

# A Comparative Study of Tian Xiaoe's and Carrie's

## --Tragedies: A Feminist Approach

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### Abstract

**The successful creation of characters contributes to the success of a novel. In his novel White Deer Plain, Chen Zhongshi creates a tragic female character, Tian Xiaoe, who is at the mercy of others all her life. In Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser describes an innocent girl who becomes increasingly indifferent after a series of changes and finally becomes a counterattack against the patriarchal society. It seems that Carrie can be a successful example for women, but Carrie herself does not get happiness as she wished. Based on the feminist perspective, this thesis makes a comparative analysis of the tragic fate of Tian Xiaoe and Carrie, and explores the causes from these two aspects: oppression imposed upon them from this patriarchal society and their own over-persistence. This thesis endeavors to indicate that regardless of the historical background, women should have independent consciousness. Besides, full attention should be attached to some enlightenment to women who ought to have a good education, fight for their own rights and interests so as to improve their social status.**

### Keywords

**Feminism; Tragedies; Patriarchal Society.**

### 1. Introduction

The status of women has long been a topic in the field of literature. White Deer Plain is set in the village of Bai Lu and depicts the historical changes of more than half a century from the end of the Qing Dynasty to the 1980s. Sister Carrie, together with An American Tragedy, truly reproduced the American society at that time and was close to the lives of the general public. Tian Xiao'e and Carrie can be subjects for the study of feminism, for both of them hope to change their situations in a society where men hold primary power.

First of all, Yu Dongye (2004) analyzed the feminist literary theory, especially the development of it after it was introduced to China. Then, Nikola Nedorostková made a study of Carrie and the feminism in this novel. Lin Yi-qing et al. explored the interpretation of female tragedy semiotics in the White Deer Plain, taking Tian Xiao'e as an example. Tian Qingmin made a comparison between Tess and Tian Xiaoe, both of whom suffer a lot and finally die. The illicit love between Tian Xiaoe and Hei Wa and the mistake made by Tess are the causes for their tragedies. However, it is the spirit of resistance in Tian Xiaoe and Carrie that makes them the focus in feminist literature researches. Liu Cen analyzed the two female characters of Tian Xiaoe and Bai Ling in White Deer Plain. Tian Xiaoe is regarded as a slut, contrary to the image of traditional women, but she does not feel self-contemptuous because of this, and dares to provoke, while Bai Ling is the first woman in the novel who is eager to learn and yearn for new values. Then Zhao Jie analyzed that the persecution upon Tian Xiaoe by feudal concepts was also the direct cause of her death, because although she has the concept of resistance, her power was small. Kou Xiaoli analyzed that the root of the tragic fate of Tess and Carrie was also because of their female identity. Although they are in different countries and under different social concepts, patriarchy still imprisons people's minds and women could not get rid of the label of men's

belonging. Tian Xiaoe and Carrie both have behaviors of giving themselves for life. There were independent elements in their thoughts, but there were also elements of clinging to men and living a better life. Although it seems that Carrie's fate goes to a good end, but Carrie is not happy inside, for she does not get the happiness that she wants, so it can be said that Carrie's fate is unfortunate.

Combined with a comparison of other female characters, this thesis tends to make a thorough inquiry of tragedies of Tian and Carrie to evidence that women's misfortune may be brought about by the persecution of this patriarchal society as well as defects in their personalities. In this case, some suggestions can be put forward to help women defend their own rights and avoid taking a wrong move.

## **2. General Information to Feminism**

### **2.1. Background**

The word "feminism" comes from French and it firstly used in the 1890s. It is usually considered as a social movement for equality among sexes by enlarging women's rights.

Historically, the feminist movement can be divided into three waves. The First Wave was organized by the first independent women organizations like National American Woman Suffrage Association during this period from 1890 to 1920. These groups helped many women to express themselves and mainly to fight for their right to vote. The second Wave feminism, also known as the Women's Liberation Movement, can date from 1969 and gave rise to many independent streams and movement of feminism worldwide. It focused more on issues such as patriarchal society, gender roles and sexual inequality trying to improve the overall position of women in society. The third Wave can trace back to the mid-1990s. Political, social and economic inequality are the prominent themes this time. In addition to fight against discrimination and the gender stereotype in society, women support the equality and individuality of the person.

