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Sister Carrie by Theodore Dreiser



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SISTER CARRIE by Theodore Dreiser

With an Introduction by E. L. Doctorow



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PRINTING HISTORY

Sister Carrie was first published in 1900

The text of Sister Carrie is that of the 1900 Doubleday, Page edition with Dreiser's emendations from the 1907 B. W. Dodge reprinting. Spelling and punctuation have been brought into

conformity with modern American usage.

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THEODORE DREISER

was born into a large and impoverished German-American family in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1871. He began his writing career as a reporter, working for newspapers in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis, until an editor friend, Arthur Henry, suggested he write a novel. The result was Sister Carrie, based on the life of Dreiser's own sister Emma, who had run off to New York with a married man. Rejected by several publishers as "immoral," the book was finally accepted by Doubleday and Company, and published—over Frank Doubleday's strong objections—in 1900.

Numerous cuts and changes had been made in the lengthy original manuscript by various hands, including those of Arthur Henry, Dreiser's wife Sara (known as "Jug"), and Dreiser himself. Later, when given to mythologizing his career, Dreiser was to suggest that the publishing history of Sister Carrie had been one of bowdlerization and suppression only; but the publication of his unedited manuscript by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1981 shows that Dreiser approved and even welcomed Henry's and Jug's alterations. (Whether the book was ultimately improved or compromised by their liberal editing is a fascinating and as yet unresolved issue among Dreiser scholars.) Sister Carrie sold poorly, but writers like Frank Norris and William Dean Howells saw it as a breakthrough in American realism, and Dreiser's career as a novelist was launched.

The Financier (1912) and The Titan (1914) began his trilogy about the rise of a tycoon, but it was An American Tragedy (1925), based on newspaper accounts of a sensational murder case, which brought him fame. The novel was dramatized on Broadway and sold to Hollywood. Newly influential and affluent, Dreiser visited Russia and was unimpressed, describing his observations in the skeptical Dreiser Looks at Russia (1928). In later years, however, he became an ardent (though unorthodox) Communist, writing political treatises such as America Is Worth Saving (1941). His artistic powers on the wane, Dreiser moved to Hollywood in 1939 and supported himself largely by the sale of film rights of his earlier works. He died there, in 1945, at the age of seventy-four.

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INTRODUCTION

by E. L. Doctorow

Theodore Dreiser was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1871. His father was a German Catholic immigrant, embittered by hard luck in business. His mother, by contrast, had seemingly endless resources of courage and hope for her ten children despite the staggering burden of bearing and raising them in poverty. The family moved from one Indiana town to another as the father lost or found employment. In volume one of Dreiser's autobiography, Dawn, he remembers scavenging along the railroad tracks for coal for the family stove; but he testifies also to the joyful sensuality of his child's feelings for life and the natural world around him.

At the age of fifteen, influenced by the accounts of some of his older brothers and sisters, Theodore went off alone to Chicago—the same sort of journey, and made for the same reason, as that undertaken by the heroine of Sister Carrie. He found work as a dishwasher and busboy and then as a shipping clerk. After an interval at Indiana University in Bloomington, financed by a former schoolteacher who believed in his potential, he returned to his romance with the city of Chicago as a bill collector, real estate clerk, and laundry-truck driver.

But he had vague ambitions of writing. He had delivered newspapers as a child and had come to associate with the life of a reporter all the drama and glory of the catastrophes of history and the doings of great men. His first newspaper job was the Chicago Herald—dispensing toys for the needy at Christmas. But eventually he was hired as a cub reporter for the Chicago Globe and subsequently went on to St. Louis to become a feature writer for the Globe-Democrat. After reviewing in absentia a theatrical performance that turned out not to have occurred, he

felt it wise to leave St. Louis. He found a job with the *Dispatch* in Pittsburgh where, since it was the aftermath of the Homestead strike in which armies of Pinkerton detectives and striking steelworkers had fought pitched battles, he began to appreciate some of the problems inherent in American economic life.

