

# A Comparative Study of *Sister Carrie* and *The Great Gatsby* — from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

Yirong Gao<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Central South University, Changsha, China

\*Corresponding author: 1732129598@qq.com

**Abstract:** *Sister Carrie* and *The Great Gatsby* are both classic novels in America, which have huge impact on American literature. *Sister Carrie* is the first novel written by Dreiser reveals the social situation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and has become one of a representatives of naturalism. *The Great Gatsby*, written by Fitzgerald in the 1920s, reveals the life in Roaring Twenties and exposes the broken American dream, and it is one of the representatives of Modernism. These two novels have great literary value and have been studied by lots of scholars. There are many previous studies about *Sister Carrie* and *The Great Gatsby* from the perspective of feminism. Since ecofeminism was noticed and popularized in literature study, some ecofeminist scholars have analyzed these two classics separately. Few studies, however, have done research into them together from the perspective of ecofeminism. This study focuses on making a comparison between the two American novels from the perspective of ecofeminism and aims at exploring the same ecofeminist implication implied in the two works from the comparative study of the two female protagonists and the ecological environments. From the analysis of the two female characters' sufferings and the worsening environment caused by men, it proved that the tragedies of women and the ecological environment are caused by the traditional patriarchal system and the dualism fixed in civilization. It is expected that more people would change their traditional dualistic ideas of the opposition between men and women, culture, and nature and pay attention to their equality.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Ecologism, Patriarchal society, Equality

## 1. Introduction

*Sister Carrie* and *The Great Gatsby* are two classic novels in the 19th and 20th century in the US. They have been studied from home and abroad. *Sister Carrie* is a classic novel which since its appearance, has pioneered a new way for American literature in the early 20th century. It is Theodore Dreiser's first novel and it is the magnum opus of naturalistic literature. Scholars explore this novel from the philosophic view, theme, images in the novel and its significance to America. Other critics of Dreiser also explained and commented on the novel in separate articles or articles in their monographs or anthologies. It shows that the novel *Sister Carrie* is very important for Dreiser. *The Great Gatsby* has become one of literary works being popularized by feminist critics from 1940 after the author Fitzgerald died. With the constant improvement of women's social status, women's images began to be popular in literature studies. Ecofeminist literary criticism is a new branch of traditional feminism and it is popular in literature in recent years. Ecofeminist literary critique is a relatively new theory in literature study which has become a trend accompanying worsening environment and the wakening consciousness of women. It is an interdisciplinary theory from multi-angles concerning nature, environment, gender and the connection between human and nature. It also pours attention into the problems of environmental deterioration and social injustice, that is to say the way we treat nature and we treat each other are inextricably intertwined.

Nowadays, in order to seek a harmonious relationship between human and nature, it is necessary to extrapolate and extend the idea of eliminating the unequal gender relationship. Ecofeminists should break through limitations of the times, and bestow the same tenderness upon the world beyond human.

This study, by comparing these two classics from this perspective, is aimed at identifying the resemblance of Daisy and Carrie and their living environment. It may help readers understand the profound meaning of ecofeminism and how the patriarchal society affects women and nature.

## 2. A Comparative Study of Ecofeminism Embodied in the Two Heroines in the Novels

### 2.1 Ecofeminism Embodied in the Two Novels

From the perspective of ecofeminism, women and nature are equal to men and culture. All the ecological system have the same right, and human beings are no longer the superior one who rule the whole world. Genders are determined inborn and can't be changed. Men and women have equal rights and obligations, and they have different works and divisions in this society. However, with the development of civilization, there is a new standard appears called social gender. It makes use of the natural differences between men and women and argue that men is superior to women, so women should follow the leadership of men without any other reason.

Rosemary Radford Ruether once said that "women should unite women about their needs with those of the ecological movements to preconceive a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and those values underlying in this society."<sup>[1]</sup>

From the female characters' sufferings to environmental descriptions in *Sister Carrie*, it can be seen that many ecofeminist implications in the novel. In this novel, Carrie and her sister Minnie's sufferings have shown us the relationship between women and men. This is obviously not an equal and harmonious relationship that should be adopted in the civilized human society. In the social system that composes of male and female cells, men's social status and earthly fortune are based on the exploitation and oppression of women. Women, who were supposed to enjoy equal rights as their counterparts, were completely deprived of freedom and respect.

