

# Why Are Women Discontent?

by Carol McCluer

Women all over America are discontent--just look at the number of current books on the subject. In one, the author writes about how women are “perpetually cranky.” “Perpetually cranky” is a way of describing a state of mind that torments people--and did me. I am eternally grateful I learned from Aesthetic Realism why I had a gnawing feeling of discontent even when I got what I thought I wanted--including a man lavishing me with attention and praise.

Aesthetic Realism explains for the first time that there are two kinds of discontent--one that comes from the best thing in a person, our desire to like the world. There is a drive within our very nature to see more, feel more--a tremendous ethical insistence in us that we be fair to the world outside of us. And “when we are unfair to the world,” writes Eli Siegel in *Self and World*, “it can be shown that something in us which is the world itself, doesn’t like it.”

The other kind of discontent is based on the hope in a woman to feel the world is a mess, not good enough to satisfy us, that people are not appreciative or interesting enough. This kind of discontent arises from contempt, defined by Mr. Siegel as “the addition to self through the lessening of something else.”

The tremendous inclination in women to be discontent ravages their lives, and, had it not been comprehended and criticized in me, would have ruined mine. Tonight, I will tell some of how my life changed through studying Aesthetic Realism. And I will speak about an important novel by the American writer Theodore Dreiser.

## ***1. I Learn About the Drive to Be Discontent***

Growing up in Brea, California, the first of four children, I enjoyed many things--playing the piano, studying ballet, and reading. But I was in a terrific fight between getting accurate pleasure from these, and getting pleasure from feeling I was a superior creature, and things should simply go my way all the time, and if they didn’t, I was discontent. I was very much praised by my teachers and my parents, especially my father. He called me his “sweetheart,” and when we talked I got the feeling, “We are deeper and more savvy than anyone else in this family.” I flattered myself that I was the most important person in his life. But inside I knew I wasn't just sweet and good; and

I felt like a faker. In his essay, "On A Person's Not Being Known," Eli Siegel explains:

*There is a triumph in hiding, or being unknown; and this triumph obscures the fact that the being not known, the not being understood, is our greatest, most pervasive sadness....Because people in a family are not seen as they are, as they see themselves when they are alone with themselves, there is a great deal of concealed displeasure.*

Meanwhile, I expected everybody, very much boys, to treat me the way my father did. And when they didn't, I felt I had a right to be wounded and furious.

Most of the time I would tightly hold in what I really felt. Then at other times, I would get out of control with anger or hysterical laughing. And I was nervous: I couldn't memorize my piano pieces, and would shake when I had to play in front of people; and though nobody knew it seeing my smiling face, even the most everyday situations of having to talk to people, like calling a store to ask a question, would be frightening to me.

In high school, I tried out for cheerleading and didn't make it, and I remember how fiercely I felt, "I'll show them I'm so much better than this stupid school and this stupid town" as I sobbed into my pillow. I was in the Drama Club, and got cast in many plays, but I felt stabbed when another girl got a good part. Once, when I got a dramatic part, rather than being grateful and happy, I thought, "They think I can't do comedy!" When a young man I had had a crush on since first grade turned down my invitation to a high school dance where the girls invited the boys, I was devastated, and felt intensely, "Never again will I be in the humiliating position of showing more care for someone than he shows for me."

By the time I was 18, I was generally disgruntled, and blamed it on being from such a boring, middle-class town. I felt if I was in a big city, famous, rich, and adored--that would really satisfy me. I moved to LA, got work as an actress and singer, and got the attentions of many men. But none of my relationships lasted. Rather than think something was wrong with me, I defiantly thought, bottom line was that others, including my boyfriends, were stifling my expression. In a lecture "Aesthetic Realism and Dissatisfaction," Mr. Siegel explains:

*In a choice between changing something in themselves and therefore thinking*

*they have done something wrong, or finding misery from the world--there is a tendency to say, "I'd rather have myself and be miserable than change what I am and find more accurate pleasure in the world."*

I put together my own nightclub act, thinking this would show everyone my true value. Backed by a band and singers, I sang a variety of songs. While I was hoping to get to something really worthwhile in terms of expression, I was also trying to dazzle the audience. In between songs I carried on an airy, cynical banter that included bawdy jokes meant to impress my friends. I received laughter and applause that night, but the next morning when I woke up was the lowest point of my life. It was my 25th birthday. I had done the thing that was supposed to make me happy at last, and I felt heartsick, and hated myself.