### **2.2. Application to Literary Criticism**

Feminist literary theory is the cultural derivative of the western feminist movement. This movement can date back to the French Revolution of 1789 when The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and The Female Citizen was put forward. It stresses the importance of women's due rights. After struggling for a long period, American women won their right to vote, which highlighted this movement. Then, with the development of this movement, besides political independence, people diverted their attention to other areas, like literature, history, language and so on. In literature, feminist literary theory formed its prototype.

Themes of inquiry include discrimination, stereotypes, objectification (especially regarding sexuality), the body, oppression, and patriarchy.

The influence of feminist literary theory on creation is reflected in the changes of theme, characters and narration of works due to the intervention of female viewpoint. With the growth and expansion of female consciousness, female writing has gone through a period from "girl's age" to "adult age" and then to the stage of rebelling against male culture.

## **3. The Comparison of Tian Xiaoe's and Carrie's Tragedies**

### **3.1. Similar Characteristics in Early Period**

It is these very similarities that result in their tragic fates by influencing their actions and preventing them from getting help. Thus, summarizing these similarities can make women in modern society aware of what they should avoid in their life.

The first one is illiteracy. As for the social background of White Deer Plain, it is set in the long period transferring from feudal society to modern society. There was a saying widely rooted in the mind of folks, "Innocence is the virtue for women." since the very ancient age. Then, educational right for women was advocated after the foundation of New China, whereas low levels of spreading of education and a preference for sons have prevented most women from receiving the education, especially in poor rural areas.

Based on this background, although the novel doesn't give a description of Tian Xiaoe's girlhood, it can be inferred that she doesn't receive a good education. This is reason why she becomes the concubine of Lord Guo and wishes to be a qualified concubine. Born in a rural area, she is inculcated with many feudal conceptions. Hence though she dares to be in pursuit of love, she marries Lord Guo, and even after she lives with Hei Wa, she regards him as the head of family. In other words, she still relies much on men. So consequently, she does not dare to do as many rebellious things as Bai Ling did, such as running away from home and refusing the arranged marriage.

Compared with her, Bai Ling, the daughter of Bai Jiaxuan, is much luckier. Bai Ling is the youngest child and only daughter of Bai Jiaxuan, so she is high in favor with her father, which enables her to do many things that were believed to be only for men at that time. For example, she is allowed to go to the school with her two brothers; she is protected by her father from binding her feet. What's more, she is allowed to receive education in a new type of school where she is exposed to new ideas. Then, she falls in love with Lu Zhaohai and gives birth to a girl. This couple devote themselves to the revolution for which Bai Ling dies. Apparently, Bai Ling's life is short but wonderful. Although she dies young, she is able to do live a different life from other women, like receiving education, marrying a man she loves and dying for her goals. She can be thought a woman of the new culture.

The reason why Tian and Bai live completely different lives and have totally diverse endings is partly that they differ in their education levels. It may be said that Tian Xiao'e struggles instinctively, while Bai Ling revolts consciously. This also explains for the failure of Tian Xiao'e. When it comes to Carrie, she is from a small place. Due to being less educated, it is difficult for her to get a well-paid and decent job as she wishes and earn enough money to preen herself. Her first job is to work at a factory from which she can only get four and a half dollars every week, four of which has to be given to her sister as the rent. Obviously, it is improbable for her to buy new clothes as well as superb jewels.