Women's independence is deprived by men. Independence has become one of our basic needs. If lose independence, a person will fail to control his or her own destiny. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America, women were considered as appendages of men. In such a moral distorted society, gaining success no longer depended on industrial work and thrift, but the pursuit of money. For a woman, her body was the best and the quickest way of obtaining both wealth and social status. Carrie took this shortcut. In such a male-dominant society, women could hardly be independent and have equal social status as men.

The other is the environments in the novel. Men raked in the dough and sacrificed ecological environment and women's rights. They tried to establish a so-called civilized society. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, men had done much damage to the ecological environment due to the development of economy such as the over-exploitation of natural resources, too much occupation of agricultural land, and many kinds of pollution. Men's fortune and development were totally based on the destroy of nature. In the end of the 19th century, the United States had just finished its second industrial revolution. At the turning of a new century, industrialization made people's daily life changed in a rapid speed. It brought about a great change in socioeconomic and cultural conditions. The traditional manual labor was replaced by machine. The invention of railways and steam driven vessels dominated the transportation in different trades. The increasing use of natural resources led to an irreversible damage to environment. Although there were not too much environmental description in the novel, Dreiser used the the eyes of a country girl before and after came into Chicago to imply the negative impact brought by economic development to environment. At that time, almost all the factories needed steam, water, coals and oil. The increasing number of factory relied heavily on natural resources, which had brought heavy burden to nature and finally would lead to resource exhaustion.

In the novel *The Great Gatsby*, ecofeminism is also embodied in the heroine Daisy and the environment's sufferings at that time. Daisy's nonchalance after Gatsby's death and the environmental pollution in the novel show us how the natural ecological and social environment changes can lead to the distortion of a person's humanity.

Daisy's suffering and changes can demonstrate how patriarchal social system can dominant and persecute women. At the beginning, she had a natural connection with nature and was a naive girl without any secularity. However, this connection evaporated with the industrial plunder of nature and the deep-rooted patriarchal society. In the novel, Daisy was a very pretty girl with a pair of shining eyes and a bright and enthusiastic mouth, especially her violet which let all the men who adored her be obsessed with her. Her love with Gatsby in her youth shows that she didn't care his money and social status. Daisy wanted to marry a man who really loved her instead of a man who could give her enough fortune and better life. However, her family forced her to choose a man with a good fortune and a social status whom she didn't love.

As a new woman, Daisy once tried to rebel against patriarchy, but finally her natural instincts didn't overcome the persecution of women in this male-dominated and material-oriented society. In the novel, Daisy was a representative of spiritual emptiness and materialism, and her voice was full of money. The fundamental reason can be found that Daisy, like nature, was the object of oppression and transformation in patriarchal society. Under the influence of patriarchy, women don't have much autonomy.

In the 1920s, America was in the midst of an unprecedented capitalist economic boom, especially its industrial development. But the potential crisis existed in false prosperity. Natural resources and the ecological environment suffered a lot. People indulged in the neon of world and didn't care about the ecology and the environment. Men were the conquerors of nature and women. They looted the resources for the construction of their kingdom. They exploited and oppressed women for self-satisfaction.

### ***2.2 The Interconnection Between the Sufferings of Environment and Heroines in Novels***

Human beings have two genders which were determined by genes. Men and women are born to have equal rights and duties, although their division of work are different in society. Nature and culture are equal in the world, too. However, with the development of civilization, social gender takes place to natural gender because the unfair standards made by man. Thus women become inferior to men. Men break the ecological environment to establish a civilized society and pursue a high-level civilization. In their mind, nature is like woman, lower than culture and man. Men use dualism as an excuse for their persecution of nature and women. They cheat women to depend on them and create an illusion that women can't live without men. Women have been deprived of independence by the patriarchal system. A person without independence will lose control of his or her own destiny.

In *Sister Carrie*, the author Dreiser portrayed a society full of suppression, domination and inequality. Many critics complain that "Carrie's image may destroy the image of women in people's mind and cause serious consequences, because women should follow this life attitude"<sup>[2]</sup>. Carrie and her sister's suffering were a vivid picture of the life of women in patriarchal society. From Carrie's job-seeking experience, we can notice that women can hardly find a nice job to earn their living so that they have to be reduced to the attachment to men. Gender bias in society deprived the independence of women and their right to pursue their dreams.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy's duty was to marry a successful upper-class man in order to have a good quality of life. Her family education and the social culture made her believe that only by depending on men could own a good life. Women have been deprived of their economic independence, which made them to be dependent on men.

