, the moments of 'truth' in the text, fit the second level of the poetics in their ability to separate Carrie's fictional history and the reality of that history for living women. Carrie herself may be fiction, but Dreiser's sisters and their stories are real; thus Carrie is a mixture of the two, both fiction and reality.

Many young writers of his day absorbed the idea that fiction could replicate reality, even to the point of scientific exactness....He thought of Sister Carrie 'as a book that is close to life. It is intended not as a piece of literary craftsmanship, but as a picture of conditions done as simply and effectively as the English language will permit.' His most consistent way of grounding his fiction in the 'extent of all reality' was to turn to real-life sources. (Pizer 35)

The personal histories of his sisters Emma, Mame, Sylvia, Theresa and Claire have been picked over, pieces selected, then melded together to help create the history of Caroline Meeber, as well as other women in Sister Carrie and in many of Dreiser's other novels. For example, in Dreiser's An American Tragedy, Roberta Alden's pregnancy and attempts to find a doctor who will perform an abortion on her are reminiscent of Dreiser's sister Mame's attempt to find an abortionist. In his novel The "Genius", Dreiser may be using his marriage to Sarah Dreiser to flesh out the relationship between Eugene and Angela.

In Sister Carrie, the heroine's relationship with Drouet reflects Mame's relationship with the older Colonel Silsby.<sup>29</sup> In the novel, Carrie seems to allow her desire for material items to

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<sup>29</sup>This is the pseudonym that Dreiser uses in his autobiography, Dawn: An Autobiography of Early Youth, for the attorney who became infatuated with Mame when the family lived in Terre Haute, Indiana. As neither the editor of Dreiser's autobiography, nor W. A. Swanberg, the author of Dreiser, a biography of the famous author, give the real name of this man, Colonel Silsby will be used whenever this person is mentioned.

Dreiser also uses fictitious names for his sisters in this text: "To the girls, for reasons of my own, I shall give fictitious names and disregard the order of their birth. I shall call them Amy, Trina, Eleanor, Ruth, and Janet" (10). In the index, T. D. Nostwich, the editor of the text, lists the sisters under their fictitious names and in parentheses he adds the name of the sister whom he believes is represented by each false name.

Dreiser's reasons for fictionalizing his sisters in this work would seem to stem from his knowledge of how the society will judge them based on the actions that they take in their real lives. This is a judgment that his fictional character Carrie manages to avoid in the reality of the novel, but which the novel itself found difficult to get away from, resulting in little promotion of the first publication and delay in future attempts to republish the text.

seduce her as much if not more than her attraction for Drouet. Mame's initial interactions with Colonel Silsby also seem to revolve around her consumer desire. Both women live in a predominantly consumer culture, one in which they, while having the desire, do not have the means to participate.

In Dawn: An Autobiography of Early Youth, Dreiser relates Mame's history with Colonel Silsby:

During one of the most desperate periods of the family's finances, when my father was out of employment, my sister [Mame], who was then only fifteen or sixteen, met a Colonel Silsby..., a prominent lawyer and officeholder in Terre Haute....Later, seeing her eyeing longingly the hats in a milliner's window at Eastertide, and knowing the family's financial state, this same Colonel asked [Mame] if she wouldn't like to have one.

"Indeed I would!" she replied.

"Then you take this ten dollars and see if you can get one!"

After some persuasion she took the money. And so began a friendship which ended in intimacy and what by some might be deemed seduction. (13)

Swanberg in his depiction of the event quotes Dreiser's text for the most part; however, his account is more matter of fact, stating, "The lawyer seduced the girl and became her lover" (6).

Carrie's own seduction is prompted by her desire for the lovely clothes that she sees being worn by women all around her. She knows that she would look her best if she could only afford to buy the garments. Drouet's ability to provide her with these luxuries is in part what draws her to him. However, there exists an aspect in this relationship that is not covered in either the autobiography or the biography: Carrie also finds Drouet himself appealing. Not only does he have money, but he is handsome and charming. The money is most likely the primary attraction as it can afford Carrie the material items that she desires; however, the attention she receives from him flatters her and is an added inducement. It doesn't hurt that



he is handsome and charming. Carrie's self-admiration and obsession with her own appearance mirrors Nana's behavior.

