

24 CRITICS DISCUSS

Sister Carrie (1900)

Theodore Dreiser

(1871-1945)

“The best novel I had read in MS since I had been reading for the firm, and...it pleased me as well as any novel I have read in *any* form.... I shall do all in my power to see that the decision is for publication.”

Frank Norris to Dreiser (1899)
Letters of Theodore Dreiser I, 52, footnote 16
ed. Robert H. Elias
(U Pennsylvania 1959)

“You know, I don’t like *Sister Carrie*.”

William Dean Howells to Dreiser (1900)

“*Sister Carrie* was so displeasing to one of the members of the firm, or to his wife, that the book, though it came out according to the letter of Dreiser’s contract, was published without enthusiasm and few copies were sold. It had in fact something like the same fate as Crane’s *Maggie*. But Dreiser’s was, in its naïve decade, the more disturbing book... Readers long accustomed to seeing the lives of women in novels shown under a strict scheme of rewards and punishments were outraged. Such lives as Carrie’s ought not to be told about, even if they happened. Dreiser had no sympathy with a moralism that contradicted his observation. The first attractive woman he had ever seen was his brother Paul’s mistress. One of his sisters had eloped with a married man in Chicago, to New York, and lived in reasonable comfort. Dreiser had lodged at her house for a time and must have used her as more or less his model for Carrie.... There was a submerged American world, instinctive and undisciplined, which literature had passed over....

In *Sister Carrie* Dreiser tenderly conceived and honestly told the story of a girl who goes from her small town to Chicago, loves first one man and then a second, and outgrows them both, as any number of women have done on their way to the stage. Dreiser’s strongest pity was for Hurstwood, the second man, who gives up wife and children and position for love, learns that it is not enough, and gradually deteriorates till he loses Carrie and sinks by way of the bread line to the Potter’s Field. Never before in America had any such lives been recounted by a novelist so close to such characters. Dreiser’s mastery had no moral condescension in it, nor even much superiority to Carrie and Hurstwood in knowledge and taste. He stood beside them while he told their story. *Sister Carrie* was better received in England than in America, where criticism was inept and unimaginative.... For ten years, during which he was the successful editor of various magazines, he was a kind of legendary figure cherished by a few enthusiasts but generally unread.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 246-48

“Dreiser’s great first novel, *Sister Carrie*, which he dared to publish thirty years ago and which I read twenty-five years ago, came to housebound and airless America like a great free Western wind, and to our stuffy domesticity gave us the first fresh air since Mark Twain and Whitman.”

Sinclair Lewis
Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech
(Stockholm 1930)

“Carrie Meeber, penniless and ‘full of the illusions of ignorance and youth,’ leaves her rural home to seek work in Chicago, and becomes acquainted with Charles Drouet, a salesman who impresses her by his worldliness and affluence. In Chicago she lives with her sister and brother-in-law, and works for a time at jobs that pay little and oppress her imaginative spirit. After a period of unemployment and loneliness, she

allows Drouet to establish her as his mistress, and finds temporary happiness with him. She becomes aware of his inferiority, however, and during his absences falls under the influence of his friend George Hurstwood, middle-aged, married, and comparatively intelligent and cultured, who is the manager of a celebrated bar. They finally elope, first to Montreal and then to New York, where he opens a saloon, and they live together for more than three years.

Carrie grows in intellectual and emotional stature, while Hurstwood, away from the atmosphere of success on which his life has been based, steadily declines. When they are impoverished, their relations become strained, until Carrie goes on the stage and begins to support Hurstwood, rising from the chorus to minor acting parts. At last she deserts him, feeling that he is too great a burden, since he has not tried to obtain work except for a brief time as a strikebreaker during a trolley strike. Carrie becomes a star of musical comedies, but in spite of her success she is lonely and dissatisfied. Without her knowledge, Hurstwood sinks lower and lower, and after becoming a beggar, commits suicide.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“*Sister Carrie* had the appearance of being a Naturalistic novel and would be used as a model for the work of later Naturalists. Yet it was, in a sense, naturalistic by default, Naturalistic because Dreiser was writing about the life he knew best in the only style he had learned. There is a personal and compulsive quality in the novel that is not at all Naturalistic. The book is felt rather than observed from the outside, like *McTeague*; and it is based on dreams rather than documents. Where *McTeague* had been a conducted tour of the depths, *Sister Carrie* was a cry from the depths, as if *McTeague* had uttered it. It was a more frightening book to genteel readers than *McTeague* had been. They were repelled not only by the cheapness of the characters but even more by the fact that the author admired them....

Genteel readers didn't know whether to be more offended by the judgement or by the language in which it was expressed, and they must have felt more than a premonition that Hurstwood and his creator belonged to a new class that threatened the older American culture. Most of all they resented Carrie Meeber. They had been taught that a woman's virtue is her only jewel, that the wages of sin are death; yet Carrie let herself be seduced without a struggle, yielding first to a traveling salesman, then to Hurstwood; and instead of dying in misery she becomes a famous actress.

McTeague had offended the proprieties while respecting moral principles; every misdeed it mentioned had been punished in the end. *Sister Carrie*, on the other hand, was a direct affront to the standards by which respectable Americans had always claimed to live....with two or three exceptions the reviews were violently adverse and even insulting. ‘The story leaves a very unpleasant impression,’ said the *Minneapolis Journal*. ‘You would never dream of recommending to another person to read it,’ said the *Post-Intelligencer* in Seattle. *Life*, the humorous weekly, was serious about Carrie and warned the girls who might think of following in her footsteps that they would ‘end their days on the Island or in the gutter.’ *Sister Carrie*, said the *Chicago Tribune*, ‘transgresses the literary morality of the average American novel to a point that is almost Zolaesque.’ The *Book Buyer* accused Dreiser of being ‘the chronicler of materialism in its basest forms...’

For Dreiser the battle over *Sister Carrie* lasted for more than a quarter-century and ended with his triumph over the genteel critics. Yet the first years were full of disasters, in spite of the help that Dreiser and his book received from Frank Norris. One English publisher remembered Norris as a man who was ‘more eager for Dreiser's *Carrie* to be read than for his own novels.’ Besides trying to get American reviews for the book, Norris kept writing about it to England. A London edition of *Sister Carrie* appeared in 1901 and was enthusiastically praised. ‘At last a really strong novel has come from America,’ exclaimed the *Daily Mail*; and there were echoes of the judgement in other English papers.