Then comes inferiority and poverty. Tian Xiaoe' father forces her to be a concubine of Lord Guo for the sake of money, and after that Tian has to be the sexy slave of Lord Guo. Nevertheless, it doesn't mean that Tian can enjoys her life during the day time, as she has to do other chores, like being in charge of the meals of the employees and so on. Actually, she is not much more noble than a servant girl. In addition, at that time, women were seen as appendages to men as well as tools for offspring. By way of illustration, Bai Jiaxuan, the later patriarch, has seven wives in total, six of whom die successively. However, in order to have grandsons and granddaughters, Jiaxuan's father helps Jiaxuan get married by precious betrothal gifts. Fathers of these six dead women agree so as to obtain enough money without any concern about their daughters' lives, which can explicate the low social status of women. Nobody cares their lives virtually.

Carrie comes to Chicago for the purpose of living a rich life, hard dream as it turns out to be. To begin with, she lives with her sister, but the shabby and humiliating environment destroys her original dream. She has several different jobs, but nothing except humiliation and toil is brought to her. This is why she is so easily seduced by men that she would do everything for a better life, even to become a mistress.

The last one is that they are both regarded as the property of men. After failing in getting the true love, Tian Xiaoe has formed the habit of giving herself freely to men in order to be alive. To

be more specific, there are four main males in her life, Lord Guo, Hei Wa, Lu Zilin and Bai Xiaowen. Although Tian hopes to control her own life, she owns nothing and nobody is willing to give her a hand. She is excluded by villagers, meaning that it is difficult to the point of impossibility for her to make a living on her own.

Carrie wants to live a happy life on her own at first, which is destroyed by the reality. She seeks for jobs for a long time, but nobody is willing to offer her a job. The only job she gets is a worker in the factory with four and a half dollars every week as salary, which she is satisfied with at first, for she believes that she can blend in the life of the city and buy everything she likes to make herself more pretty and charming. Yet, Carrie's hopes for a better life are extinguished by her first day's work consisting of the uncomfortable workplace and the hard work itself. Then, she finds it easy to live on men, Hurstwood and Drouet, because she just needs to give herself to men and she can enjoy a carefree life. Both Hurstwood and Drouet regard Carrie as a dazzling accessory.

### **3.2. Different Embodiment of Their Tragedies**

#### **3.2.1. Tian's Tragedies**

Tian Xiao'e is the embodiment of beauty and desire. She presents the ego of desire in the entanglement of spirit and flesh, and stirs the seemingly calm feudal patriarchal society of White Deer Plain with the sharp sword of revenge. The lack of female innate value makes Tian Xiaoe's revenge always in an unconscious state, which can not transcend the realistic context, and Tian Xiaoe's fate falls into a paradoxical survival state. Tian xiaoe's extreme and paranoid resistance subverts the sense of order and security in the ethical world.

Tian Xiaoe's extreme and paranoid persistence subverts the sense of order and security in the ethical world. As a woman in a patriarchal society, her existence will eventually be destroyed. Lu San is the father of Hei Wa, which means he is the father-in-law of Tian Xiaoe. Lu San has been working for the House of White. Bai Jiaxuan never fails to pay Lu San, and Lu San gives of his best when working, which leads to a good relationship between them. What's more, Bai Jiaxuan treats Hei Wa as his own son and supports Hei Wa to study in the school with his two sons, Bai Xiaowen and Bai Xiaowu. In this case, Lu San has never been anything but grateful for that.

Due to the kindness from the family of Bai, Lu San feels so sorry about the degeneration of Bai Xiaowen seduced by Tian Xiaoe that he kills Tian Xiaoe. Lu San believes that it is Tian Xiaoe who should be to blame for the degeneration of Xiaowen and the rebellion of Hei Wa. After Tian Xiaoe dies, her body is sealed in the cave where she lived, rotting and stinking with time going. People often abused her frequently. Tian Xiaoe' soul is attached to the Lu San body, crying and asking what her mistakes are on earth and why everybody here can't give her even a little warmth.