In the second volume of his autobiography, Newspaper Days, Dreiser acknowledges the formative influence of his fellow reporters and editors—cynics, boulevardiers, and drunks though many of them were. "They did not believe, as I still did, that there was a fixed moral order in the world which one contravened at his peril." But while he absorbed their ideas and attitudes he seems to have been immune to their world-weary resources. Here is his description of the character of his young self: "Chronically nebulous, doubting, uncertain, I stared and stared at everything, only wondering, not solving." This happens also to be a perfect description of the state of readiness in a novelist.

Yet it was not until he was working in New York as a magazine editor—by now married to Sara White, a schoolteacher he had met at the Chicago World's Fair—that Dreiser even thought of writing fiction. A friend of his, Arthur Henry, an Ohio journalist, had encouraged him to write stories and then challenged him to write a novel. Henry, to his credit, had recognized in Dreiser's work as a feature writer the capacity of the novelist. And so in 1899, Theodore Dreiser, age twenty-eight, wrote the title "Sister Carrie" on a piece of paper, and having no idea what it meant, proceeded to compose the book to find out.

It is not difficult to find in Sister Carrie the circumstantial details that Dreiser brought to it from his own life: what it means to be in wonder and awe of a great city in which you're looking for work, or to be desperately hungry and down on your luck, a street person, as we say now, or to be on the way up the business ladder, a young man dressed in the latest fashion and knowing how to endear himself to young women. One of Dreiser's sisters had run off to Toronto with a married man, just as Carrie does to Montreal, and the married man had turned out to have stolen money from his employer, just as Carrie's lover George Hurstwood is made to do. The Chicago of the novel is the Chicago Dreiser knew in his youth and is painstakingly accurate in its references to streets, hotels, and restaurants. The New York where Carrie and Hurstwood play out their love affair is one you may trust down to the last streetlamp.

But none of this accounts for the composition—what the act

of writing creates. We may hope to sense what this is by reflecting on F. O. Matthiessen's statement, in his authoritative critical biography *Theodore Dreiser*, that Dreiser was "virtually the first major American writer whose family name was not English or Scotch-Irish." An outsider because of his German background, his poverty, his limited parochial school education, Dreiser sprang to being as an artist independent of the prevailing literary and cultural values and tastes that might otherwise have formed him. He wrote about what he had seen as a working reporter—and he had seen a lot. He stood outside the governing New England influence that George Santayana called "the genteel tradition"—a tradition whose end result, according to Matthiessen, "is to make art an adornment rather than an organic expression of life, to confuse it with politeness and delicacy . . . and to think of literature as somehow dependent upon the better born groups of richer standing."

Eighty years later our literary history has absorbed the work of James T. Farrell, Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow—to mention just those ethnic and lower-depth writers out of Chicago—and the immigrant impudence is itself part of the prevailing culture. But in 1900 the first publisher to see the manuscript of Sister Carrie, Harper Brothers, turned it down on the grounds that it was not "sufficiently delicate to depict without offense to the reader the continued illicit relations of the heroine." And the publisher who accepted it, Doubleday, Page, published it with trepidation, and therefore badly. It came out in 1900, sold less than seven hundred copies, and created for Dreiser the reputation of naturalist-barbarian that followed him down the years.

What was the nature of the book's offense? In what way did it lack sufficient delicacy? Sara White Dreiser felt the trouble lay partly in the references to the sexual lives of the characters. Dreiser struck all of these he could find before submitting the book to Doubleday. Literary scholars tell us that both Mrs. Dreiser and Arthur Henry were intimately involved in the editing of the manuscript after the Harper rejection. The commendable scholarship of the Dreiserians of the University of Pennsylvania Press, which in 1981 published a version of the uncut manuscript, makes it possible to see, however, that even the uncut Sister Carrie was never sexually explicit nor less than circumspect in its depictions of physical life.