There was a different sort of echo in New York, a buzz of angry gossip about English critics and their fantastic notions of American fiction. Without the London edition, *Sister Carrie* might have been forgotten for years, but now it was arousing a quiet wave of condemnation among persons who had never seen a copy of the novel. Dreiser found that magazine editors were suddenly uninterested in his articles and

stories, which had once been widely published; the new ones were coming back with rejection slips. One editor said, 'You are a disgrace to America.' The *Atlantic Monthly* wrote him that he was 'morally bankrupt' and could not publish there. At the office of *Harper's Magazine* Dreiser happened to meet William Dean Howells, who had always been friendly since the day when Dreiser had interviewed him for another magazine. This time Howells was cold. 'You know, I don't like *Sister Carrie*,' he said as he hurried away. It was the first occasion on which he had failed to support a new work of honest American fiction."

Malcolm Cowley
"The Slow Triumph of *Sister Carrie*"
The New Republic CXVI
(23 June 1947) 24-26

"The role of Dreiser's immediate contemporaries was to press beyond Realism to Naturalism. *The Red Badge of Courage* made a great stir the year that Dreiser first arrived in New York. But though he printed one of Crane's stories, 'A Mystery of Heroism'...he seems never to have had any feeling of close kinship with Crane's work. The case was altogether different with Frank Norris. Dreiser says that he picked up *McTeague* shortly after finishing *Sister Carrie*, and was thrilled by 'the invaluable local color, the force and reality of it all. Here was a true book, as arresting and illuminating as any I had ever read, and about America!'...[Dreiser] 'had never read a line of Zola.' He went on from Balzac to Hardy, whose sense of massive fate made a deep impression upon him. But the chief thing revealed through considering the aspects of tradition available for a writer of Dreiser's day is how little he was aware of them....

Dreiser was the representative of a far cruder America than Hawthorne's. He was only half-educated, and was scarcely a conscious artist at all when he set out to write *Sister Carrie*. In an authentic sense he was a primitive, not unlike the occasional American sign painter who has found that he possessed the dogged skills to create a portrait likeness and then has bent all the force of a rugged character to realize this verity. Opinions have been sharply divided as to Dreiser's skill in the most rudimentary element of his craft, the ability to tell a story.... When he wrote *Sister Carrie*, he was hardly concerned with the intricacies of a plot as Hardy contrived one. So far as he was aware of a model at all, it was Balzac's direct way of presenting solid slabs of continuous experience. Looking back at the finished result, he said, 'It is not intended as a piece of literary craftsmanship, but as a picture of conditions done as simply and effectively as the English language will permit.'

Why his 'picture of conditions' then seemed revolutionary in America is perhaps the aspect of Dreiser that is hardest for us to grasp now. Yet, as [Edgar Lee] Masters was to put it: 'Forty years ago when you wrote *Sister Carrie*, there was one ideology by which to write the novel about a woman. It was to prove that as a matter of Christian sin, not even of cause and consequence...the woman was punished.'... Carrie not only escaped punishment—Dreiser did not even regard her as sinful; and this was the crux of his defiance of late nineteenth-century conventionality.... He would be hailed by Sherwood Anderson as the stalwart opener of doors for the next generation.... If we are to appreciate, not the final value of Dreiser to readers today, but the first great contribution that he brought to his contemporaries, we must remember that Santayana coined the phrase 'the genteel tradition' to describe what he considered the most dangerous defect in American thought. Observing our dominant New England culture, Santayana believed that its deep-rooted error was that it separated thought from experience....

In her excited discovery of Chicago, Carrie is essentially Dreiser himself.... But Dreiser is also Drouet, the 'masher,' the flashy dresser. Or at least in his early poverty he had aspired to such clothes as he describes with intimate thoroughness when Drouet first speaks to Carrie on the train... In a more profound sense Dreiser is also Hurstwood. Or rather, Hurstwood, basking in the blaze of lights and dark polished woodwork of Fitzgerald and Moy's and affable with the rich and well-placed... And when later in New York, Hurstwood, no longer in his luck, begins to sag step by step down into the bottomless pit of poverty, Dreiser renders every detail of what he himself most dreaded....

The title of the novel appears as *The Flesh and the Spirit* in Dreiser's first agreement with Doubleday, and it is instructive to observe the kind of allegorical pattern he had in mind.... Dreiser continues to think of Carrie as an ignorant but slowly wakening seeker after some deeper significance in life.... Dreiser's

realm of 'the spirit,' in rejecting conventional standards, is so loosely defined and moreover so cluttered with clichés that it is hard to respond any longer to his sense of liberation in it. His most serious inadequacy in presenting his heroine is not what Mrs. Doubleday thought—that Carrie is too unconventional—but that she is not unconventional enough. The only way we could sense what Dreiser calls her 'feeling mind' would be to see her deeply stirred, and this she never is. Her affairs with Drouet and Hurstwood are so slurred over, in instinctive accordance with what was then demanded of fiction, that they are robbed of any warmth. She is never a woman in love....

Dreiser's use of...contrasting scenes in the final chapters is his most effective structural device. These chapters also contain one of the major accounts of the nature of poverty in American fiction....by Dreiser's time the distance had widened between the promise of Jefferson's America and the actualities of McKinley's....recurrent are the phrases which project Dreiser's feeling that people are swept by forces far beyond their control.... From this point increasingly Dreiser see his characters as 'drifting.'... Incidentally, Dreiser's own fondness for a rocking chair, which many interviews with him noted, suggests a physical basis for the rhythm of his thoughts. The slowness with which things occur in his novels is one of the ways by which he gives them weight. He has very little of the psychologist's skill in portraying the inner life of his characters, but he is caught by an overwhelming sense of the flow of life, mysterious beyond any probing. He remarks of Hurstwood that his apathy was 'almost inexplicable,' and some readers are impatient with Dreiser's frequent lack of skill in detailed motivation....

Charges of clumsiness have been repeated against him so often that they have obscured the many passages where, like the journeyman painter, he has a mastery of the plain style. When his mind was most absorbed with what he had to say, the flourishes of the feature-writer fell away, as did also the cumbersome, only half-accurate abstract terms ('affectional,' 'actualities'). Then he could write long passages where nothing is striking except the total effect. He is at his best in conveying the first understated rift between Hurstwood and Carrie, with everything keyed down to the neutral phrases that passed between them over the supper table. Or in conveying the brutal blankness of Hurstwood's separation from his partner Shaughnessy, or the pitiful blankness of the scene where Hurstwood begs from Carrie. Or in the entire chapter dealing with the streetcar strike... It is impossible to suggest the power of these in brief quotations, or in anything short of the whole."

