Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 277

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

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Project Editor

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Contents

Sister Carrie

Theodore Dreiser

The following entry presents criticism of Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* (1900). For discussion of Dreiser's complete career, see *TCLC,* Volumes 10, 18, and 35; for discussion of the novel *An American Tragedy,* see *TCLC,* Volume 83.

INTRODUCTION

Sister Carrie, Dreiser's debut work, is considered an important novel in American literature and a landmark text in the development of literary Modernism. Generally regarded as representative of the literary school of Naturalism, it was among the first American novels to depart from the gentility that characterized fiction of the nineteenth century, offering instead a detailed and uncompromising portrait of turn-of-the-century urban culture. In this complex "rags-to-riches" narrative Dreiser addressed a number of important themes, including morality, ambition, the pursuit of the American Dream, and the variable nature of identity. Through its depiction of the titular protagonist's rise to fame and financial success, *Sister Carrie* also poses questions regarding the tension between determinism and free will, the effects of materialism on human culture, and the commodification of modern life. Although sometimes criticized for its awkward prose style, sentimentalism, and didactic commentary, the novel is generally acknowledged as a seminal work of American fiction and appreciated for its penetrating insight into contemporary critical issues. Writing in 1968, John J. McAleer remarked that in *Sister Carrie* Dreiser adeptly presented his era in historical perspective and extracted "from its flow of values things which were not ephemeral." For this reason, according to the critic, the novel "has the timelessness that attaches to all things which best evoke their times."

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sister Carrie relates the story of Carrie Meeber, a young woman from Wisconsin, who moves to Chicago in pursuit of the American Dream. Despite her inexperience Carrie finds a job, but it is tedious, low paying work in a shoe factory. She is discouraged to realize that most of her paltry salary will have to be surrendered to Minnie and Hanson, her sister and brother-in-law, who demand that she pay them for lodging. With the onset of winter, Carrie becomes sick and loses her job. She searches, unsuccessfully, for another position, but she eventually meets Charlie Drouet, a traveling salesman whom she first encountered on the train ride into Chicago. Drouet takes her to lunch, gives her money for warmer clothes, and eventually offers her lodging, so that she can leave Minnie and Hanson's drab apartment. Carrie accepts Drouet's offer, and begins enjoying some of the luxuries that she has been denied. Through interactions with a neighbor, Mrs. Hale, Carrie becomes aware of even greater possibilities of wealth, and she eventually becomes dissatisfied with her comfortable existence.

Drouet introduces Carrie to George Hurstwood, a successful manager at Fitzgerald and Moy's, an upscale bar frequented by Chicago's elite society. Hurstwood maintains a comfortable life with his family, and while he realizes that an indiscreet affair could jeopardize his social standing, he is strongly attracted to Carrie and begins visiting her when Drouet is away on business. As the novel progresses Carrie's relationship with Hurstwood escalates. Unaware that Hurstwood is already married, Carrie believes that he will propose, while Hurstwood fantasizes about experiencing pleasure without responsibilities. Meanwhile, as a result of his affair Hurstwood neglects his family, and his life at home deteriorates. During this time Drouet convinces Carrie to take part in an amateur theatrical production, and she delivers a surprisingly impressive performance.

While Carrie and Hurstwood continue their affair, both Drouet and Julia, Hurstwood's wife, begin to suspect their partners of infidelity. During an argument Drouet informs Carrie that Hurstwood is married and then moves out of the apartment they have shared. Carrie writes Hurstwood a letter dissolving their relationship. Julia, who has legal rights to their property, locks her husband out of their house and threatens to ruin his reputation. Resolving to win Carrie back, Hurstwood steals ten thousand dollars from his employers and convinces Carrie to travel with him to Montreal, where they get married under the name Wheeler.

Carrie and Hurstwood move to New York, where Hurstwood invests in another, less lucrative, bar, and they are forced to watch their household expenses. For the next

two years they live in relative harmony, although Carrie's domestic life becomes increasingly isolating. She eventually befriends a wealthy neighbor, Mrs. Vance, who introduces her to New York's high life, once again stimulating her desire for material wealth. Carrie also meets Robert Ames, an intellectual who instructs her to yearn for even greater levels of social standing and artistic success. In their third year together in New York, Hurstwood's business suffers, and as their finances decline, their relationship also deteriorates.