From the description of the environment in these two novels, it can be seen that the increasing economic development is based on the destruction of nature and the exploitation of natural resources. The polluted environment aggravated the conflicts between human and nature. Nature had been sterilized because of over-exploitation. But men didn't realize it and kept on their construction.

In the patriarchal society, women and nature are the disadvantaged part, their sufferings are led by those selfish and arrogant men. In this morbid relationship, the road to equality and harmony is full of obstacle and conflicts.

### ***2.3 Causes of the Tragedies***

At the beginning, Carrie and Daisy were pure and naive, and their living environments were more close to nature. However, after Carrie came into the big city full of pollution and patriarchal culture, she gradually turned into a cold fish and been devoured by the corrupt society. Daisy's instinct was kind and sympathetic, but the inculcation of patriarchal culture transformed her completely into an appendix of men without her own will.

With the expanding of human society and economic activity, ecological environment is deteriorating and environmental pollution is aggravating. Men are satisfied with the seemingly rich civilization and culture, ignoring the worsening environment and the vulnerable who have been persecuted by men for a long time. Exploring the causes that behind their similar experiences, it may find the main factors contributed to the tragedies.

There are many causes lead to Carrie and Daisy's tragedies. Cultural factors can be considered as

the root. Bible as the most important religious book in Christian religions have influenced almost American culture. Gender relationship reflects the culture values in Bible that women and men are unequal since they were born. The Bible implies that women are created by men and are their appendixes. It is the root cause of men's superior status and domination over women. In these two novels, the male characters show this value in the Bible, they both had more than one sexual relationship with women at the same period, and they enjoyed sexual pleasure brought about by philandering and conquering women. But in such a patriarchal society, their behaviors were considered as reasonable and no one would condemn their betray and disloyalty. On the contrary, Carrie and Daisy were scolded because their love affairs.

Except for religious factor, philosophy is also an influenced one. The same experiences between women and nature can be traced back to the existence of dualism. It allows the oppression and exploitation of the weak. Gender system contributed to the oppression of women and legitimized men's domination. The pursuit of economic development allows the persecution of nature and ecological environment. From these two novels, Carrie and Minnie's sufferings shows social stereotype to women and the unbalanced labour division between men and women.

In addition, industrialization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is also a harmful impact. Industrialization, which plays a main part in human intervention in nature, should be taken as the top pusher in this process. It also influences women's social status. Industrialization intensified men's domination and the negative impact of patriarchy. The unbalanced distribution has worsened women's social status and the gender relationship, which will affect the human harmony and development. A Scholar said that the profit-maximization pattern at the cost of ecological environment should be taken the advantages to a sustainable development depend on "maintaining ecologically viable relations between humans and nature"<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper studies two American classic novels *Sister Carrie* and *The Great Gatsby* from the perspective of ecofeminism. By analyzing and comparing the two heroines and their living environment in the two novels, it can be seen that Carrie and Daisy have the similar experiences as the ecological environment. The most obvious one is that their sufferings are caused by patriarchal society and the ideology of dualism.

The paper introduces the two novels, the previous studies on them first and the theory of ecofeminism. Then the paper gives a comparative study of *Sister Carrie* and *The Great Gatsby* from the perspective of ecofeminism. By comparing the two heroines' sufferings and their living environment, it can be found that their tragedies are both caused by patriarchy and the dualistic ideology. Men dominate both women and environment. They take the advantages of women and nature to build their splendid civilization. Carrie and Daisy's sufferings demonstrated that how men control and exploit women and ecology. The tragedy caused by patriarchy warns people that if women and nature have no equal right and obligation with men and cultural, the harmonious society will break down. American dream will never come true without the harmonious relationship between human and nature and women and men in America. There have been many cases proved that human's destroy and over-exploitation of nature also caused lots of problems to human. The awakening of women's consciousness will finally mature and women will fight for their own rights.

Therefore, it is necessary to rise men's awareness to respect nature and women so that they will realize the importance of environmental protection and gender equality. The concept of ecofeminism will not only benefit human beings, but also all the creatures in the world.

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