F. O. Matthiessen
Theodore Dreiser

(1950; Dell/Delta 1951) 58-62, 66-67, 71, 73, 79, 84-85, 87

"*Sister Carrie* (1900) had...the advantage of a fresh, new, arresting event. Its rawness shocked the wife of the publisher whom Frank Norris had prevailed upon to accept the manuscript. For the liberal critic, the muckraker and the tilter at Philistine windmills, *Sister Carrie* was an event of high importance, an importance which has survived sober reevaluations of the book. Dreiser gained his hearing at a time when his apologists were anxious to find just such a writer. His followers did not leave him, but increased their admiration with each successive book.

Carrie Meeber discovers that there are three points of view concerning the mechanics of satisfying desire. In the grim semipoverty of her sister's home, she is told that it is best to do without things; the conventions sanction a dreary and monotonous lower-class life. The important step away from that life is at first urged by the drummer, Drouet. Things are within her grasp, if she will take them and accept the marginal morality that taking them requires; she is able to take a further step, to go away with the glamorous Hurstwood and settle with him in New York. Throughout Carrie is a simple, pure soul, touchingly concerned over moral irregularities and becomingly surprised when she discovers the tricks Hurstwood has played on her. Finally, she advances beyond her dependence upon men, when she discovers that her man is not dependable. Carrie's rise marks a quite definitely qualitative change from her earlier life. She becomes self-supporting and is able to afford the kind of life she has dreamed of during the Chicago days. More than that, she achieves financial independence because of her talent as an actress, and there are degrees of excellence there too.

Toward the end of the novel, Dreiser moves toward an 'argument,' a simple classification of desires as material and ideal. Through the stimulus of the wholesome remarks of one Robert Ames, the third and last

man in her life, she is crudely enabled to make distinctions: 'the ideal' is more important than things, for one; culture and 'the arts' are in the end more gratifying than vulgar wealth; there is more value in being a dramatic actress than in starring in musical shows. The pattern of the last third of the novel seems therefore to have a vague moral purpose. Hurstwood's decline and fall, detailed with the grim exhaustiveness of which Dreiser is master, is concurrent with Carrie's rise.

At the end Hurstwood is dead, and Carrie is unhappy. Nevertheless, there is no overt preaching in the description of Hurstwood's decay. Instead, there are amateur chemistry and physiology. Dreiser's moral interpretations are given in pseudoscientific terms. Above all, the novel urges us to accept these two characters as passive, and on the whole, as will-less creatures. Hurstwood suffers, not punishment for a crime, but the debilitating effects of a change in environment plus the compounding evil of a slowing of energy. In New York he has none of the material support for the self-confidence of his Chicago days. Discomfort and poverty serve to increase the difficulty of making another start. Potter's field is the end result. Its cause is cumulative; we are held fascinated by the growing pattern of disenchantment and dissolution. In the end, we have an exhaustively documented anatomy of misery. Throughout the novel, we sense something of the fresh, naïve, uncynical wonder of the setting in which the narrative proceeds."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery/Gateway 1951-63) 47-49

"Dreiser sentimentalizes Carrie—in his tender title, which 'came' to him out of that mysterious region of 'otherwhereness' before he had even chosen the theme of his book, and in the famous last paragraph, where he presents her as a seeker after beauty forever doomed to disappointment. But his characterization of the woman belies him. There is nothing of the pilgrim about Carrie; all she ever asked of life was a fair degree of creature comfort and a place of modest security in a world which seemed to have nothing for her so long as she remained a decent girl. But by the same token, if she is no pilgrim, she is utterly free of the guile and rapacity that 'kept' women were supposed to display in novels when they were admitted there at all. Neither is Drouet, her seducer, the conventional wolf in sheep's clothing whom everybody had hissed in the old melodramas....

There are faults in *Sister Carrie*: the heroine's rise to theatrical eminence is romantic in the bad sense; one is never quite convinced that Hurstwood would have taken the money; and if Carrie believed herself married to him, when in the world did she think he had been divorced? But the author's love for his essentially commonplace sinners still powerfully communicates itself to his readers, and for many the old Union Park district in Chicago speaks more eloquently of them than of any of the real persons who have lived there."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 286-87

"The literary power lies in the singular way Dreiser's sensibility, as that sensibility inheres in every scene, acts to become an expressive symbol for artistic meaning. What is meant by Dreiser's sensibility is his felt, rather than formulated, values—those values which produce his own special responsiveness to the pathetic in life, his special kind of caring for mankind, his honest, his acute awareness of social cruelty, his sometimes reverential, sometimes bewildered, reaction to the way of life in America. It is this integration of self and art which produces the voice of Dreiser."

William J. Handy
"A Re-Examination of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*"
Texas Studies in Literature and Language
(Autumn 1959) 380-89

"Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), is an important literary landmark.... The Fates made a strange choice when they singled out Theodore Dreiser to write the most controversial novel of the new century. Until he became a reporter, he had never made a success of anything. Yet we can see that many details of his struggle to be a success were written into *Sister Carrie*....the faithful reporter, presented by

facts of existence in a segment of a new American city as he had known them.... Seduction, adultery, bigamy, and theft are presented as natural actions on which it is useless to moralize. Worse still, no one is punished for them. These actions had been events in the life of Dreiser's sister; if the events were true, why should they not be touched up a bit and made into fiction? Dreiser had no idea that he had written an immoral book and that there might be trouble ahead for it....

When the Doubledays returned from Europe, Mrs. Doubleday, a social worker with large sympathies for the poor, read the novel in proof and was horrified at the prospect of the firm's bringing out so vulgar and immoral a book. Her husband agree with her judgment... Why had Mrs. Doubleday and most of the reviewers in the genteel journals been so horrified by *Sister Carrie*? Why did the word get around that Dreiser had written a 'dirty' book? After all, seduction has been an item in the stock-in-trade of novelists since the first novel in English, *Pamela*, appeared in 1740. But there were regulatory conventions and taboos, all of which Dreiser had ignored. Seducers must be punished or reformed. Yet Carrie's first lover, Drouet, is more prosperous at the end of the novel than at the beginning. Hurstwood, who steals Carrie from Drouet, does, it is true, go slowly down to poverty and suicide, but Dreiser is careful to explain the reasons for his decline. His seduction of Carrie is only an incidental cause. If he had been a young man, able to start over again in New York, he might, we gather, have become again a manager of a saloon as elegant as Fitzgerald and Moy's.