But that experience was what propelled me to make the best decision of my life--to move to New York. Through the good will of a fellow singer and actor Bennett Cooperman--who is now an Aesthetic Realism consultant--I learned about Aesthetic Realism and was able finally to meet the understanding I had been yearning for all my life! In my first Aesthetic Realism consultation, I was asked:

*Do you think if a girl can charm other people before she charms herself, there's something wrong? Is it dangerous to have someone very much taken by us when we feel it's not deserved?*

"Yes!" I answered. A light was beginning to shine through--I was seeing my discontent came largely because I had an opinion of myself based on how fair I was, regardless of how much praise I got. And I began to learn why love had never gone right. My consultants said:

*As you talk about men, including the first man you knew, your father, you seem sad... You don't know how much you are still affected by the power you had over your father and your feeling you should have that power over any man... So, how much do you want someone to mean to you? Men feel you want to do something to them, but you don't want them to mean a great deal to you. As an actress, your job is to affect people. But how much an actor or actress wants to be affected herself is a very big thing.*

As I studied Aesthetic Realism, I had a new lease on life. I began to see I had a large hope that things *not* mean so much to me; in fact, to have contempt for them. Hearing criticism of this, the deepest thing in me was strengthened: every day I was more honestly affected by people and things--a tree in winter, the way the sky looks at twilight, a child skipping down the street. I began to read books again, and had large emotions about them: *Middlemarch*, *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*; and I studied things I never thought I would: Shakespeare, economics, the visual arts. I came to love Van Gogh and Matisse; to value and hear better all kinds of music. The drama means more to me, and I am proud to say through what I have learned, I am increasingly able to present characters in plays with sincerity. And what I had longed for so much happened: I was able really to love a man, Kevin Fennell, and I am so proud that we have been married for 18 years. What I am learning is what every woman has a right to know!

## 2. *Sister Carrie; and The Hope to be Discontent*

*Sister Carrie*, a novel by Theodore Dreiser, published in 1900, is the story of a young woman who is discontent, and leaves her farmland home in Wisconsin to seek a more meaningful, exciting life in Chicago. Dreiser writes:

*Caroline, or Sister Carrie, as she had been half affectionately termed by the family, was...warm with the fancies of youth...possessed of a figure promising eventual shapeliness and an eye alight with certain native intelligence...she was interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life...[and] dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy...*

Faced with the prospect of having to get a job, Carrie Meeber walks the streets of the rapidly growing Chicago of 1889. Dreiser describes so well something Eli Siegel definitively explained and passionately criticized: the horrible grind people are put through because of the injustice of an economic system based on profit--the justifiable discontent it makes for in the minds, bodies and souls of people: “[Carrie] was a work-seeker, an outcast without employment, one whom the average employee could tell at a glance was poor and in need of a situation.” And Dreiser describes her feelings as she sees women with better clothes and more money than she has. He writes:

*A flame of envy lighted in her heart. She realized in a dim way how much the city*

*held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart.*

She gets a job for three and a half dollars a week running a machine that finishes boys' caps. The working conditions in the factory are horrible, not unlike those in sweatshops that exist to this day. Dreiser writes:

*...[T]he room...had a thick odour of fresh leather....Her legs began to tire and she wanted to get up and stretch. Would noon never come? It seemed as if she had worked an entire day...her eyes were tiring, straining at the one point where the eye-punch came down...Her hands began to ache at the wrists and then in the fingers and toward the last, she seemed one mass of dull, complaining muscles.*

Carrie gets sick and loses her job. A charming traveling salesman, Charlie Drouet, whom she had met on the train to Chicago, asks her to live with him--and she agrees to it. She is immediately taken out of her hard life, becomes well-dressed and admired, goes to plays and restaurants. But she is still discontent. Commentators on this book surmise this is because "society" sees her as immoral. That may be, but Aesthetic Realism would ask: Is the reason you are against yourself the fault of convention or that you have gone away from your deepest purpose--to be fair to the world? "There is only one thing immoral in the world," stated Eli Siegel, "liking oneself too much and the outside world too little." Dreiser describes Carrie's conscience telling her she is a failure.

*"Why?" she questioned... [C]ame the whispered answer... "You had not tried before you failed." ...She really was not enamoured of Drouet. She was more clever than he. In a dim way, she was beginning to see where he lacked.*

She is pretending to care more for another human being than she really does, and she doesn't like herself. In my life, I had a way of feeling at first, "This is the man for me!" and then over time getting hurt, disillusioned and bitter--it became a recurring pattern, and I felt sadly that no one could ever live up to my expectations. I got so cynical that I lived with a man I didn't really care for but knew could give me things and help advance my career, and I was ashamed of myself. I told my consultants about him, and other men I had been in relation to. They asked me: "What do you think

is the great triumph and tragedy of women as to men?"