Originally, Drouet offers Carrie twenty dollars with which to buy herself a new jacket. At first hesitant, Carrie allows Drouet's persuasion and her own desires to convince her to accept the money, without considering the difficulty she will have explaining how she came by it. When Carrie actually tries to use the money she is torn between her desires and her feelings of propriety: "Now she paused at each individual bit of finery, where before she had hurried on. Her woman's heart was warm with desire for them. How would she look in this, how charming that would make her!...All the time she wavered in mind, now persuading herself that she could buy it right away if she chose, now recalling to herself the actual condition" (63-4). Finally, unable to make up her mind, Carrie meets Drouet for lunch without the jacket, but when she insists that she cannot take the money from him, Drouet cheerfully overrides her objections and takes her shopping himself. It is during this shopping excursion that Drouet convinces Carrie to leave Minnie and Sven and to let him set her up in an apartment somewhere. Drouet sells it to her as a platonic situation, claiming, "You can get yourself a nice room by yourself. I won't hurt you" (65). Nonetheless, it seems that Carrie is aware of the underlying motivations: "Carrie saw the drift, but could not express her thoughts. She felt more than ever the helplessness of her case" (65). Yet, Carrie's desires for material items and a lifestyle that is different from her sister's override her better judgment.

When reading Carrie's story and seeing her seeming complicity in her circumstances, her seeming lack of agency, one is able to see her connection to Dreiser's Emma who confessed to her brother: "Where [she] liked a man, it was easy enough to go with him—it was fun—there wasn't really anything wrong with it that [she] could see. Aside from the social scheme

as people seem to want it, [she doesn't] even now see that it was" (69). Carrie is seen to be carried along with the tide in her seduction by Drouet and elopement with Hurstwood.

Rarely does Carrie moralize. She seems immune to self-analysis or reflection. "He looked steadily at her as she glanced about, warmly musing" (75). Carrie is trying to escape from her sister's fate and the strict morality of the society in which she lived, as mirrored in Minnie's dream: Minnie and Carrie are looking into a pit and Carrie wants to get into the basket and descend into the mine, while Minnie holds back. Carrie descends into the cavity, leaving Minnie watching after her. Minnie's dream alerts the reader to Carrie's real situation with Drouet; in Minnie's view, which reflects the view of society, Carrie has in effect descended into the abyss. Immediately after Minnie's dream, we find Drouet inviting Hurstwood out to his house (75-7). Carrie's seduction is complete with only the slightest of emotions on her own part. And Dreiser is already introducing the next entanglement in which Carrie will find herself succumbing to Hurstwood.

Dreiser's sister Emma's biography provides him with more than just a conflict with society's mores; it also lends a framework for developing Carrie's relationship with Hurstwood. In 1886, Dreiser's sister Emma left Chicago with a married man, L. A. Hopkins, a bar cashier.<sup>30</sup> Apparently before running away, Hopkins stole \$3,500 from the establishment he worked at. Hopkins and Emma ran first to Montreal and then to New York, where they settled down. The elopement and theft are detailed in Swanberg's biography: however in Dreiser's Dawn the elopement is glossed over and the theft is not mentioned. Instead the truth is cloaked in news of Emma's marriage and Dreiser's own social commentary:

And more, considering all that had been said, I had been strongly of the opinion that no

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<sup>30</sup>According to the chronology of The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser.

respectable man anywhere would have either [Emma] or [Sylvia]. And yet here was [Emma] already taken over by one, and that one, presumably at least, respectable. For was he not an officeholder in the great city New York, and more as a letter in regard to all this stated, a Catholic? (234)

Obviously, Dreiser believed what the society told him about transgressive women: “no respectable man would marry one.” Unfortunately for Emma, Hopkins did not marry her and after stealing from the bar, he was no longer respectable.<sup>31</sup>

In Carrie’s story Dreiser effectively rewrites Emma’s biography in two ways. First, he has Carrie denounce her suitor when she discovers he is married. Hurstwood is forced to kidnap Carrie and commit bigamy in order to bring Carrie around. In contrast to this, Swanberg tells his readers that Emma “discovered that [Hopkins] was already married. But she eloped with him to Montreal” (19). It would seem that while Dreiser on the one hand, claims to understand how a young woman might be drawn into a sexual relationship outside of marriage, on the other he feels the need to rewrite the biographies, to make his sisters innocent or at least naïve victims. While he calls the social mores into question he also, to a certain extent, is still defining his characters within those very mores.