Convention permitted a number of solutions for the case of the fallen woman. Carrie might have had to endure a series of terrible misfortunes, in order that she could be redeemed in the end by a good man. Or she might have gone irremediably to the bad. She might have entered the limbo of the demimonde, where she could be sealed off from decent people, prospering, but secretly and constantly grieving. Dreiser used none of these approved recipes in cooking up Carrie's seduction.... What most particularly shocked many of the first readers of *Sister Carrie* was the matter-of-factness of the seduction. Dreiser warned them in Chapter I that it was inevitable.... Here is the shocker. Dreiser is implying that in the throbbing big cities of the land there are many—how many?—Sister Carries. This no right-thinking American was prepared to believe.... Instead of punishment, in the end she is accorded success...

No American novelist had so faithfully and minutely rendered life in our sprawling cities—the streets, mean and fashionable, the saloons and restaurants and hotels, the department stores (newly arrived on the scene), the theaters, the apartment houses with elevators and doormen and dumbwaiters. Here was our first full-scale city novel... Much has been written about Dreiser as one of our earliest Naturalists. With some limitations he can rightly be said to belong in that corner. But he had not read a word of Zola at the time of the writing of *Sister Carrie*, and so he could have known little of the master Naturalist's hope of creating fiction which would place characters in situations where they could be watched as if they were being experimented on in a laboratory. Because he was a reporter, Dreiser crowded his novel with authentic detail, one requirement in the naturalist's manual. For the same reason he kept his characters at a distance, most of the time, and so achieved that coolness of tone which the Naturalists admired.

What Dreiser knew about philosophical naturalism he found in his reading of Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer. The effect had been unsettling because Dreiser was a seeker of absolutes all his life, moving on from one philosophical position (if one can call it that) to another. While he was writing *Sister Carrie*, the evolutionary hypothesis offered Dreiser something to cling to, though there was not much comfort in knowing that Man, according to Spencer, was helpless to control his destiny, even if he was slowly moving up the evolutionary scale. In the opening of Chapter 8 Dreiser provides us with the Naturalistic clue to Carrie's tropism, her instinctive movement upward. He defines the exact point on the scale at which she had arrived and beyond which she may not go.... 'She followed whither her craving led. She was as yet more drawn than she drew.' Carrie might dream of the next stage upward, but free will and reason were too feeble in her to permit her to imagine what true happiness might be and so make her way consciously toward it."

Willard Thorp
Afterward

Sister Carrie by Theodore Dreiser
(New American Library/Signet 1961) 467-75

“By now the cataloguing of Dreiser’s limitations has settled into a rather dry routine: his turgid and graceless style, which led F. R. Leavis to observe that Dreiser writes as if he hasn’t a native language; his limited insight into the psychology of his characters; his wearisome attention to detail; and his editorial pretentiousness and inconsistency, in which he often seems bent on making metaphysical mountains out of mechanistic molehills.

Such characteristics are not mere superfluous gimcrackery but part of Dreiser’s substance, inseparable from his fictional method and from the conception of human experience that he attempts to shape in his fiction. Yet to pigeonhole Dreiser in this way is to obscure the fact that not all of his substance is composed of such defects. Equally the product of his method and conception, when he is at his best, is a powerful sense of the mystery underlying human experience, of the fathomless processes which hold our lives in suspension, of the deep sources of pain and desire with which our human condition confronts us—in short, of what Dreiser himself called the wonder of life. Even if he is not a Balzac or a Dickens or a Dostoyevsky, the whole of Dreiser’s substance is frequently rich and moving and powerful. It is time finally to acknowledge him as our own and go on from there—to explore his quality and unravel his meaning for us. If we cannot afford to ignore his limitations, neither can we afford to let him lie bound in that literary dungeon to which he has been consigned for some years by the neoliberal Zeuses of contemporary criticism.

The greatest obstacle in the way of such an enterprise is not that Dreiser writes as if he hasn’t a native language, but that as critics we are unprepared to pass beyond that fact. We are disconcerted to read a statement like Saul Bellow’s in his review of F. O. Matthiessen’s book on Dreiser: ‘But it is very odd that no one has thought to ask just what the “bad writing” of a powerful novelist signifies.’ Such a remark suggests that in some significant way we are estranged from the novel as a literary form, that to recover Dreiser we must recover the suppleness of certain critical faculties which have been until recently the victims of atrophy.... The source of his power and his meaning for us lies...in his method of arranging the episodes of his plots in order to dramatize with perfect coherence that absence of foreordained purpose in the universe, and its corollary, the hegemony of chance, of which he speaks to awkwardly in his ‘philosophical’ writings. Not consistently but in long and powerful sequences, Dreiser’s plot construction results in a fully credible image of human experience as an amoral process; it implies the possibility of human purpose and dignity arising out of a necessary immersion in this process; and hence Dreiser’s method excludes the deterministic pathos of the conventional naturalistic novel, which conceives of human experience as the closing of a trap rather than the unfolding of a process....

Knowledge arises from a rhythm in the sequence of Dreiser’s episodes rather than from anything that can be communicated by a graceful style. It is the rhythm of inarticulate human experience, undifferentiated and hence by definition without style. Matthiessen suggested rightly that Dreiser’s sea imagery, his symbol of the rocking chair, and his own fondness for a rocking chair, all points to ‘a physical basis for the rhythm of his thoughts.’ But where the imagery and symbols are only its symptoms, the ‘physical basis’ itself is established by Dreiser’s method of construction, which is his true source of strength. It is also the source of his weakness...in that his method of construction disables Dreiser from portraying the emergence in human experience of moral consciousness and its corollary, literary style....

The design of the novel’s first eight chapters makes perfectly logical and coherent Carrie’s silent drifting toward her own good, and at the same time the irrelevance of any moral categories by which she might judge or be judged.... But while Dreiser in fact presents an enormous amount of documentary detail, he does not simply pile it up to create an environmental ‘force’ which explains Carrie’s fall; and Matthiessen certainly was wrong when he suggested that Dreiser’s characteristic method of construction is ‘Balzac’s direct way of presenting solid slabs of continuous experience.’ The experience presented is indeed continuous, but its distinctive quality is that it is not presented in solid slabs that might make us aware of a shaping environment. Instead Dreiser breaks up and alternates in a precisely elaborated pattern the two main groups of details, so that the larger dialectic of the whole sequence is mirrored and repeated a hundred times in the minute episodes of the unfolding action. Though a Jamesian concern with the conscious life is alien to Dreiser, he works with a similar intensity of focus upon ‘manners’ as the primary stuff of experience....