When Hurstwood loses his position entirely, Carrie finds work as a chorus girl in the theater. Her acting career flourishes, and she is offered more lucrative roles in the subsequent weeks. Eventually Carrie's success enables her to leave Hurstwood. She gains popularity with audiences and finally pursues a full-time stage career. As Carrie experiences rising success, Hurstwood declines further into poverty and is reduced to begging in the streets. He eventually commits suicide by gassing himself in a cheap hotel room. Carrie never learns of Hurstwood's death, and her success grows. At the end of the novel, she is a rich and celebrated actress, but she remains insecure and unfulfilled and continues to suffer from an unnamed desire.

MAJOR THEMES

The American Dream, or the pursuit of prosperity, is an important theme in *Sister Carrie.* On one level, the novel operates as a "rags-to-riches" narrative, insofar as it follows Carrie's rise to financial success and social status through her pursuit of a career in the theater. With Hurstwood's decline from riches to rags, however, Dreiser also demonstrates the fragility of material gain and social status. While *Sister Carrie* resembles other rags-to-riches narratives popular during the time, the success of Dreiser's protagonist differs significantly from those depicted in other contemporary texts. For instance, Carrie ignores Victorian conventions governing morality and sexuality, and is consequently able to advance by taking advantage of every opportunity, rather than earning success through virtue. Dreiser also complicates the rags-to-riches narrative by suggesting that Carrie's success is superficial and offers her no real or lasting fulfillment but leaves her still longing for something that she cannot identify at the end of the novel.

In addition, Dreiser explores the related theme of materialism in *Sister Carrie,* highlighting the consequences of the evolving economic structure on American culture at the turn of the century. Set in Chicago during the economic boom that followed the Civil War, the novel depicts the growing emphasis on conspicuous consumption, or the acquisition of goods and services as a means of signaling wealth and attaining social status. Throughout the novel Carrie demonstrates her insatiable ambition to acquire material possessions, as well as her understanding that such markers of wealth denote status and prestige. As the novel progresses Carrie becomes aware of even greater levels of wealth and social prestige with the help of such characters as Mrs. Hale, Mrs. Vance, and Robert Ames, and subsequently becomes dissatisfied with her own existence. Although Carrie believes that accruing wealth and success will enable her to achieve happiness, Dreiser repeatedly demonstrates that consumerism is a system that relies on the perpetuation of desire and ultimately results in dissatisfaction.

The commodification of humanity is another important theme in *Sister Carrie.* At various points in the novel Dreiser shows the dehumanizing effects of the free market system. For instance, during Carrie's job search employers assess the protagonist's value as they would any other commodity. Likewise, Carrie is not invited to live in her sister's household out of familial love or obligation, but because she can improve her sister's financial situation through her rent, thus underscoring her status as a commodity rather than an individual. Later in the novel Carrie's sexuality also becomes a commodity. As numerous scholars have noted, Carrie enters into sexual relationships with both Drouet and Hurstwood, not necessarily for love, but to advance her situation, and then easily leaves them when better opportunities arise.

The tension between determinism and free will is an important and controversial theme in *Sister Carrie.* While most Naturalist texts champion determinism, or the idea that social conditions, heredity, and environment exert inescapable force on the trajectory of human character and experience, Dreiser's ambivalent treatment of the subject has prompted numerous scholarly debates in the years since his novel was first published. For some scholars the author's deterministic philosophy is most evident in his depiction of the city, whose numerous temptations overwhelm Carrie's sense of right and wrong, leading her to exploit her sexual status in order to survive and even prosper with each new situation. Likewise, Hurstwood's decline, which demonstrates the character's inability to adapt and survive in a new urban environment, expresses the negative mirror image of Carrie's experience, showing again how environment and social conditions, more than individual will, determine one's fate. Other critics, however, suggest that Dreiser did not fully commit to the deterministic outlook in his novel. Many often point to the scene in which Hurstwood steals money from his employers, which suggests that the author also considered free will a factor in human action. Although Hurstwood vacillates between taking the money or not, once the safe accidentally closes and locks, his actions have already determined his fate. Whether he steals the money or re-

turns it, his employers will distrust him, and his reputation will be ruined.

