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# THEODORE DREISER SISTER CARRIE



Introduction by Dr. Clarence A. Andrews COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

# SISTER CARRIE

*THEODORE DREISER*

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# SISTER CARRIE



*THEODORE DREISER*

## Introduction

In 1899, the very first issue of *Who's Who in America* listed Theodore Dreiser as "Journalist-Author," with a note to the effect that he was in particular the author of "Studies of Contemporary Celebrities" and "Poems." Thus the future author of *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), *The "Genius"* (1915), and *An American Tragedy* (1925) had already achieved fame of a sort before he ever sat down to begin a single one of the longer works which were to establish him as one of the major figures of American literary history.

Theodore Herman Albert Dreiser (to give the name by which his German-Catholic parents baptized him) might have seemed at that instant in time to have been the least likely candidate for literary immortality among those listed in the book. A background of "dumb despair" and poverty (at one time, he stole coal to help keep his home warm), a resulting pattern of mobility (at another time, he lived in part of a brothel) which often interfered with his formal education, a broken home, with siblings and father coming and going, an adolescence in a series of drab Midwestern towns, a career as an itinerant newspaperman and holder of various odd jobs—none of this would have seemed to have provided the background which a successful author should have. But something had happened to Dreiser in that year 1899 which was to make all the difference.

That something was a visit he and his wife (he had married

Sarah [Sallie] White in 1898) paid to Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Henry in Maumee. Henry, a former city editor of the *Toledo Blade* had been trying to persuade Dreiser to try his hand at short stories. On this occasion Dreiser was persuaded; within a year or so, he had had four short stories accepted for publication. In the fall of 1899, Arthur Henry, moving to New York City, then Dreiser's home, presented a new course of action to Dreiser. He and Dreiser should both try their hands at writing a novel. Dreiser accepted this challenge, and, according to his own story, he took a piece of paper and, sitting at his desk, wrote the words "Sister Carrie" across the top of a blank sheet of paper. At the moment, according to his later testimony, he had no idea at all as to what would follow.

But within a month he had completed some hundred pages, up to the point where Carrie is introduced to Hurstwood by Drouet. At that point, he stopped, feeling that what he had done was at best a failure, and went back to his routine of writing articles. He reckoned, however, without Henry, who told him that unless Dreiser went on with his book, he (Henry) could not go on with his novel, *A Princess of Arcady*. Dreiser, feeling almost a fool, then continued his novel, bringing it up to the point where Hurstwood is about to steal the money from Fitzgerald and Moy's. He stopped at this point because he could not conceive just how Hurstwood should steal the money.

Henry was out of New York just then, but when he returned he read what Dreiser had written and told him that he must continue. Dreiser managed to conceive the scene where the money is stolen and went on to the point in the novel where Hurstwood's decline begins. Again he stopped for a while, baffled as to how to proceed. Finally, in May of 1900, with Henry's continuing encouragement, he finished the novel. He took his manuscript to a friend at Harper and Brothers, but that company refused it. The publishers who at the time were publishing the works of writers such as William Dean Howells, Mrs. Humphry Ward, and Henry Seton Merriman may have found the book a bit too gamy for their genteel tastes.

Dreiser then took the manuscript to Doubleday, Page and Company, where Frank Norris (who had published *McTeague* in 1899) read it. He reported that it was "the best novel" he had read (and he had been reading the French novelist Zola, it should be noted) and recommended that Doubleday publish the book.

Accordingly, the company entered into a contract with Dreiser to publish the book. But then something happened. The story (as told by Dreiser and H. L. Mencken) is that Mr. Doubleday was in Europe when the contract was signed. When he returned he found his wife quite upset over the novel; he himself may

have felt that it was an "immoral" book. In any case, the company informed Dreiser that the book would not be published. But Dreiser needed the money Doubleday had promised him; he consulted a lawyer, who told him that the company was legally obligated to carry out the contract. The company, too, consulted its lawyers and learned the same news. But at the same time, the company was told that while it must publish the book it need not make an effort to sell it. So some thousand copies of the book were published and a few copies were sent to reviewers. Other than that, the book received no advertising. Many of the copies gathered dust in the Doubleday warehouse for years. At most, some six hundred copies were sold and Dreiser got about a hundred dollars for his labors.

Although reviews of the book were in general favorable, Dreiser was so discouraged by the events just related that he did not try his hand at long fiction for almost a decade. During that period, he lived from hand to mouth for a time, and finally became editor of magazines, especially *The Delineator*, a publication for ladies interested in fashions!

Through his own efforts and the efforts of others (among whom was Hamlin Garland), *Sister Carrie* was transferred to another publishing house in 1907. From that moment on, its eventual success was assured, and the novel has continued in print ever since.