Instead of piling up his material in solid slabs, then, Dreiser separates and stretches it out in minute gradations, and then shuttles Carrie back and forth. Hanson's cold disapproval of her aspirations is a single fact of the story; but Dreiser exhibits it on three distinct occasions, and each time after Carrie has had a success which gives rise to those aspirations. And her exposure to Hanson is usually followed by her exposure to Drouet. Her two main possibilities are presented to her mind serially and alternately instead of in simultaneous pairs, and the alternations are so swift that she has time to respond only in feeling but not in judgment to one set of circumstances before it is succeeded by its opposite....

Drouet offers Carrie a way out of the spiritual death in which her environment does indeed threaten to trap her, an avenue leading toward the center of life. And when we see Carrie installed as Drouet's mistress, we are aware in her of a new person. She has learned to dress and move her body gracefully. She is acquiring the habit of speaking several sentences consecutively. She has begun to discriminate the tones of the world around her. As the process continues and her immersion is renewed, she learns to perceive Drouet's limitations and outgrows him too. Her progress from Drouet to Hurstwood to Ames is marked by a continuing enlargement of identity and inner-direction. She is transformed from an amorphous into a differentiated human being."

Julian Markels
"Dreiser and the Plotting of Inarticulate Experience"
The Massachusetts Review 2
(Spring 1961) 431-40

"The first novel of this pioneer American literary realist [Naturalist], *Sister Carrie* was officially published in 1900, but because of its supposed immorality it was not readily available to readers until 1912. Carrie, an innocent country girl, is pitted against the impersonal cruelty of Chicago in the 1890's. She is rescued by a traveling salesman, Charles Drouet. Later a wealthy married man, George Hurstwood, virtually abducts her to New York. Hurstwood acts dishonorably through real love; but Carrie's weakness is closer to what Granville Hicks calls Dreiser's own 'desire for the ostentatious luxury of the successful business man.' Reaching still further for material comforts, Carrie goes on the stage.

As her star rises Hurstwood's sinks lower until, unknown to Carrie, he becomes a destitute Bowery bum and commits suicide. Carrie herself finds no happiness, but 'though often disillusioned, she was still waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led among dreams become real.' Dreiser's writing has here what Lionel Trilling calls 'the awkwardness, the chaos, the heaviness which we associate with "reality".' His dialogue is often flat, his philosophical digressions banal. Nevertheless there is power in the spectacle of these helpless creatures in the grip of social forces they cannot control. Like so many of Dreiser's creations, Carrie and Hurstwood are always seeking to escape from the realities of life—dreaming in the midst of the Darwinian struggle for survival."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Although the intrinsic merit of Theodore Dreiser's work is still under debate, Dreiser himself appears to have won a permanent place in our cultural history as a literary pioneer. Critics and scholars agree almost without dissent that Dreiser, rather than Crane or Norris, was chiefly responsible for establishing those attitudes—including the confrontation of the actual and the unpleasant, the candor and forthrightness, the refusal to be bound by the conventional, and the frankness in sexual matters—which have characterized and distinguished most of the best American fiction in this century....

What has been portrayed in [*Sister Carrie*] is an essentially Victorian heroine who comes very close to the stereotyped heroine of popular melodrama, but who is at the same time the first truly modern heroine in American fiction because her behavior operates within the sphere of naturalistic and iconoclastic pragmatism rather than Victorian moral dogmatism. As Claude Simpson, Kenneth Lynn and others have noted, this was the moral frankness which constituted the book's radicalism and which charted the path for the modern American novel. Grant Knight has aptly summed up the novel's narrative: 'It introduced a pretty woman who twice stooped to folly and did so almost casually and without punishment, a salesman who entered almost as casually into a liaison and also went unpunished, a stronger man who went down to

beggary and death, and a part of the American scene appallingly imbued with materialism and impoverished in culture.' Not only does sin go unpunished in *Sister Carrie*, it usually goes unrecognized as sin.... He had written the first American novel without moral bias, and for that deed he paid heavily, thrown by the book's withdrawal and by its scant critical notice into a depression so deep that his career as a novelist was nearly ended before it had fairly begun.

We may see just how modern *Sister Carrie* was, in this sense, by recalling that its nearest relation was Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Street*, and by momentarily comparing both the depiction and fate of the two heroines. Her virtue lost, Crane's character can suffer only disintegration and death, a fate expected and approved by the book's audience. How different is Dreiser's Carrie, who prospers in her appearance and her fortunes, finally achieving stardom on the Broadway stage.... Her sexual allure is completely that of the archetypal Victorian heroine, comprised of innocence, purity and helplessness.... The only passion or urge which Dreiser does grant Carrie is the urge, as much sublime as sensual, for nice things....

From the instant Carrie and the drummer Drouet meet on the train it is obvious there is magnetic energy in their gaze. (This is Dreiser's substitution for erotic appeal)... Dreiser's handling of the seduction itself is the model of propriety and makes use of a number of the standard genteel clichés. As Drouet stands with Carrie at the door of her flat, having clothed her, wined her and dined her, the scene shifts abruptly to Carrie's sister, who dreams, in this order, of Carrie's descent into a coal minepit, of Carrie perched on a promontory of land, sinking, and at last of Carrie falling over the edge of a rock. In his later books, Dreiser would resort to Freudian terms to describe such matters, but here he creates a transparent allegory in popular idiom of the stages of Carrie's sexual and moral surrender. She has now become a 'fallen' woman in images which would have seemed both familiar and appropriate to the nineteenth-century reader....

Her conscience, product of a religious home, continues to trouble her. Thus we see, as Claude Simpson has perceptively remarked, that Dreiser had not yet divorced himself from the Christian morality he affected to renounce. This underlying confusion and illogic is perhaps the source for the peculiar nostalgia and bittersweetness which are almost as characteristic of the novel as its Naturalistic bluntness....he has, I think, attempted to excuse Carrie in the eyes of the contemporary reader by again associating her with the pathetic heroine of sentimental melodrama whose virtue is the price she must pay either for her life or the mortgage. However, in this case Dreiser permits no heroic intervention by Gallant Ned, nor does he characterize the seducers as Villains. They are merely doing what comes naturally. In other words, Dreiser combines his own Naturalistic convictions with the one extenuating or modifying circumstance permitted by the age: Carrie must become indecent in order to live decently. The fault has consequently been shifted away from the female to the male...

Carrie's blind insistence that Hurstwood marry her despite her knowledge that he is already married, offers further evidence of Dreiser's strenuous attempts to make his heroine conform to Victorian taboos. Ultimately, of course, Dreiser places the blame for Carrie's fall upon his favorite whipping boy, the social order which allows such grim conditions to exist that survival, not moral precept or decency, becomes the test of truth. So successful was Dreiser's modesty in the rendition of the novel's illicit sexuality, and so noble his social indignation... Dreiser suggests repeatedly that Carrie's seduction is not accomplished wholly by masculine lust and her own weakness. It is made amply clear that her seducer is also modern life, as symbolized by the big city, with its glamour and appeal.... What happens to Carrie in Chicago could well have been predicted by any Victorian and many moderns; it is what happens to every innocent rural lass when she leaves home. The city was evil and only heaven could protect the working girl....