#### **3.2.2. Carrie's Tragedies**

Carrie seems to have a different ending. At first, in order to survive in the big city, Carrie has an immoral relation with the salesman Drouet. She believes that she will marry Drouet one day, only to be disappointed by prevarication from the rake over and over again. Then, she is deceived by Hurstwood, a friend of Drouet. Compared with Drouet, Hurstwood is more personable and decent. Carrie doesn't know that Hurstwood has been married, so she also dreams of marring this outstanding man. However, she is discouraged a lot by the fact that Hurstwood not only hides his marriage, but also steals money. During the following days, Hurstwood is proved to be incompetent to take care of himself and Carrie. Having endured a painful period of unsustainability, Hurstwood begins to decadent as he recalls the good old days, his ambition eroded gradually.

Carrie becomes a star in the end with her desire for performance, beauty and her ability to put emotions and personal experiences into her performance. Her salary rises from 12 dollars every week to 150 dollars every week as she becomes increasingly famous. She is surrounded by numerous suitors gradually. These two facts give a strong proof to Carrie's physical success. However, she doesn't feel happy, because fame and fortune are not able to satisfy her pursuit of mental happiness. After Carrie, the heroine, stepped into the upper society, she saw that the luxury of the bourgeoisie was superficial. Although they were all beautifully dressed and elegant, and behaved perfectly as far as possible, they were all hypocritical people, and the representatives of the bourgeoisie were just animals dressed in human skin. At the moment, the heroine's spirit is empty, she has a deep understanding of this society. In fact, from the background of the era that this novel relies on, the intrigues and conflicts of the capitalist society can also display how empty and lonely the crowd was at that time.

## **4. Rooted Causes of Their Tragedies**

### **4.1. The Oppression on Women under the Values of Patriarchal Society**

It is the oppression on women that results in their unhappiness. Compared with men, women enjoy less freedom in the patriarchal society. There are more rules, more restraints but fewer chances for them. Examples can be seen frequently that women are punished severely when they make same mistakes as men.

#### **4.1.1. Forced Subordinate Status of Women**

Since ancient China, women have been taught not to turn up in public, which develops an idea gradually that women's place is at home. The girls in noble families would not go out until they get married. Even a woman as frivolous as Tian Xiao'e will choose to stay at home and wait for their husbands or lovers to support families. Additionally, women are likely to be rejected by those employers, which may result from the bias that women were born to be weaker than men. In western society, elegant women are also believed to enjoy their lives with beautiful clothes, frequent visits to theater, magnificent houses and so on. There is no need for them to work, and their only mission is to be beautiful and please their husbands.

Given these two values, there is no other choice for women but to live on men, because it is hard for them to find content jobs to earn money. A tradition view that women should devote themselves to the family life totally and it is women's duties to take care of their families, especially their kids, is still maintained unreasonably. Even at present, if a woman spends much of her time and energy on her work and cares little about her family, she will probably be criticized by her parents who would have been her closest supporters, not to mention people around her. This phenomenon gives a proof of the existing unfair condition of women. Therefore, the "men outside the home, women inside" point of view from the formation of trivial housework should be borne by women has become the unalterable truth.

#### **4.1.2. Overemphasis on Women's Chastity**

Men require women to regard chastity as the highest virtue. It even evolved into the western chastity belt and the eastern memorial arch of chastity. A woman who loses her virginity is considered unladylike and demeaning.

The reason why Tian Xiaoe is expelled by villagers in the village of Bai Lu is that she has illegitimate sex relations with many men, which is not accepted by the society whose requirement for a woman is to be faithful to a man all of her life. Feudal society attaches great importance to women's chastity. In the traditional ideology, women's normal physical and mental needs are suppressed. In feudal society, ninety percent of women were no longer "real" people, but became advocates of moral principles tool. Since ancient China, women were not allowed to live outside and exposed to a place where there was a man strange to them, not to

mention that a woman can marry different men or have illegitimate sex relations with men except their husbands. In this case, many cruel punishments have been created, like drowning a woman in a pond. There is a scene in the White Deer Plain that Tian is tied in front of the public and her trousers are dragged down, which tears the esteem of Tian into pieces. After that, Tian seems to abandon her esteem completely, wearing shabbily, caring little about others and giving herself to others more easily. In this case, she gives herself to Lu Zilin for the sake of living, and later she becomes a tool of him to seduce Bai Xiaowen for revenge, which leads to her death.