The average modern reader, after finishing *Sister Carrie*, may wonder what the fuss was all about and what there was about it that led it to be considered "immoral." I would respond to that sense of puzzlement in this way: there seems to have been just as much "sin" and "immorality" in the nineteenth century as there is in this, but people were more reluctant then to talk or write or read about deviations from what was considered normal or acceptable behavior. Many people were quite upset (I believe "shook" is the current word) when they found lines such as these in a magazine:

. . . as one meets  
The chance romances of the streets,  
The Juliet of a night?

Instead, they preferred (if statistics about book sales may be considered a valid criterion) such nonsense as this:

"Draw the veil. The full interview between such hearts,  
so deeply tried, so long severed, so unexpectedly reunited, is  
almost too sacred for description."



The lady who wrote those lines died in 1899. In her lifetime, she wrote and sold more books than any other American writer of the late 19th century!

The crime of *Sister Carrie* was that it portrayed the life of a "fallen woman"—as if she were a virtuous woman. It portrayed behavior which for those times was unspeakable—and it made no judgments about that behavior. As a matter of fact, the book erred seriously in that *Sister Carrie* was not only not punished for her transgressions—she was actually rewarded. For at the end of the novel, although Carrie has not resolved some basic personal problems, she has achieved a material success of sorts.

So much for that aspect of *Sister Carrie*. The more important matter is—why do we still read the book today?

It is not for the "story line" as such—that is relatively simple. Carrie Meeber ("Sister Carrie") leaves her Wisconsin home to go to Chicago to live with her married sister. On the train she meets Charles Drouet, a "drummer" or salesman. After a short stay with her sister, she goes to live with Drouet, but without marrying him. Through Drouet, she meets George Hurstwood, manager of a deluxe saloon. Eventually, Hurstwood, a family man, becomes infatuated with her and tricks her into leaving Chicago with him. He finances this expedition and their subsequent life together in New York—after a pretended marriage—with money he has stolen from his Chicago employer. The remainder of the novel details Hurstwood's subsequent personal decline and eventual suicide and Carrie's rise in the world of musical entertainment.

It is not for the theme of success versus failure that we read the story, either. That theme was very common in American fiction—witness, for example, the whole series of Horatio Alger's novels: *Paul, the Peddler*, *Luke Walton*, *Struggling Upward* are examples. This theme is based on the American dream that the average man may rise above his origins to political or financial success. However, Dreiser varied this theme in one important way. In Alger's novels, for instance, virtue always triumphs and evil or want of virtue always fails. By definition, *Sister Carrie* is hardly a virtuous woman for her time; yet she succeeds.

Incidentally, an interesting comparison can be made of the success-versus-failure theme in *Sister Carrie* with the same theme in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Both books report the contrasting careers of a man and a woman. In both books, the woman begins at the bottom and rises to a more successful place in life. In both books, the central male character begins at the top and falls to a lower place in life. The important difference (and it is an asset for Dreiser's novel) is that in *Sister Carrie* the protagonist is a woman.

Nor do we read this book because it is a period piece, although in many ways it is that. Dreiser was fascinated by the world of change he saw around him—the growth of the cities, the construction of tall buildings, the new devices such as the telephone and electric light that technology was making available, the new kinds of social beings—the drummer, the professional entertainer. Over and over, he describes this world of change and with obvious relish—but the book transcends this aspect.

The world of *Sister Carrie* is a transitional world. The pony express, the beginnings of the telegraph, the invention of the telephone are all within the memory of many men living at the time. Yet this world is becoming more compact—by the time Hurstwood and Carrie have arrived in Canada, for example, the newspaper has the story of his defalcation and a detective is looking for him.

Nor is *Sister Carrie* a novel of social protest. When she first comes to Chicago, Carrie meets a brother-in-law who is employed by a meat packing firm. Yet his employer is not the meat packer that Upton Sinclair was to depict in just a few years in *The Jungle*. Carrie secures employment in a dress manufacturing shop. The work is tedious and the pay is low—but the workers endure and even manage to find some degree of fun and society in their work.

And Dreiser is depicting a world he knew in this book. He had endured poverty, he had lived in the Chicago and New York he described. Many of the adventures described in the book are based on events which had happened in Dreiser's own family or on events which he had seen or taken part in.

Yet even though Dreiser described his world in a realistic fashion—so realistically, in fact, that the book shocked many people—it still retains much of the reticence and flavor of the Victorian period. One result of the reticence is that Carrie is not a whole woman. A result of the flavor is that the book is neatly concluded with all its loose ends brought to our attention. Another result is the point of view which often treats Carrie in a manner very typical of 19th century authors—phrases such as “A half equipped little knight,” “a silent little Quakeress.”