Throughout *Sister Carrie* Dreiser comments on the power of romance, love, jealousy and passion, and he hints at but does not depict the sex act. Yet although he obviously believes in the 'majesty of passion' as a determinant in man's fate (e.g., in *An American Tragedy* he calls the sexual urges 'rearranging chemisms' fundamental to all human behavior), he offers no extended frank or convincing description of their influence.... Inevitably, once a man and a woman have met and the sexual 'chemism' has expressed itself in an initial mating, Dreiser begins to substitute other factors (such as class, status and money) in the place of the erotic in his descriptions of a romance or marriage. Consequently, in Dreiser's fictional world sex is never as strong after fulfillment as before. We see this in the behavior of Eugene Witla, in Frank

Cowperwood, in Clyde Griffiths and perhaps in Dreiser himself, who avowed and practiced a belief in sexual 'varietism.'...

Whatever the reasons for Carrie's depiction, they produce a heroine of curious flatness whose lack of dimension impresses most modern readers as the novel's greatest weakness. The flatness is also responsible for one of the large holes in the books' fabric of realism. The author has given us the story of a beautiful and desirable woman surrendering to two attractive men, but has said nothing about the aftermath of the surrender or about its puissance in the lives of those involved. Had Dreiser given Carrie passion, womanly passion, or at least told us why she lacked it, she would have assumed that depth and force as a character she now wants. As is, she is flat, or as Matthiessen has correctly noted, 'She is never a woman in love.' Consequently and inevitably the focus of the novel shifts to Hurstwood. There is no better evidence of Dreiser's commitment to some of the very taboos he shattered. He either could not, or dared not, portray his heroine with the same earthly lusts as the male. Women could fall, but they could not feel.

In short, we find that in *Sister Carrie*, the novel which began the literary revolution against prudery in America, Dreiser has created a Victorian Vamp: a woman who is precisely that mixture of strengths and weaknesses which the nineteenth century conceived her to be, but who is at the same time in her unrequited sexual sins the first modern heroine. Eve-like, she yields to the flesh, but in the strongest Victorian tradition she does so only out of the confusion and need engendered by women's innate helplessness and man's predatory lustfulness. In accord with the highest fashion of the time she has no animality, no passion, no sexuality of her own. Her beauty attracts men, yes, but she is not responsible. Again, despite her fall, she is better than the men she lives with, and, in fact, better than anyone else in the novel except the shadowy Ames. The men and only the men have bestial urgings, and there is not the slightest hint that Carrie, even when possessed, abandons herself to them or responds in kind. Insofar as it is possible for Dreiser to make it so, Carrie sins chastely. Further, Carrie grows in refinement, in grace, in knowledge; she alone is capable of growth...

Finally, Carrie triumphs on the stage by becoming the image, the personification, of the Victorian ideal of womanhood; lovely, poised, demure, with a suggestion of refinement and a touch of pathos. She is, in retrospect, perhaps the first of the American love goddesses."

Sheldon Norman Grebstein
"Dreiser's Victorian Vamp"
Midcontinent American Journal Studies IV
(Spring 1963) 3-11

"There are seventeen Dreiser volumes now in paper, including seven different imprints of *Sister Carrie*. (For the record, which has its interest as a signpost of taste, there are also seven *Ambassadors*, fourteen *Red Badges of Courage*, ten *Moby-Dicks*, fifteen *Scarlet Letters*, twelve *Huckleberry Finns*.)... It is as the novelist of the inarticulate hero that Dreiser comes again upon the literary scene.... Dreiser's characters are low in the sense of being stupid. Carrie and Jennie and Clyde would probably rank well below the norm in any intelligence test.... In the most literal sense, as his letters and autobiographical writings show clearly, Dreiser wrote as a brother. This is the central fact about his work, far more important than the clichés thrown at him in the 1930's and '40's: that he was a peasant, a linguistic immigrant, a Naturalist, a People's realist...

Dreiser's triumph in this enterprise is Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, the last novel published in his lifetime and the sum of his experience as man and artist. But from his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, he addressed himself to the problem of expressing the inexpressibles and, what is more, carried it off with virtuosity and delicacy. These two books are Dreiser's masterpieces. *The Tragedy* is in every way more profound, more complex in structure, more rich in suggestions. That is where we are to look for the tragic sense, the compassion and the sociological subtlety that have won Dreiser the respect, if not the affection of his readers....

There are effects of light and color that point to Dreiser's early and lasting passion for painting and architectural decoration, which has hardly been taken seriously by his critics. There are contrapuntal effects with speech—urban and rural; common, middling and 'cultivated'; slang and theatrical bombast—

that very few other novelists (James Joyce is one) have ever attempted. To say that the best scenes in *Sister Carrie* are cinematic rather than theatrical is another way of saying that Dreiser was a born, virtuoso novelist, for the movies learned more from the novelist than from the playwright. But it is often helpful, as Robert Penn Warren has shown in an essay on *An American Tragedy*, to write of Dreiser's effects in terms of the 'sweep of the lens,' the 'shift of focus,' the 'movie in our heads'....

The writing in the seduction scene is careful to the point of finesse--a word I would like to bring forward in connection with Dreiser, if only because it challenges the old and worn-out complaints against his style. In one of the recent favorable statements about Dreiser (they are still relatively rare) Saul Bellow asked a useful question about the nature of 'bad writing' by a powerful novelist, but moved away from the answer with the lamest recommendation: that 'Dreiser's novels are best read quickly.' The reverse is true. 'Fine' writing (some of James's or Virginia Woolf's, for instance) often fails on slow and close examination, while the coarse, dense, uneven language of the more subtle novelists (like Dickens) yields surprising rewards—and explanations of the art of fiction—to the careful reader....

Now Dreiser has been careful, in the opening chapters of the novel, to show that Carrie, although momentarily unfortunate, is *not* in the grip of a massively malign fate. She is *not* starving; she is far from destitution; she has two decent homes to go back to. What is at stake is not Carrie's survival but her growth. Dreiser has therefore established the sense of spreading cold that grips Carrie, a cold which is seasonal and physical but also emotional, and to which this scene, full of Drouet's 'radiant presence,' provides a warm alternative. The whole cold-warmth pattern has been cued to the reader with a sentence about the difficulty of *transplantation* 'in the matter of flowers or maidens,' which focuses our attention on Carrie as an organism, significantly a plant rather than an animal, whose response to temptation will be less conscious than instinctive....