As for Carrie, it is her beauty, innocence and purity that attract men at first. Yet her commitment to two men in succession could be criticized by conventional moral standards. In fact, the desire and pursuit of a better life is not a sin. Therefore, to obtain that life requires abandoning the traditional moral values that bind one's mind. Carrie changed her situation by dedicating herself to Drouet and Hurstwood, and then left them one after another in search of a better life. Carrie's behavior can only be judged by an arbitrary standard that constitutes Dreiser's evolutionary morality, and hence it violates the traditional morality and should be spurned by normal people.

## **4.2. Defects in their personalities**

### **4.2.1. Tian's Over-persistence to Love**

Maybe it is the early unfortunate experience that makes Tian extremely thirsty for a true lover, which leads to her adultery with Hei Wa. She isn't afraid of the poor life and the discrimination from others. She once asks Hei Wa to secretly take her to a place where nobody knows them even if she is likely to be out of meat, and scant of clothes every day. In her opinion, what she only cares is the sincerity and love from Hei Wa and there is nothing that can prevent them from getting their ideal life. Her relations with Lord Guo and Lu Zilin are a result of being compelled by the patriarchal society, because she is ordered to marry Lord Guo by her father and in order to survive, she has to give herself to Lu Zilin. In Chinese traditional values, women must listen to their fathers before they get married; they should follow their husbands if married; they are supposed to obey their sons after the deaths of their husbands. It is distinctly seen that women can't make their own decisions, and they have to obey the men in their lives at different times. She loves Hei Wa and Bai Xiaowen who have taken good care of her respectively. In order to give response to the love from Hei Wa, she would start an adulterous relation with him which results in her being cast aside by the others, including her families. As for Bai Xiaowen, her life with him is so impoverishing that she has such a heart-breaking deed that when she is pregnant, she eats uncooked wild vegetables on the ground so as to be alive.

### **4.2.2. Carrie's Over-persistence to Rich Life**

Carrie has never been judged as a bad person, as she never does anything harmful deliberately. Although she has a strong desire for the life in the upper society, she is kind and independent in her nature, to begin with. She doesn't take the money from Drouet for granted. The first time she meets Drouet in Chicago, Drouet gives her some money for her new clothes, but having thought for a long time, Carrie returns his money finally. It is the powerful evidence to Carrie's innocent nature.

Then, combined with the stay at her sister's home and unsatisfactory workplace, the strong desire for a prosperous life subjects her to the immoral conception. Meanwhile, this desire made her abandon Hurstwood. Actually, from the point of view of human nature, the heroine is not wrong. She left a poor man to get rid of the dependence on men. However, when the heroine succeeds in her career, she doesn't go to find and help Hurstwood. Nor did she take it into account that Hurstwood sacrifices everything to live with her. What she is just thinking of is how to make her live a wonderful life of upper class.

She spent her whole life on money, pleasure, material, luxury, clothes, appearance. She is good at how to learn from the rich, so that she can become assimilated quickly after she is rich.

Taking all above into consideration, the only pursuit of Carrie is to blend in a big city. Her neighbors are a wealthy couple who is the episode of the upper class. Carrie is willing to communicate with them to burden her horizon. At the same time, she also enjoys the bright lights and the appreciative eyes of others, first experience in the stage leaving her a profound impression. She doesn't want to do bad deeds intentionally, but if these deeds can bring her good life, it is probable for her to commit these deeds and comply with the fate.

### **4.3. Suggestions for Women to Change their Fate**

#### **4.3.1. Bravery for Fighting for the Educational Right**

In China, gender equality is the basic national policy, and the whole country is implementing the concept of gender equality in all aspects of social life. But even so, there are still many inequalities between men and women in reality. To solve this issue, it is not enough to rely on one person or one group alone, but need the efforts of the whole society. Women, as a vulnerable party, need to have the courage to stand up for themselves and speak out, pointing out the unequal treatment they experience, so that more people and groups can become aware of and concerned about these issues. After all, while legislative protection can go a long way to improving the problem of gender inequality, a change in the mindset of society as a whole is the root of the problem. In particular, with regard to the right to education, in some countries and regions of the world, women still do not enjoy the same educational resources as men. For women in these regions, it is especially important to unite and speak up. Education is the golden key to change one's destiny and the ladder of human civilization, and the right to education is a right that women must fight for.