In using his rewritten biographies of his sisters’ lives, Dreiser is able to create a character in Carrie that singles her out from all other heroines of fictional fallen woman fables. Carrie is not just a fiction: she represents moments in the history of a living woman, the histories of real women. Not only is Dreiser able to make Carrie’s story real through the use of the biography, but he is also able to call into question the more conventional fallen women plots,

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<sup>31</sup>The legality of Emma’s marriage is subtly called into question in the autobiography, but is never explicitly denied. Dreiser’s inclusion of his father’s comments on the marriage may be meant to lead the reader to question the legitimacy of the marriage: “Had anyone witnessed the marriage? Was there any proof? There appeared to be since both [Theresa] and [Mame] vouched for it” (234). This might well have appeared to prove the marriage, if both Theresa and Mame had not already been shown to have had their own “disreputable” relationships.

confront the faulty society constructions, and rewrite, perhaps in a more positive light, the histories of his own sisters.<sup>32</sup>

In rewriting the histories of his sisters, Dreiser is also creating a different type of *Bildung* for his female protagonist. He draws two pictures of possible paths that Carrie's history could follow in a real-world scenario. However, the development of Carrie's history diverges from the two most likely paths, opening for the reader the possibility of multiple paths, paths that can cross over the others, paths that can be turned or reversed. Dreiser's rewriting, revising, re-envisioning these two paths align him with Miller's poetics.

Miller claims that at a third level, feminist writing "contests the available plots of female development or *Bildung* and embodies dissent from the dominant tradition in a certain number of recurrent narrative gestures, especially in the modalities of closure that Rachel DuPlessis has called 'writing beyond the ending'" (8). The many paths that Dreiser envisions for Carrie all represent the possibility of a more conventional ending; however, Carrie's story denies all of these possible endings.

In the more conventional texts, a heroine's plot might result in her marriage or in her becoming a nun, effectively marrying God. Or, if she is a transgressive heroine, her story would most likely end in madness, death, or a combination of the two. Nana, for example, dies in the final chapter of her novel. Possible endings that Carrie's story might take can be seen through the stories of the other female characters in the text. In novels that illustrate what society felt was proper behavior for women of the day, 'good' girls typically married.

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<sup>32</sup>Swanberg writes that "Mame Dreiser arrived, but not on a routine visit. Weeping, she told her mother that she was pregnant, that her lawyer lover had given her \$50 and the name of a country doctor who was believed to perform abortions. The doctor refused her. What was she to do?" (11) This part of Mame's history may have been left out of Carrie's story as means for Dreiser to rewrite her history for her. In his autobiography, Dreiser attributed this history to a friend of Mame's named Kitty, unwilling even with the fictional names to link his sister to an attempted abortion, something that would be judged more harshly even than the premarital sex. However, later on he will use this part of her biography in writing *An American Tragedy*. Dreiser's sister Sylvia also becomes pregnant while unmarried and is sent to live in New York with Emma and Hopkins.