When *Sister Carrie* was new it was regularly denounced, even by the firm that published it, as an immoral and indecent book. Inevitably, later critics, even those so well disposed as F. O. Matthiessen, have reproached Dreiser for his timidity in avoiding sexual contact between his characters. It is true that Dreiser never removes Carrie's clothes or shows her in the act of love. (When, much later, he came to handle sex openly, as in *The Stoic*, the effect is breathless and not quite sane—directing our attention more to Dreiser's temperament than to that of his characters.) What I have called the seduction scene in *Sister Carrie* culminates in nothing more physical than a pressing of hands....

The natural forces of growth and change, the mysteriously casual interactions of creature with environment that roused in Dreiser the emotions of wonder and awe, have been suggested by a metaphorical (but essentially novelistic) language which in turn gives a surprising eloquence to this tawdry encounter between trivial personalities. The people, Carrie and Drouet, are neither glorified nor idealized. Two chapters and several days, perhaps weeks, later, Carrie becomes Drouet's mistress. Dreiser puts off the denouement, and indeed avoids presenting the event directly to the reader, not from mere prudery but from a conscious desire to destroy the significance of the act as action, to minimize the element of free will (in which he was a strenuous nonbeliever) and to make credible the lack of reflection in such a girl as Carrie.... Dreiser's commentary insists, too heavily, but never stupidly, on the importance of money, the force of instinct, the significance of habits—abstract topics that drain from Carrie's action the last vestige of moral or sentimental tone. He is particularly careful to keep Carrie's mind blank...."

Ellen Moers
"The Finesse of Dreiser"
American Scholar 33
(Winter 1963-64) 109-14

"The modern reader often finds in *Sister Carrie* a certain antique quality, and it is difficult to understand the criticism it aroused. It offered none of the lurid physical descriptions now *de rigueur* in the novel. It dealt with no social or sexual perversions. It did not openly discuss any controversial themes. It was not shocking, but it was nonetheless a major milestone in American literary history, both for its techniques and its contents. Like any effective writer, Dreiser wrote of things he knew. He modeled Carrie Meeber on one of his sisters, and took her from small-town America to the tantalizing new metropolis of Chicago.... Bored with country life, Sister Carrie came to Chicago to find her fortune. Fine clothes,

money, the flitter of attention were her standards of worldly success.... Carrie symbolized America's false values and innocence, for she knew nothing of life but its surface manifestations. She was not evil, or even weak; she was the product of her world. She was innocently selfish in desiring attention and status. A lack of perspective on herself and her world doomed her, for it made her prey to events....

Hurstwood ideally symbolized both Chicago and America and dominated the book's last half. The chronicle of his rise and fall is one of the great works in American naturalistic writing....through accident and unpredictable events, he lost his business and degenerated physically and emotionally until he bore no resemblance to the elegant man Carrie had first met and so innocently admired.... He took from her the sympathy and warmth his first wife had denied him in a ruthless search for social status. The inherent tragedy of their situation became a major theme in Dreiser's work: the more they grew and changed, the more their desires expanded. They lacked either the knowledge or intellect to perceive that uncontrollable events dictated their lives...

By accident, Carrie entered the theater world and became an overnight sensation on the stage. Her fortunes rose, her world expanded as the Hurstwood she abandoned declined grimly to street bum and finally committed suicide after Carrie apparently forgot and ignored his plight. In a sentimental epilogue, Dreiser left Carrie rocking in a dreamlike state, dimly aware that her world was beyond definition, wondering what the future held. Through Carrie and Hurstwood, he had stated a major theme in modern America: man's basic tragedy is that as he grows, expresses himself, and finds greater fulfillments for needs and desires, the avenues through which he does these things are progressively closed. Every satisfaction creates a dissatisfaction; every freedom begets a frustrating desire for further freedom. To grow, as man must, is to be unhappy....

The book presented no heroes or villains and drew few judgments on its characters' conduct. Carrie was not evil; she was merely weak, as nature and her life gave her false values. She symbolized well much of innocent America. 'Not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allures the feeling mind unused to reason.' Though the philosophy that lay beneath *Sister Carrie's* words was opaque, Dreiser had touched upon the basic theme of Naturalism. Man was at the mercy of forces within and outside himself that he could not understand or control. The wider implication that man-made laws were therefore often cruel and unjust added a certain shock value to the book for a generation that publicly thought otherwise....

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser combined a rich flow of facts with a logical narrative structure and dreamlike tone to make the book engrossing despite many faults of language and structure. Personally, the book was a means of working out, if only haltingly, many of his confusions. Carrie partly represented the childish Dreiser in her desires and values. He wanted her to rise in the world, yet sensed that it was futile. Hurstwood symbolized what Dreiser feared he might become, a man at the mercy of events, thrown back into an atavistic existence by fate and chance.

The book's central theme was the process of development. It was history, dealing with people and events without passing critical judgment upon them or their acts. Carrie was a sympathetic woman, yet she was not tragic. It was hard to sympathize with her, since everything that happened seemed logical. Tragedy involves bitter struggle against fate, and Carrie did not fight. Everything that came to her seemed predestined, and she moved through events without touching them.... She sensed that the world was indifferent, that people were selfish and cruel. Her tragedy lay in not knowing what to do about it.... Hurstwood was the book's focus, illustrating the power of the theme of poverty and determinism upon the young Dreiser.

The affairs, especially the love affairs, of the lower classes were news to the *fin de siecle* reading public. Stephen Crane had made a small beginning by detailing the life of his Maggie, 'a girl of the streets.' Frank Norris had carefully detailed a sordid world in *McTeague*, complete with powerful sexual undertones and lurid descriptions of the brutal sides of existence. But these and other naturalists had a small reading public. They were still pioneers when Dreiser wrote *Sister Carrie*. No other American novelist had turned to the lower classes with as much sympathy and compassion, or in as great detail. Though the book

remained virtually unread, Dreiser made some impression on the reading public. He was recognized as a spokesman of the painfully emerging literary Naturalism.”