#### **4.3.2. Pursuit for Personality Liberation and Personality Independence**

In order to obtain the due status in the society and change this established prejudice, women should first free their mind. Only when they view themselves as equal as men will they gain the respect truly. It is extremely wrong for women to stress the equality of genders as well as enjoying the right brought by their gender. The work is attributed according to the characteristics of genders instead of gender itself. Besides, women should struggle for their educational rights with the help of morality and law, which teaches them how to help themselves and fight back. Finally, women should be brave to be faced with all disagreements in front of them. Many may deny themselves, when confronted with divergence.

Then, it is advised that women should be given more chances and opportunities, like offering more jobs for them. Nowadays, many companies prefer to employ men, because they believe it is men who can be more devoted to their work. Women have to look after their families, causing their being less committed to the work. Besides, it is commonly seen that women are rejected by many positions seemingly designed for men, like programmers, which evolves to a illusion that women are weak in or unsuitable for these positions. However, if women were given chances to learn, they could show their talents for these jobs. In addition, women couldn't get their due status until they can be economically independent, for it is their economic independence that endows them with entitlement to speak to men equally.

## **5. Conclusion**

As what has been discussed shows, the tragic fates of these two heroines mainly result from their over-persistence and the outer influence imposed by the patriarchal society. They are all pretty and kind girls at first, only to change a lot after suffering a lot. Tian Xiao'e loses her life when pursuing her wanted happiness. Paying so extreme attention to love, Tian Xiao'e is never independent in her real life. After her death, she is even regarded as a shame of women. She

gives herself completely to men who treat her tenderly and accept her as the wife, only to be hurt once and once again, because women at the patriarchal society are not allowed to have different husbands and are compelled to be faithful even after their husbands' death. Nevertheless, what is ridiculous is that it is common for a man to have several wives in order to perpetuate their families, like Bai Jiaxuan whose father selects six wives for him and all of these six women die in different reasons. At the end of the novel, Tian Xiao's ghost brings a plague on the village, which can be viewed as a hit from the weak on the unfair society.

As for Carrie, she changes her physical life successfully and becomes a powerful fight against the patriarchal society. She pursues her dream bravely and deserts her life living on men. After she succeeds, she refuses to help Hurstwood, which can be seen as an attack to this patriarchal society, that is, women can make it to the top without being attached to men. But Carrie is unable to get her wanted life as well. Actually, both Hurstwood and Drouet really love her, though both of them cheat her at the same time. Hurstwood hopes to live with Carrie and is willing to abandon everything, including his job, his family and decent life. But in order to achieve her dream of living a rich life, Carrie leaves Hurstwood and then doesn't lend him a hand. The loneliness at the end of the novel reflects Carrie's mental failure. Therefore, although Carrie seems to live a good life and have a happy ending, her fate can be defined as a tragic one. Compared with Bai Ling in *White Deer Plain*, whose life is short but dream comes true, both Tian Xiao'e and Carrie are confronted with unfortunate lives, resulting from the inner cause, their over-persistence, and the outer cause, the persecution from the patriarchal society. They become the victims of the long-existing inequality. Thus, no matter what their endings are and how different their endings are, they are both tragic, just different in dimension.

Since the prejudice has long bothered women over the world, women should know how to change their life, in other words, women should be inspired to fight for other rights, besides the right of life. Receiving education is of extreme importance for women, because women can equip themselves with the needed knowledge, knowing what is the good way to fight against the unfair deem. What's more, women should consider what the life they want is and should be clear of their current situations, for if they are so persistent to a single thing, they may be unconscious of their present sufferings, which may lead to their being likelier to take a wrong turn to the misery.

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