*CMc: Feeling superior to them?*

*Con: When a man kisses you, does your respect for him go up, or down?*

I was so used to having contempt for men, hearing this, I was amazed at the words "respect" and "kiss" even being in the same sentence. I said, "I think down." They explained:

*That is the great triumph and tragedy of women: that as a man shows plainly that he desires her, her respect for him goes down. Do you think you want men to be as good as they can be?*

"No," I said. They asked me if I had gotten a satisfaction thinking a man would flop. I said, "Yes, I think so," and they continued:

*You want to punish men and then you feel bad when you succeed. This is the feminine dilemma.*

They were describing accurately what had gone on in me. Women need to know what I so desperately did: our desire to be discontent, the hope that a man fail with us, so we can feel victorious, kills the possibility of love. And having good will is the logical, beautiful, romantic answer!

### **3. *Good Will: The Opposition to Wrong Discontent***

In the novel, Carrie has "the feminine dilemma" which I was learning about in myself--she wants to care for someone, but she also has a big desire to punish and be superior to men. She meets George Hurstwood, the manager of a fashionable bar in Chicago. Writes Dreiser:

*For the most part he lounged about, dressed in excellent, tailored suits of imported goods, several rings upon his fingers, a fine blue diamond in his necktie...When Hurstwood called, [Carrie] met a man who was more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways...He was mild, placid, assured, giving the impression that he wished to be of service only—to do something which would make the lady*

*more pleased.*

And Carrie makes the mistake women do every day, and I did: she judges a man, not on how fair he is to the world, but by how he treats her, how important he makes her. I was once asked in a consultation, “Do you think the purpose of men is to praise you, or to like the world?” Carrie clearly feels the purpose of men is to praise her--and Hurstwood does it more elegantly than anyone she’s ever met. He looks at her searchingly and asks:

*“You are not satisfied with life, are you?”*

*“No,” she answered, weakly... He reached over and touched her hand.*

There is intense feeling between them, but not good will; they weaken, rather than strengthen, the desire in each other to be fair to other people. After much happens, they end up together in New York City, living in a small flat on 78th Street. Hurstwood goes in as partner of a saloon, but the business does badly and he loses his entire investment. Dreiser’s description of the decline of Hurstwood--from an arrogant, self-assured man to one who has to beg in the streets--is powerful and moving.

But Carrie is deeply cold to what is happening to him, and you feel she is getting a huge victory of contempt seeing him flop. She says she is going to look for work as an actress, something she has been interested in. Hurstwood objects at first, and Dreiser writes:

*“It’s better than going hungry,” said Carrie. “If you don’t want me to do that, why don’t you get work yourself?” ... “Oh, let up,” he answered... She secretly resolved to try. It didn’t matter about him.*

This unfeelingness of Carrie is something every woman has to look at in herself. Some years ago, just before the birth of our daughter, Sara, when I needed my husband more than ever and he was tremendously happy, I found myself driven to be discontent. In one class when I spoke about various complaints I had gathered as to Kevin, Ellen Reiss asked me: “Do you think Mr. Fennell would like the having of this child to make him larger and freer and see more meaning in things?” “Yes,” I said. And she asked:

*Will you let him? Which makes you more important--to see meaning in a person, or*

*to be superior? There's something you get from being able to look down on your husband that you feel is more important than loving him, and more important than respecting yourself, and it's very dangerous.*

I was so relieved by this discussion. I saw that I was actually hoping to be displeased, and the putrid discontent I was harboring began to change immediately. Four days later, our daughter, Sara, was born, and I am so grateful there was a new birth of good will between us in our marriage. Today, all three of us are learning together!

Sister Carrie ends sadly years later with Carrie Madenda, as she is now known, an affluent and celebrated actress, alone in her hotel room, still discontent with her life, and still not understanding why.

Aesthetic Realism opened up the world to me, and made my heart and mind so much larger! The painful discontent, once so much a part of my life, has ended, and this is what women everywhere will feel when Aesthetic Realism is known!



Carol McCluer graduated from the City University of New York with a degree in Education and Theatre, and is studying to teach Aesthetic Realism in classes taught by the Class Chairman, Ellen Reiss. As part of the Aesthetic Realism Theatre Company, she performs in culturally avant-garde theatrical and musical events at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City; and also works as a software trainer. She lives on the Lower East Side of Manhattan with her husband and 12-year-old daughter.