But Dreiser's wife and friend were closer to the mark when they urged him not to leave the reader at the end of the book with the impression that Carrie was to be rewarded for her life of illicit relation. Dreiser wrote according to the aesthetic principle of Realism, which proposes that the business of fiction is not to draw an idealized picture of human beings for the instruction or sentimental satisfaction of readers, but rather to portray life as it is really lived under specific circumstances of time and place, and to show how people actually think and feel and why they do what they do. But the young author had also chosen, consciously or unconsciously, to build his realistic novel on one of the oldest narrative conventions in literature—a convention, moreover, right off the shelf of literary gentility. Dreiser made the changes asked of him; but the structural parody of Sister Carrie is its pointed offense—one which no amount of judicious editing could soften.

Consider that in Chapter I, before her train even reaches Chicago, the eighteen-year-old Carrie, a "half-equipped little knight . . . venturing to reconnoitre the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams . . ." is picked up by a traveling salesman who sits in the coach seat behind hers and, assuming theology's favored position for the Devil, leans forward and whispers into her ear. The assault upon innocence is a staple of Christian melodrama; as a narrative convention it looks back at least as far as the first novel in English, Samuel Richardson's Pamela, whose heroine is exercised in defense of her virtue for well over three hundred pages. Our Carrie doesn't make it past page sixty-four. Unable to find a decent job, overwhelmed by the rude rush and merciless dazzle of an urban society, she moves in with the importunate salesman, Charlie Drouet, and improves her fortunes materially by her act. Furthermore, Drouet is shown to be not a bad fellow, only somewhat shallow and insensitive.

Living unwed with Drouet and then, in a somewhat more complicated situation, with the erstwhile hero of the book George Hurstwood, Carrie hardly suffers any of the standard fates the convention requires. Dreiser saw to it that she would not end up happy, but neither is she punished or repentant. What is more important, the author never suggests that her alternatives, had she been capable of choosing them, would have given her a finer life or made her a better person.

Of course Dreiser is not in spirit a parodist. He's the least ironical of our major writers and there is reason to doubt from the evidence of Sister Carrie that he has even the hope of wit. What he has rather is a concern for the moral consequence of life that is so pervasive as to constitute a vision. But it is unmediated by piety. All God can do in Sister Carrie is provide a soup line for

someone who's down and out. He is not presumed by any of the characters to provide guidance, let alone redemption. He is not indicated by even one fully functioning conscience. And those characters who are wronged—Hurstwood's wife and children, for example—are motivated by the same material values; they are as singlemindedly ambitious, and governed by the same sensitivity to wealth and status, as everyone else.

And here we may begin to hope to locate the achievement of this novel. There is a remarkable moment of transition when it becomes clear that Carrie will change her sexual state. We are immediately taken into the mind of her older sister Minnie, a drab spiritless woman, married to an immigrant who cleans refrigerator cars at the stockyards for a living. Minnie has not been particularly generous or supportive to her younger sister families and, by implication, the values of family life do not come out well in Sister Carrie—but she is concerned enough about Carrie's fate to have a troubled dream as she falls asleep. In her dream she sees Carrie disappear forever into the dark pit of some sort of water-ridden coal mine. Characteristically, Dreiser chooses the right direction for Hell, but his metaphor has a superseding value. The black coal mine is perdition in its industrial form. And it is solely in the modern industrial world, without reference to any other state of existence than the material, that Dreiser finds the government of our moral being.

The Dreiserian universe is composed of merchants, workers, club-men, managers, actors, salesmen, doormen, cops, derelicts—a Balzacian population unified by the rules of commerce and the ideals of property and social position. "The true meaning of money yet remains to be popularly explained and comprehended," Dreiser says at the beginning of Chapter VII, and proceeds, with Sister Carrie, to give us the best explanation we have had. It is not merely that his characters must display it if they have it, work for it, steal, or beg for it if they haven't: their very beings are contingent upon it—who they are in the character of their souls.