Opposed to these real world trajectories that Carrie's plot could have followed is the literary model of female *Bildung*. Dreiser's history for Carrie defies the more traditional plot lines that female characters were allowed to follow in the literature of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Dreiser ultimately ends up taking the well-known trope of the fallen woman and rewriting her story against the conventions of the time. Thomas Riggio, in Pizer's The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser, argues that Dreiser "employs two familiar motifs of nineteenth-century literature. The folk tale of the simple country girl seduced by the lures of the city (or someone from the city)...[and the] fable of the young woman who rises above her lowly origins as a theatrical star" (35). It is interesting to note here that Riggio points to Nana as an example of this second type of fable, "[the fable] was taken to brutally realistic limits in Zola's Nana (1880)" (35). Dreiser successfully rewrites both. The possible paths of Carrie's life are not confined to her story alone, nor to the traditional plots, but are expanded out through the stories of the other women in his text. Miller's fourth level of feminist writing states, "Finally, through an insistence on singularity, feminist writing figures the existence of other subjective economies, other styles of identity" (8). Dreiser's character development of the other women in the novel reinforces their own individual circumstances and stories, while highlighting Carrie's differences. Despite the narrator's generalizations about women's characters, Dreiser's novel does not essentialize all women in Carrie. And even though Dreiser combines the histories of his sisters into Carrie's story, in his rewriting of the events in their lives he gives Carrie a *Bildung* that is uniquely her own.

In the history of Minnie, Carrie's sister, Dreiser portrays a hardworking woman whose life revolves around her husband and her child. In the beginning of the novel, when Carrie is starting her job at the shoe factory, Minnie's hardworking domestic life offers one of two

paths for which her sister's life seems destined. Minnie's husband, Sven, works at the stockyards, so he gets up at "half-past five" (13). Minnie, who must prepare his breakfast, gets up at four-forty. Sven goes to sleep early as he must rise early, contrasted with Minnie, who not only gets up before he does, but then stays up after he has gone to sleep, in order to finish her household duties. Minnie has forgotten how to think for herself; she "reflected her husband's point of view in the matter of work" (15). Her circumstances also dictate Minnie's thoughts: "They were serious reflections of a mind which invariably adjusted itself, without much complaining, to such surroundings as its industry could make for it" (31). Minnie's thoughts make her incompatible with the younger Carrie: "Her thoughts were staid and solemnly adapted to a condition" (47). Carrie does not want to become the type of person she views her sister as, someone with whom she has nothing in common. This is the fate which Carrie is escaping from when she runs away with Drouet.

Dreiser contrasts Carrie and Minnie: "Carrie, however, was not to be reduced to the common level of observation which prevailed in the flat" (29). Dreiser's use of "however" in this sentence emphasizes the difference between the sisters. Carrie refuses to fade into the background, while it is clear that Minnie is content to quietly occupy the margins. Carrie has information to share and is going to share it, not dissolving into reticence. Minnie can only be drawn out into the conversation "under the warming influence of Carrie's good spirits and her husband's somewhat conversational mood" (29). Minnie's is an unacceptable fate to Carrie.

The other obvious trajectory open for Carrie's future in a real world context is that of the shop girl. When Carrie is working in the shoe factory her trajectory could follow the same path as the other factory girls, a course followed by the life of Dreiser's Roberta Alden in An

American Tragedy, who is seduced, impregnated, abandoned, and murdered by her lover.

Carrie finds herself in the unfortunate position of existing between the two spheres that she recognizes in society, the haves and the have nots. Carrie does not identify with the working girls at the factory; instead she feels alienated and repulsed by their behavior and circumstances: “As Carrie listened to this and much more of a similar familiar badinage among the men and girls, she instinctively withdrew into herself. She was not used to this type, and felt that there was something hard and low about it all” (38). At the same time, Carrie feels “ashamed in the face of better dressed girls” (39). Wanting to avoid the path that Carrie sees open to her as a working girl, she allows Drouet to coax her into becoming his mistress.

Ironically, Roberta’s situation, which Carrie would associate with the working girl, is not so dissimilar to Carrie’s circumstances. Both women allow themselves to enter into sexual relationships with men who seem to promise better lives to the working-girls, the difference being that Roberta falls in love with Clyde while Carrie uses Drouet for her own means and ultimately moves beyond his sphere.