The variable nature of identity, primarily demonstrated in the character of the heroine, is another theme present in *Sister Carrie.* At various points Carrie suppresses her own urges and adapts her personality to suit the expectations and desires of others. She first complies with the ideas of propriety issued by her sister and brother-in-law, and later begins imitating the gestures and behaviors that Drouet admires in other women, reinforcing the traditional attitude that women merely mirror the needs of men. Carrie similarly adjusts to suit Hurstwood's expectations, and even marries him under a different name. The idea that Carrie has no fixed identity is also reinforced by her seemingly innate ability to perform onstage. A born actress, she easily adapts to various roles, and she once again assumes an alternate name for her theatrical persona.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The events surrounding the initial publication of *Sister Carrie* in 1900 have become legendary in American literary history. After the manuscript elicited an enthusiastic endorsement from Naturalist author Frank Norris, who worked as an editor for Doubleday, Page and Company, Dreiser was offered a contract by the firm to publish the novel. The agreement was formed with the junior partner, William H. Page, while Frank Doubleday was out of the country. Dreiser maintained that when Doubleday returned, he took the manuscript home, where Mrs. Doubleday read it and found it offensive, after which Doubleday attempted to dissolve the contract. When Dreiser refused to withdraw the book, Doubleday honored their contract but failed to promote the work. As a result of this "suppression" of the novel, less than five hundred copies of the book sold in the first sixteen months after its publication. In the years that followed the author and his supporters found it useful to characterize Mrs. Doubleday as a Victorian prude, while Dreiser was portrayed as a martyr to American Puritanism. Although Mrs. Doubleday's involvement has never been authenticated, Dreiser repeated the story often throughout his career, and his version of events was widely accepted.

What critical reaction Dreiser received for *Sister Carrie* upon its initial release was mixed. While some commentators praised the work for its detailed and uncompromising realism, others found the novel "unpleasant" and questioned the author's treatment of morality. A number of critics also found fault with Dreiser's style and language, which veered between didacticism and sentimentality on the one hand, and stark realism on the other. The novel's reputation fared much better after William Heinemann published it for British readers in 1901. A second American edition of the work, published by B. W. Dodge in 1907, also proved to be successful. Reviewers of these later editions particularly noted Dreiser's insightful depiction of Chicago and New York and admired the author's portrayal of Hurstwood's social and physical decline. Writing in 1951 F. O. Matthiessen asserted that with the figure of Hurstwood "Dreiser began his chief contribution to American literature." While some early commentators argued that Hurstwood provides an important counterpoint to Carrie's arc in the narrative, others contended that the novel suffers aesthetically when the character replaces Carrie as the central focus of the work. In the decades that followed, *Sister Carrie* played a central role in discussions of early twentieth-century American life and culture and came to be regarded as a representative text within the Naturalist mode. In 1981 the University of Pennsylvania Press published a restored edition of the novel, which included material Dreiser deleted prior to 1900, as well as three alternate endings to the book.

In the latter half of the twentieth century scholars continued to discuss the thematic preoccupations explored in *Sister Carrie.* In the early 1960s William A. Freedman identified circularity as an important motif within the work, describing Carrie's social ascent as a "circular quest for happiness." Rejecting claims that Hurstwood's decline detracts from the novel, Philip Fisher emphasized the thematic importance of the cycle of human life, as depicted in the young protagonist's rise and the aging Hurstwood's descent, arguing that various images employed in the work, including the recurring appearance of the rocking chair, reinforce this theme. Other commentators, including Irene Gammel and Florence Dore, probed Dreiser's treatment of sexuality in *Sister Carrie.* Gammel, writing in 1994, remarked that "the sexualization of power in a modern consumer culture" is the central theme of the work, while Dore linked the representation of Carrie's sexuality to questions of identity, asserting that *Sister Carrie* remains "a chronicle of American misogyny—a novelistic account of the failure to achieve a feminine sexual identity outside of a demand for feminine innocence." The link between personal identity, feminine sexuality, and modern capitalistic culture in Dreiser's work was also examined, in varying degrees, by Dean McWilliams, Tim Armstrong, Kiyohiko Murayama, and Babak Elahi.