When we first meet George Hurstwood he is a virile man of the world, with a cosmopolitan charm and an intelligence competent to all the demands that his life might place on himexactly the characteristics that attract Carrie. But after he wins her—having to go to great lengths to get her away from Drouet—and is living with her in New York, his powers fade and he enters into a slow, terrible decline of spirit. In the material world, the stature of a man is in his exterior supports. His passion

INTRODUCTION

for Carrie has removed Hurstwood from his job, from the respect of his peers, and from the accourtements of position—house, family, bank account. Without these he is without will. He is simply not the same man. His love for Carrie cannot sustain him—indeed, it collapses along with his income.

Carrie, for her part, is emphasized to be a passive individual who comes into animation under the attentions of others. She never thinks about anything she hasn't seen. She is a heroine who goes through her story without an idea in her head. If Dreiser is telling here of a sentimental education, Carrie's teachers are not primarily the men who keep her but other women—the succession of neighbors and friends who instruct her in the longing for clothes, jewels, apartments, and in all the emblems of taste and fashion. It is these things that arouse her passion and delineate her possibilities. And when, under the pressure of circumstance, she discovers her talent for acting, it will be seen that her success springs not from any force of creativity, innate and substantive, but from the fact that her face and demeanor so well represent "the world's longing." It is Carrie as representation of all desire, a poignant reflection of the entire society, that makes her a star and causes people to pay money to see her. Dreiser gives this crucial observation to the one person in the book who is capable of standing in judgment of the culture he lives in, the remote Mr. Ames, a character said to have been modeled on Thomas Alva Edison. "The world is always struggling to express itself," Ames tells Carrie. "Your face . . . [is] a thing the world likes to see because it's a natural expression of its longing."

Longing, the hope for fulfillment, is the one unwavering passion of the world's commerce. Dreiser is of two minds about this passion. To a populace firmly in the grip of material existence, the desire for something more is a destructive energy that can never be exhausted; it is doom. Hurstwood, whose success as manager of a high-class drinking establishment is not sufficient, fixes his further ambition on Carrie, and is ruined. But the desire for something more, the longing for fulfillment, is also hope, and therefore innocence, a sort of redemption. Carrie, at the top of her profession, is left looking for something more, and though we understand she will never find it—no more than Hurstwood has—her recognition that she is unfulfilled is the closest thing to grace in the Dreiser theology.

H. L. Mencken, although a great friend and champion of Dreiser's, felt the author had made a serious structural error by

giving so much space, in a novel about Carrie, to the fate of Hurstwood. Mencken believed this ruined the organic unity of the book. It is true there are no more graphic and stunning scenes than those that follow Hurstwood down to dereliction. But the case is overstated. Dreiser's panoptic vision encompasses more than the story of one or another individual. George Hurstwood's fall propels Carrie Meeber's rise. As Einstein taught, the energy of the universe is never exhausted, only transformed and recycled. Carrie discovers her ability to earn money because Hurstwood has lost his. Together they describe all the possibilities of material fate, lonely death, enormous success, and in a world in which everyone is alone with his own ambition, the moral consequence is the same.

It is astonishing to consider how—in this big realistic novel, which takes us into three cities, and portrays to effect most of the classes of American society, a novel in which we are witness to physical degradation, homelessness, unremitting labor and violent strikes at the one extreme, and fine living, glamorous well-being and wealth at the other, and through which a seemingly endless cast of characters appear fully animated in their surroundings of streets, tenements, saloons, office buildings, trains, hotels, theaters—it is astounding how hermetic this novel is. What a closed and suffocating America Dreiser seals us in! The selfeducated immigrant's son, a naif who stared and wondered at everything, managed to connect it all in as unitary a vision as has been produced by American literature. He is said to be a clumsy, cumbersome writer, but the clarity and consistency of his vision is a function of his craft. It comes of a control of recurrent imagery and reiterated observation. It comes of a narrative voice that is older, wiser, and more compassionate than we have any right to expect from a first novelist in his twenties. It is a result of the rate of stately progress of the events of the story, and of the attention given to every phase of growth in the feelings of the major characters—which brilliantly exceeds, in its patience, the magnitude of their minds or the originality of their problems. There is nothing clumsy about any of this, nor anything but genius in the vision that comes off the pages of Sister Carrie and into each and every one of us.



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