In rewriting the ending of Emma’s elopement to New York with L. A. Hopkins, Dreiser creates not only an alternative *Bildung* for Carrie, but also figures another style of identity for her. The first remove for Carrie is the one from kept woman to provider. Hurstwood’s failure to find and maintain a position forces Carrie to go out into the work force. For the lower classes at this point in time, it was not unusual for women to work; however, according to Kathy Peiss, it was unusual for married women to work, and for all intents and purposes, Carrie believes herself to be married. According to Peiss, when married women did take on outside work, they typically chose domestic activities: bringing in other people’s laundry,

sewing or embroidering, cleaning others' homes. Carrie breaks away from both stereotypes: she not only is a working 'married' woman, but she chooses a career that is outside of the domestic sphere.

Carrie is now in the public eye, and Hurstwood, in a role reversal, has retired from the center to assume a role within the home. He is now dependent on her generosity with her earnings; Carrie is the sole provider, not a supplement to the male income. At first the reversal is a slow change:

“Well,” she said, “here’s the money,” and emptied it out on the table. “I haven’t got quite enough to pay it all. If they can wait until Saturday, though, I’ll have some more.”  
“You keep it,” said Hurstwood, sadly. “I only want enough to pay the grocer.” (361)

However, after Hurstwood’s disastrous attempt at driving the trolley car, his decline accelerates in proportion to Carrie’s rise. Carrie’s abandonment of him is really the final incident in a long list of events that breaks his spirit. Carrie began the novel as the seduced, but she ends the novel in another role reversal as the abandoner instead as one who was abandoned.

After Carrie has ventured out on her own for the first time, her history begins to tell the tale of another new form of identity available to women, the New Woman. According to Heilmann and Beetham, “New Women were thus the subjects as well as the objects of debate in the press and so were able to challenge the traditional discourses on femininity, masculinity, sex, marriage and the family” (2-3). Dreiser as a newspaper man, brother, and social observer would have been aware of the emergence of the New Woman. The descriptions of Dreiser’s sisters, in his autobiography, depict women who are fighting against the old traditions and defining themselves as New Women.



This same article also claims that “the common feature which recurs again and again in different cultures is the identification of the New Woman with the modern and the disruptive, that is with challenges to existing structures of gendered identity” (2). As was discussed in Carrie’s relationship with Hurstwood, the traditional gender roles are reversed and Carrie becomes not only the bread winner but also at the end of the relationship the abandoner. In this respect Carrie is modeling the New Woman for her readers. This is especially ironic since Hurstwood began their life together by essentially kidnapping her and abandoning his wife and children.

As well as refiguring gender roles, the New Woman also assumed her place in the new consumer culture that was developing in America at the turn-of-the-century; she is the consumer and the consumed. Women tried to achieve the New Woman image, as pictured in the advertisements and cartoons of the day, by clothing and accessorizing themselves in accordance with images from the popular media. Angelika Köhler discusses the popular image of the New Woman as she appeared in American cartoons: “For decades, women were adored as ‘Angels in the House’. One of those who questioned this traditional assumption was Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944). The Gibson Girl has probably become the most popular image of the New Woman...” (158). Thus, it is relatively safe to assume that Carrie would have been aware of this image and would have been attracted to it.

Collins’ article concurs with this opinion, claiming that “The physical ideal of turn-of-the-century American women was the Gibson Girl” (283). Collins gives a physical description of the Gibson Girl: “[She] had a full bust and hips, but her body was thinner, firmer, elongated. She was tall, often dressed for sport, and she appeared to be wearing comfortable clothes, although her waist was so tiny, there had to be a corset somewhere” (284). Collin’s claims

that “The Gibson Girl looked a little like Lillie Langtry....When Langtry made her stage debut in America, people were taken aback at first by her athletic figure” (284). It is intriguing that Carrie’s constant attempts to remake herself in this image result in her success on the stage, like Lilly Langtry.