We read *Sister Carrie* today because it is a novel about genuine people for whom we can care. We are concerned when the innocent Carrie meets the worldly Drouet; we are unhappy at the dreary surroundings of her first Chicago home and job. We share with her her longing to escape from this world, even if it is only to stand in the doorway or to walk through the shops with their bright ornaments. When she goes to live with Drouet we are both shocked and happy—happy that she has improved her lot, shocked at the method she has used. But not for long. Carrie

is no Pamela who will stoutly defend her virtue in order to get a higher price for it in the end. Carrie will live life as it comes. She will violate some moral codes, obey others.

It is worth noting that Carrie never violates the codes which have to do with money, as Hurstwood does. This point is important, for the society of *Sister Carrie* is a society based on wealth. When Carrie's state of affluence first begins to improve because of her own efforts—not because of the generosity or desires of others—she recalls that factory girls in Chicago are still working very hard for wages which are mere pittance. And Hurstwood's world is a different world from the world of Carrie's beginnings because the people who live in it have a certain level of income. Hurstwood can live very comfortably, but he is conscious of the fact that he does not know the men who are extremely highly placed in society—the men of real wealth.

Carrie, Hurstwood, Drouet are real people, caught up in a world of events which they only partially control. They are not masked stereotypes, set on a stage to illustrate a thesis about man's place in a predetermined universe. A portion of their fate is determined for them by the wills of others—a portion of their fate is determined for them by the world in which they find themselves. Carrie, caught up in the effects of Hurstwood's theft and flight, need not perish as he does. She succeeds because she has a will of her own and finds a way. That way at first leads her to a chorus line. But she succeeds in the theater where others fail because she is attractive—and because she is sincere. In a world which places monetary values on things, she is able to achieve a certain state of affluence—the personality which first engaged Drouet and then Hurstwood is seen to be negotiable.

Yet Carrie's success is limited. It is superficial, a phantasy of true success. And therein lies the universal attractiveness of Dreiser's novel. For Carrie is like the eternal clown in us who meets the world bravely but who is lonely beneath the grease-paint. She is the prototype of the Jean Harlows, the Marilyn Monroes of our own times—the entertainers who create for others a world of escape and phantasy by living in one themselves. She is the symbol, moreover, of each of us who bravely wears the superficial mantle of successful living—yet who daily retires to the rocking chair, actually or figuratively, there to sit with the reality of ourselves—alone, alone, endlessly rocking:

Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart! Onward, onward, it saith, and where beauty leads, there it follows. Whether it be the tinkle of a lonely sheep bell o'er some quiet landscape, or the glimmer of beauty in sylvan places, or the show of soul in some passing eye, the

heart knows and makes answer, following. It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise. Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.

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## CHAPTER 1

### *The Magnet Attracting: A Waif Amid Forces*

When Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago, her total outfit consisted of a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse, containing her ticket, a scrap of paper with her sister's address in Van Buren Street, and four dollars in money. It was in August, 1889. She was eighteen years of age, bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth. Whatever touch of regret at parting characterised her thoughts, it was certainly not for advantages now being given up. A gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss, a touch in her throat when the cars clacked by the flour mill where her father worked by the day, a pathetic sigh as the familiar green environs of the village passed in review, and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken.

To be sure there was always the next station, where one might descend and return. There was the great city, bound more closely by these very trains which came up daily. Columbia City was not so very far away, even once she was in Chicago. What, pray, is a few hours—a few hundred miles? She looked at the little slip bearing her sister's address and wondered. She gazed at the green landscape, now passing in swift review, until her swifter thoughts replaced its impression with vague conjectures of what Chicago might be.

When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility. The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye. Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman. A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human

hives, appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms. Without a counsellor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! Unrecognised for what they are, their beauty, like music, too often relaxes, then weakens, then perverts the simpler human perceptions.

Caroline, or Sister Carrie, as she had been half affectionately termed by the family, was possessed of a mind rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis. Self-interest with her was high, but not strong. It was, nevertheless, her guiding characteristic. Warm with the fancies of youth, pretty with the insipid prettiness of the formative period, possessed of a figure promising eventual shapeliness and an eye alight with certain native intelligence, she was a fair example of the middle American class—two generations removed from the emigrant. Books were beyond her interest—knowledge a sealed book. In the intuitive graces she was still crude. She could scarcely toss her head gracefully. Her hands were almost ineffectual. The feet, though small, were set flatly. And yet she was interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things. A half-equipped little knight she was, venturing to reconnoitre the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy, which should make it prey and subject—the proper penitent, grovelling at a woman's slipper.

"That," said a voice in her ear, "is one of the prettiest little resorts in Wisconsin."

"Is it?" she answered nervously.

The train was just pulling out of Waukesha. For some time she had been conscious of a man behind. She felt him observing her mass of hair. He had been fidgetting, and with natural intuition she felt a certain interest growing in that quarter. Her maidenly reserve, and a certain sense of what was conventional under the circumstances, called her to forestall and deny this familiarity, but the daring and magnetism of the individual, born of past experiences and triumphs, prevailed. She answered.