By far the most dominant issue in critical discussions of *Sister Carrie* is the question of the novel's status as a representative Naturalistic work. Related to this point is its unusual mixture of different, even conflicting, literary styles, such as Realism and Romanticism. Rejecting the novel's connections to the Naturalist tradition, Charles Child Walcutt argued that *Sister Carrie* is better characterized as "a perfect novel of manners," while Yoshinobu Hakutani described the work as closer to

Romanticism than Naturalism in its sympathetic treatment of its characters. Likewise, John J. McAleer and James Lundquist stated that Dreiser took deliberate pains to mitigate, in McAleer's words, "a strict mechanist" ideology in his novel, mainly by suggesting the possibility of free will in human action. Other scholars, however, including Richard Lehan, David E. E. Sloan, Philip Gerber, and Donald Pizer, put forth the opposite claim, contending that *Sister Carrie,* despite its suggestions otherwise, is indeed a Naturalist work. In his 1999 essay, Pizer maintained that while Dreiser's narrative defies the category in some respects, it "does not mean that the term *naturalism* cannot offer a productive approach to the novel, both for what occurs in the novel itself and for the relationship of the novel to other works of its literary movement." Yet a third group of critics have offered a more nuanced reading of the issue. McWilliams blamed the conflict "between materialism and an insatiable idealism" in the novel on Dreiser's inability to adhere to his Naturalist message, and Bruce E. Fleming averred that Dreiser actually synthesizes the two worldviews, determinism and free will, through his detailed depictions of the "mental states" of his leading characters, and by showing that through "passivity" they become the external world that shapes them.

While the formal strategies and thematic concerns depicted in *Sister Carrie* have prompted numerous critical debates, scholars generally agree that the novel remains a seminal work within the American literary canon. For most present-day critics, *Sister Carrie* is significant, not because of Dreiser's language or even his subject matter, but because it is among the first American novels to overturn Victorian morality and, in Lehan's words, depict "an amoral world where there was no relationship between the virtuous life and earthly reward." As Lundquist noted, "Unlikely as it may have seemed, even to Dreiser himself in 1900, it is with *Sister Carrie* that the now dominant liberal attitudes toward morality in the American novel began."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Sister Carrie (novel) 1900
Jennie Gerhardt (novel) 1911
**The Financier* (novel) 1912; revised edition, 1927
A Traveler at Forty (autobiography) 1913
**The Titan* (novel) 1914
The "Genius" (novel) 1915
A Hoosier Holiday (autobiography) 1916
Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural (plays) 1916
Free, and Other Stories (short stories) 1918
Twelve Men (sketches) 1919
Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life (essays) 1920
The Hand of the Potter (play) 1921
Book about Myself (autobiography) 1922
The Color of a Great City (essays) 1923
An American Tragedy. 2 vols. (novel) 1925
Moods, Cadenced and Declaimed (poetry) 1926
Chains (short stories and novellas) 1927
Dreiser Looks at Russia (essays) 1928
The Aspirant (poetry) 1929
A Gallery of Women. 2 vols. (sketches) 1929
Dawn (autobiography) 1931
Tragic America (essays) 1931
America Is Worth Saving (essays) 1941
The Bulwark (novel) 1946
The Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser (short stories) 1947
**The Stoic* (novel) 1947
Theodore Dreiser: A Selection of Uncollected Prose (essays and journalism) 1977
American Diaries, 1902-1926 (diaries) 1982
†*An Amateur Laborer* (autobiography) 1983
Selected Magazine Articles of Theodore Dreiser: Life and Art in the American 1890s (journalism) 1985
Journalism, Volume One: Newspaper Writings, 1892-1895 (journalism) 1988
Theodore Dreiser's "Heard in the Corridors" Articles and Related Writings (journalism) 1988
Fulfillment and Other Tales of Women and Men (short stories) 1992
Political Writings (essays) 2011

*These works are collectively referred to as the Cowperwood Trilogy or the Trilogy of Desire.

†This work was written in 1903.

CRITICISM

Claude M. Simpson, Jr. (essay date winter 1959)

SOURCE: Simpson, Claude M., Jr. "*Sister Carrie* Reconsidered." *Southwest Review* 44, no. 1 (winter 1959): 44-53.