Carrie’s participation in this commercial world illustrates her desire to fit the image that has been impressed on her. By adorning herself in the paraphernalia of the modern woman, Carrie believes that she can be the modern woman. Her desire to fit this image can be seen in her desires to participate in this commercial world, buying items in order to sell herself. It becomes apparent from her very first encounter with Drouet that Carrie desires to better herself materially. His clothing makes her self-conscious about her own garments. This discrepancy that Carrie sees between herself and others is heightened even more during her job hunt. She feels that people have only to look at her to see her for what she is: “She became conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was—a wage-seeker” (18). It is during these job hunts that Carrie sees Chicago’s brand of New Women and she immediately desires to imitate them: “Neither had she before known the nature and appearance of the shop girls with whom she now compared poorly. They were pretty in the main, some even handsome, with an air of independence and indifference which added, in the case of the more favoured, a certain piquancy....A flame of envy lighted in her heart” (22-3). Through her relationship with Drouet, Carrie begins to acquire the clothing that will raise her above her social position. Guided by her own observations as well as by Drouet’s unthinking commentaries, Carrie starts to project a more sophisticated image. She is always conscious of her carriage, her gestures, her clothing and appearance and is always trying to

become this idealized New Woman. She mimics the society women she sees, and even befriends Mrs. Vance who becomes a role model for Carrie to emulate.

Her choice of career also mirrors her desire to fit this image. Carrie's choice of acting as a career refigures a stereotype as a new identity. Up until this moment in time, acting, for women, was often linked to prostitution. However, the New Woman was starting to make her own way in society and one of these paths was the stage: "The Gibson Girl dominates in society, in sports and outdoor activities as well as in the theatre" (Köhler 163). It is Carrie's early seduction by Drouet, her exchange of sex for clothing and status, which is more closely linked with prostitution. Developing a successful career in acting is what allows Carrie to extricate herself from 'prostitution' and her dependency on men.

In this novel the old social construction of the actress is being rewritten. This may be in part due to Dreiser's relationship with Louise Kerlin Dresser. According to Thomas Riggio's article in The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser, "there was a star-struck sister who entered the family—and Dreiser's imagination—in the fall of 1899. It was then that a young woman named Louise Kerlin walked into brother Paul Dresser's Chicago office to audition for one of his shows" (38). Paul 'adopted' Louise as his sister, thus beginning her relationship with the Dreiser family, and perhaps Louise fit this image of the New Woman as actress. It is also possible that Dreiser, participating in a society where the New Woman was taking to the stage and proving successful even into her 'old' age,<sup>33</sup> saw the stage as a space where women could shape new identities not associated with prostitution, but rather with freedom. The theater offers Carrie a space in which she can be admired not just for her beauty, but also for her talent as an actress. Up to this point, the admiration that Carrie has received has been connected to her beauty as well as to the way her attention could make the

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<sup>33</sup>Collins claims that "stage stars like Lillian Russell were still drawing big crowds in their fifties" (282).

men feel. Drouet has moments of feeling heroic. Hurstwood who has been feeling neglected on his family's part (although it is due in large part to his own neglect of them for Carrie's company) feels useful and attractive. Neither of these men is truly able to appreciate Carrie for herself, but more for the idea of her. The theater and her audiences appreciate what she is able to bring to the stage from inside of herself. The theater offers freedom in the money that Carrie earns. Having always been dependent on others for money, Carrie finds that as an actress she has more money than she ever had before, allowing her to fulfill her material desires without having to exchange herself for them.

However, Carrie's desire for the stage to a certain extent places her back in the position from which she is trying to escape: "Middle-class girls might have dreamed of becoming a journalist or going off to help the poor, but working-class girls like to imagine themselves performing on the stage. The chorus girl was a New Woman, too—she made her own money, and her public image was one of assertive independence. Her spunk was supposed to be rewarded with fancy dinners, expensive gifts, and ultimately marriage to a wealthy admirer" (Collins 291). While Carrie can be aligned with the working-girl in her desire to climb the social ladder from working-girl to stage actress, her reasons for doing so are removed from the reasons suggested by Collins. Carrie has already been in a position of receiving fancy dinners from 'wealthy' admirers; she is now seeking to support herself and is gaining her independence from these admirers and the poverty in which she keeps finding herself. And yet while Carrie is breaking away from a literal sexual commodification of herself, in her career choice, as in her desire for appearances, she is still to a certain extent selling herself.