He leaned forward to put his elbows upon the back of her seat and proceeded to make himself volubly agreeable.

"Yes, that is a great resort for Chicago people. The hotels are swell. You are not familiar with this part of the country, are you?"

"Oh, yes, I am," answered Carrie. "That is, I live at Columbia City. I have never been through here, though."

"And so this is your first visit to Chicago," he observed.

All the time she was conscious of certain features out of the side of her eye. Flush, colourful cheeks, a light moustache, a grey

fedora hat. She now turned and looked upon him in full, the instincts of self-protection and coquetry mingling confusedly in her brain.

"I didn't say that," she said.

"Oh," he answered, in a very pleasing way and with an assumed air of mistake, "I thought you did."

Here was a type of the travelling canvasser for a manufacturing house—a class which at that time was first being dubbed by the slang of the day "drummers." He came within the meaning of a still newer term, which had sprung into general use among Americans in 1880, and which concisely expressed the thought of one whose dress or manners are calculated to elicit the admiration of susceptible young women—a "masher." His suit was of a striped and crossed pattern of brown wool, new at that time, but since become familiar as a business suit. The low crotch of the vest revealed a stiff shirt bosom of white and pink stripes. From his coat sleeves protruded a pair of linen cuffs of the same pattern, fastened with large, gold plate buttons, set with the common yellow agates known as "cat's-eyes." His fingers bore several rings—one, the ever-enduring heavy seal—and from his vest dangled a neat gold watch chain, from which was suspended the secret insignia of the Order of Elks. The whole suit was rather tight-fitting, and was finished off with heavy-soled tan shoes, highly polished, and the grey fedora hat. He was, for the order of intellect represented, attractive, and whatever he had to recommend him, you may be sure was not lost upon Carrie, in this, her first glance.

Lest this order of individual should permanently pass, let me put down some of the most striking characteristics of his most successful manner and method. Good clothes, of course, were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing. A strong physical nature, actuated by a keen desire for the feminine, was the next. A mind free of any consideration of the problems or forces of the world and actuated not by greed, but an insatiable love of variable pleasure. His method was always simple. Its principal element was daring, backed, of course, by an intense desire and admiration for the sex. Let him meet with a young woman once and he would approach her with an air of kindly familiarity, not unmixed with pleading, which would result in most cases in a tolerant acceptance. If she showed any tendency to coquetry he would be apt to straighten her tie, or if she "took up" with him at all, to call her by her first name. If he visited a department store it was to lounge familiarly over the counter and ask some leading questions. In more exclusive circles, on the train or in waiting stations, he went slower. If some seemingly vulnerable object appeared he was all attention—to



pass the compliments of the day, to lead the way to the parlor car, carrying her grip, or, failing that, to take a seat next her with the hope of being able to court her to her destination. Pillows, books, a footstool, the shade lowered; all these figured in the things which he could do. If, when she reached her destination he did not alight and attend her baggage for her, it was because, in his own estimation, he had signally failed.

A woman should some day write the complete philosophy of clothes. No matter how young, it is one of the things she wholly comprehends. There is an indescribably faint line in the matter of man's apparel which somehow divides for her those who are worth glancing at and those who are not. Once an individual has passed this faint line on the way downward he will get no glance from her. There is another line at which the dress of a man will cause her to study her own. This line the individual at her elbow now marked for Carrie. She became conscious of an inequality. Her own plain blue dress, with its black cotton tape trimmings, now seemed to her shabby. She felt the worn state of her shoes.

"Let's see," he went on, "I know quite a number of people in your town. Morgenroth the clothier and Gibson the dry goods man."

"Oh, do you?" she interrupted, aroused by memories of longings their show windows had cost her.

At last he had a clew to her interest, and followed it deftly. In a few minutes he had come about into her seat. He talked of sales of clothing, his travels, Chicago, and the amusements of that city.

"If you are going there, you will enjoy it immensely. Have you relatives?"

"I am going to visit my sister," she explained.

"You want to see Lincoln Park," he said, "and Michigan Boulevard. They are putting up great buildings there. It's a second New York—great. So much to see—theatres, crowds, fine houses—oh, you'll like that."

There was a little ache in her fancy of all he described. Her insignificance in the presence of so much magnificence faintly affected her. She realized that hers was not to be a round of pleasure, and yet there was something promising in all the material prospect he set forth. There was something satisfactory in the attention of this individual with his good clothes. She could not help smiling as he told her of some popular actress of whom she reminded him. She was not silly, and yet attention of this sort had its weight.

"You will be in Chicago some little time, won't you?" he observed at one turn of the now easy conversation.