[*In the following essay, Simpson offers a reappraisal of* Sister Carrie *in the context of American literature, contending that its "amoral" vision is not consistently developed by Dreiser in the work—in fact, at key points, it is morally ambiguous. Simpson praises the novel nonetheless as a "classic" text, whose treatment of human ambition remains highly relevant and moving.*]

As one reads ***Sister Carrie*** today he may well wonder why its publication in 1900 should have been considered a scandal. The central plot of the novel concerns a country girl who comes to the city and achieves success—a female version of the ever popular "rags to riches" Horatio Alger story which has come to symbolize a basic American experience. On the surface, indeed, the theme would seem almost too commonplace to excite fresh interest, and if the novelist questioned the stereotyped formula by suggesting at the close that success and happiness are not identical, this bit of preachment was neither daring nor subversive. The book contained no obscenity, little profanity, only one faintly erotic scene; its vulgarity was limited to matters of taste, in which the nineties generally were deficient. None the less, this first novel of Dreiser's met with an opposition amounting almost to suppression, a fate he was to experience later with ***The "Genius"*** and ***An American Tragedy.***

The trouble with ***Sister Carrie*** was that it ignored or defied conventional views of morality. The criminal conduct of Hurstwood was followed by his disintegration and suicide, but Dreiser did not attribute his downfall to "sin." The traveling salesman Drouet was an almost professional seducer, but he rose to become a branch manager; Dreiser treated the moral taint as irrelevant to his career. Worst of all, Carrie surrendered her virtue and became a "kept woman," yet the novel showed no useful lesson relating to the wages of sin; instead, the closing chapter pictured her as a successful actress with an apartment in the Waldorf. There could be serious reservations about the propriety of asking for sympathy with and interest in a saloonkeeper, a salesman, and a weakwilled woman, but these reservations were unimportant in comparison with the challenge to generally accepted canons of fictional behavior.

For Dreiser's world is basically amoral. He is as conscious of the disparity between society's professed standards and the actualities of life as was Mark Twain in *The Mysterious Stranger*; he is as aware of the sources and attractions of power as was Norris or Zola, as sensitive as Balzac to the aggressive role perforce played by money, as convinced as Freud that sex is a profound conditioner of behavior. For a strictly conceived Christian ethic of right and wrong, Dreiser substitutes not a systematic theory of behavior such as Zola deduced from scientific observation, but rather a sense of wonder at the nature of life. In ***Sister Carrie*** one sees the individual neither master of his fate nor in the grip of implacable forces. Instead,

> he is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve by the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other—a creature of incalculable variability.

Dreiser was later to evolve his theory of "chemisms" and assume a far more deterministic view. But in this first novel he gives considerable play to the struggle between instinct and will, and if he seldom allows chance an overmastering role neither does he force his characters into arbitrary patterns of action merely for the sake of consistency.

Dreiser's views were not original. They reflect the movements of thought which had been gathering force for half a century, particularly in Europe. But it would be a mistake to suggest that the decisive influences on him were literary. He knew some of Hardy and Balzac, but he had not read Zola, and he came upon Norris' *McTeague* only after he had completed ***Sister Carrie.*** Although he confessed that reading Tyndall, Huxley, and Herbert Spencer in the 1890's was an explosive experience, it is probable that the ideas of social Darwinism, natural selection, and the survival of the fittest made their great impact on him because they confirmed what experience had taught him but had not led him to frame into general propositions. Child of a narrow, pietistic German Catholic father and a tolerant, understanding mother, he was one of a large family steadily dogged by poverty and never permanently settled in the succession of Indiana towns they called home. One of Dreiser's strongest youthful impressions was that his father's religious orthodoxy did not keep the family solvent, that a paternal dogmatic theology was powerless to prevent one of the sons from becoming an alcoholic and two of the daughters from losing their virtue prematurely. Dreiser's formal education culminated in one year at Indiana University; by that time the most indelible impressions had been made upon his dreamy nature by the pains and longings, the furtive experiments with sex and masculine adventure that marked him as an outsider. Before he was twenty he had worked at any number of jobs, he had been on his own in Chicago, he had measured the chasm between a gaudy romantic vision of opulent success and the miserable lot of an immigrant's son.

During the next decade of his life his newspaper experience in Chicago, St. Louis, Toledo, Pittsburgh, and New York brought him in close contact with politics, poverty, business chicanery, and elastic ethics. The age that Parrington characterized as "the great barbecue" was perhaps viewed more cynically by Henry Adams than by Dreiser. Certainly Dreiser did not share Mark Twain's strong sense of moral indignation or the reform spirit of Henry George and Edward Bellamy. His two autobiographical volumes, ***Dawn*** and ***A Book About Myself,*** in covering the first twenty-five years of his life emphasize the steady undermining of family teachings, ethical idealism, religious orthodoxy; in opposition to such strict precepts was the world of experience from which he derived, at least by middle age, a mechanistic outlook which colored his view of his youth. But at the