The end of the novel, Sister Carrie, is not the end of Carrie's story, but really marks a new beginning in her life. Ames, with his passion for 'good' art, has pointed at something towards

which Carrie can strive: “Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her” (455). Ultimately, Carrie is left at the beginning of her new journey; she alone is able to create her own style of identity, to define her own history. Leaving the ending open is yet another facet of Dreiser’s writing in this novel that fits into Miller’s poetics for feminist writing. The woman reader can create her own history for Carrie, and ultimately this creativity may lead to that same reader’s applying this new ending to her own life story.

For the turn-of-the-century woman reader, Dreiser’s Sister Carrie provided a role model who broke from the traditional mold for the heroine. The women in his life as well as society’s New Woman provided Dreiser with real life models from which he shapes his title character. In writing a naturalist novel Dreiser inadvertently writes a text that fits Miller’s poetics for feminist writing. In using real people to shape Carrie’s experiences and emotional conflicts, he is fulfilling Miller’s first level, which calls for a “self-consciousness about women’s identity” (8). The sweeping generalizations that Dreiser’s narrator makes regarding women as a whole when compared and/or contrasted with Carrie’s own personal experiences works the novel into Miller’s second level, one where the heroine is contrasted to both women in fiction and to Woman. The paths that Carrie’s story follow constantly deny the readers’ expectations, first of a happy marriage to Drouet and then of a decline into ruin, madness, and/or death; this aligns the novel along Miller’s third level in which the traditional plot lines for the heroine are contested. Miller’s final level requires a text to figure other modes of identity; by representing Carrie as a New Woman, a working woman, an actress, the bread-winner, and as an independent single woman, Dreiser plays with new types of existence that were becoming available to women at the turn of the century. Many of these

identities being offered in the novel are still debated today, even though they have become more common. In reading Sister Carrie through the lens of Miller's poetics, women readers are able to reappropriate this male-authored text for themselves and for a new century.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Using Nancy K. Miller's feminist poetics as a guide for reading Émile Zola's Nana and Theodore Dreiser Sister Carrie enables the reader to perceive a feminist message in both texts. While Zola and Dreiser were not trying to write feminist manifestos, their commitment to writing novels that portrayed the truth about society shed light on the real condition of women in those societies at that time. The similarities between the two novels allow the audience to make connections that bridge both and link them to the four different levels of Miller's poetics.

The use of personal experience in both novels illustrates the writers' knowledge of, as well as consciousness about, as Miller puts it, "an inherited cultural fiction and a process of social construction" (8) that plays into the development of women's identities. Looking at Zola's notes and Dreiser's autobiographies enables the reader to identify the moments of overlap between the references and the fictional texts. These are places where Zola and Dreiser have consciously incorporated reality into their fictions to flesh out the real experiences and circumstances of the characters in the novels, thus fulfilling Miller's first level.

Zola's extensive research, documented in his notes, shows his intention to create in *Nana* a woman who is a realistic representative of the class she characterizes. The reader is able to more easily accept as 'real' the events that take place during *Nana's* dinner party when he/she can see that for the most part they come straight from the notes Zola had on a

dinner party given by a well-known courtesan. The acceptance of the scenes as representing reality paves the path for the reader to accept Nana herself as 'real'.

In Dreiser's novel the first and second levels of Miller's poetics are both fulfilled in those sections of the text where the heroine's development<sup>34</sup> conflicts with the larger social generalizations that the narrator makes. These generalizations provide evidence that Dreiser was working with a consciousness about women's identity development, cultural fictions, and social constructions. Carrie's rejection of her sister's life and a factory career in favor of building her own identity also provides evidence of this consciousness. Carrie's individual development, especially in those places where it differs from the generalizations, serves to separate her from her fictional heritage. The biographical elements support a reading of Dreiser's writing with a consciousness of women's social construction; the moments when he diverges from the biographies to rewrite the histories of his sisters provides evidence of the difficulties to which Miller refers.

Zola fits into the second level in a different manner from Dreiser. It is those moments where Nana is positioned as the reader of her own story that locate her in this space between the fictional cultural legacy of the romantics and the real woman reader of the time. Nana is ill-equipped to appreciate the new literature that Zola is writing; she desires more conventional novels, ones that only entertain. Not only is she unable to appreciate herself as a heroine of a novel, but without others informing her, she cannot even identify herself in the text that she is reading. Placing her in the position of reader allows Zola to force his own audience into an uncomfortable identification with Nana, further complicating the relation between the real world woman reader and Nana.

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<sup>34</sup>That development being modeled on the lives of his sisters as documented throughout Dreiser's autobiographies, specifically Dawn: Autobiography of Early Youth.



Miller's third level is the necessity for the text to deny the traditional development for the heroine. Both novels meet this requirement in many different ways. Neither heroine marries, which is a typical female fate for the conventional novel. Instead both women choose to live in sexual relationships outside of marriage. In traditional texts, the fallen woman would go mad or die as a result of her sin. While Zola more closely follows this development in his dealings with Nana, who dies of smallpox in the end, he still undermines the traditional morality ending in that Nana's death is not a result of her sexual transgressions but of her maternal instincts – her nurturing of her son as he dies from the disease. Dreiser more drastically changes the ending of the fallen woman tale. Not only does Carrie not lose her sanity or die; instead, she learns to succeed in the world without relying on a man and her story ends on a note of hope for the future.

Finally, both novels begin to figure other styles of identity, which is the fourth level of Miller's poetics. Both Nana and Sister Carrie address society's conflation of the actress with the prostitute. While Zola seems to be playing off of this societal construct, Dreiser seems to rewrite it completely. Zola makes his actress the consummate prostitute. She is successful as an actress in the performance of her life; however, her skills as an actress on the stage are non-existent and it is her triumphant use of her sex appeal that accounts for her victories in that venue. Dreiser, on the other hand, writes Carrie as a success on the stage who really picks up pace once she has left men behind.

While Dreiser leaves the possibility of a lesbian relationship untouched in Sister Carrie, it is possible to read Carrie's cohabitation with the other actress as potentially hinting in that direction. But Zola brings it out into the open so to speak, having Nana and Satin flaunt their same-sex love in front of Nana's male suitors. However, Zola again empowers and

undermines at the same time, figuring the lesbian relationship into the text and endowing it with brief moments of what seems to be honest caring and then envisioning that relationship in its basest form, using animal metaphors and dooming both women to death. It seems that no matter the type of relationship, heterosexual or homosexual, Nana is incapable of monogamy. Nana's voracious sexual appetite and her animal-like instincts for survival are constantly struggling to find a balance and are never successful.

The final identity that Zola rewrites is that of the mother figure: Nana is neither the completely self-sacrificing nurturer that was figured by the angel-in-the-house nor is she the reptilian mother who does not possess any ties that would bind her to her offspring. Instead, Zola's heroine falls somewhere in between the two. She is nurturing and loving in those moments when she remembers Louis' existence and is caring when it reflects back on her. Then she can be completely forgetful of her child, interested in him only as a means of amusement. Her death, which seems to be a moral ending for a life misspent, is undermined by the death of the self-sacrificing mother that Nana becomes upon returning from abroad to find her only child dying of smallpox. On the other hand, the only motherhood about which Dreiser writes is that of the supporting characters, Carrie's mother, her sister, Minnie, and Mrs. Hurstwood. It is surprising, considering Carrie's lifestyle, that the topic does not come up in relation to her, even just in the voicing of a fear of pregnancy. It may be that Dreiser could not see the hopeful ending he wrote for Carrie as being valid if she were to conceive, or it may be that he was not comfortable writing about motherhood at that point in time.

Miller's poetics sheds a new light on these texts, allowing contemporary women readers to read these male-authored, canonical novels for a feminist message. Today's woman reader can perhaps better understand the innovation of these two authors within the time in which

they were writing. It is hoped that the contemporary reader can find elements in these texts that may have provided the woman reader of the past with something new and inspirational, even for the time quite racy and controversial. I have read these two novels through a feminist lens in the hopes of finding one way to balance the scales in the continuing debate over the canon and feminism, so that women readers can take something for themselves from these narratives that perhaps at first glance do not seem to speak to their condition today.

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