H. Wayne Morgan
American Writers in Rebellion: From Mark Twain to Dreiser
(Hill & Wang 1965) 156-61

“After five years 414 unsold copies were remaindered. Norris had been insistent, however, on the greatness of *Sister Carrie*; and, as an English publisher said, ‘more eager for [it]...to be read than his own novels,’ he helped arrange an English edition in 1901. In England (like Whitman and Crane earlier and Frost and Pound somewhat later), Dreiser received his first enthusiastic reviews and began to acquire a subterranean reputation. But it would be eleven years before he would regather the emotional strength to attempt a second novel. In some ways he would never again write as good a novel as this first one, *Sister Carrie*.... Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt...Cowperwood...Eugene Witla...and Clyde Griffiths...are all caught and defeated by a web of urban illusion. But all gain stature and remain important to us by virtue of the readiness and power with which they embrace the illusions that, although ultimately defeating, are momentarily comforting and even ennobling....

[Dreiser] instinctively spoke of himself frequently as ‘an Ishmael, a wanderer.’ Carrie, too, is a wanderer. She is called a ‘half-equipped little knight,’ a ‘soldier of fortune,’ a ‘pilgrim,’ and—allegorically—the journeying Spirit who, though seeking the Heavenly City, nevertheless is ‘turned as by a wall.’ Confronted by the Walled City, she is a ‘waif amid forces,’ a ‘wisp in the wind,’ and an ‘outcast.’ ‘It must be glow and shine everywhere,’ she thinks when she comes to New York, ‘...and she was out of it all.’ Her drifting condition is characterized, moreover, by sea imagery and metaphors of voyage. She is a seeker who revises the Columbiad of American discovery. She comes from Columbia City, as a later Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, comes from Columbus, Ohio. In a comparison that would have come naturally to Dreiser from the World’s Columbian Exposition, she is a Columbus resailing the sea trails West to East—an innocent, like Twain’s, engaged, however unconsciously, on the exploration of her own Atlantics. She thus assumed a series of new identities as signs of her self-discovery. Like Huck Finn earlier and Jay Gatsby later, she takes new names to express her sense of perpetual metamorphosis....

The character and imagery of the theatre embody Dreiser’s sense that in the modern city Carrie must be a player of parts. Her desire for life is translated into ‘having a part’ in a play.... With Minnie at first and with Hurstwood at last, she is frustrated by not being able to go to the theatre to watch romantic dramas and engage in the illusion of playing a part. In life, as on the stage, she assumes a series of parts, all illusory, swiftly fading and changing. Referring repeatedly to fairy-tale states and characters in his chapter titles...Dreiser writes a novel in which, as in fairy tales, such metamorphoses are natural and assumed. Each stage of her upward progress opens a freshly enticing vision of felicity and mingles desire and frustration with achievement. A sense of the past is entirely lacking in her—only the present and the future rushing to become the present are meaningful....

Dreiser found the appropriate metaphor for this illusory movement within the larger context of motionlessness in the simultaneous stasis and incessant motion of the rocking-chair, instinctively recalling for us Whitman’s ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.’ Carrie’s rocking chair is a larger kind of cradle, in which she—and even Drouet and Hurstwood—seek solace in times of distress. The rocking chair is the equivalent to the imagery of sea-drift in the novel. Both are characterized by directionless motion. Together they make Dreiser’s symbol of the human tragedy.... In agitation and confusion she seeks the cradle and endlessly rocks.... Associated with the symbol of the rocking-chair, Dreiser’s sea images similarly suggest illusory movement. There is no real movement—only change. Dreiser repeatedly characterizes Carrie’s apparent movement as mere ‘drift’ in the rocking ebb and flow of tides or as similar to the ceaseless reappearance of waves....”

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 253-58

“With the exception of Henry James’s last works no other American novel written at the turn of the century could approach the power of *Sister Carrie*. It was a powderhouse amid gazebos. The works of

Norris, Frederic, Howells, and Garland all have been diminished by time, but *Sister Carrie*, owing to Dreiser's unusual ability to see his era in historical perspective, to extract from its flow of values those things which were not ephemeral, has the timelessness that attaches to all things which best evoke their times.... Carrie moves slowly toward acceptance of Nature through a painstaking succession of goals... Hers was 'a passive and receptive rather than an active and aggressive nature.' She does not create opportunities for herself; she merely is drawn into them as they present themselves. She wearies of her status, not because she is inconstant, but only because apart from Nature she feels restive and unrequited....

The tidal metaphor points to the flux of Nature, rather than calculated ambition, as the force which impels Carrie. The search for fulfillment through the American Dream was proving inadequate while it was still far from attainment.... The rocking-chair symbol is the dominant flux allusion among several flux allusions generating from Carrie. She is encountered first, setting forth on a train journey; she is seen last, journeying compulsively in her rocker.... Dreiser does not lose interest in Carrie when she enters the paradise of the American Dream. Her story has been written basically as a complaint against the goals of American life and their deleterious influence on the character of men and women who mistake them for the flux of Nature. Carrie has failed to find happiness in the attainment of these goals not because she has forfeited her virtue to attain them, but because the goals themselves were unworthy; the fault, then, is not hers but society's. She understands this much at the novel's end. Dreiser has made his point... By gradually withdrawing her from view, as he does, Dreiser emphasizes the isolation man experiences, as 'orphan in space,' when materialism estranges him from Nature....

The brilliant account of Hurstwood's suicide is quickly and sparingly told, yet a touch of melodrama persists. Carrie's appearance in *Under the Gaslight*, in Chicago, for the first time aroused in Hurstwood the determination to possess her. That first link in the chain now links to the last. In a squalid flophouse, Hurstwood snuffs out the gaslight and lies down to await the bliss of annihilation. Hurstwood's story was meant to complement Carrie's story, to show how precarious is the ideal she pursues. Through Hurstwood, Dreiser strikes at those goals of American life which bade men live half-empty lives, or lured them to ruin. His emotional commitment to the American Dream made him unable to take up the harmony of Nature. When he fell it was from the pinnacle of the Dream. He was destroyed because he challenged the myth of the Dream without having the courage or understanding he needed to embrace Nature confidently. He died, not for love of Carrie, but for love of his old illusions.

In *Sister Carrie*, the rocking chair is both symbolic of the flux of Nature and a proxy for it. As has been seen, Dreiser makes the rocker serve as a clue to Carrie's degree of involvement in life. But during a significant interval extending over 150 pages midway through the book, the symbol transfers from Carrie to Hurstwood. For Hurstwood, the rocker is a flux situation in itself, a surrogate for both Nature and the American Dream, in neither of which he is able to participate. His loss of contact with a larger flux is first disclosed in one of the many marine images used throughout the book to give an additional symbolic dimension to Dreiser's theory of flux: 'He was like a vessel, powerful and dangerous, but rolling and foundering without sail.'... Hurstwood's sole link with the world of flux now becomes his rocker. It is at this juncture that sexual congress with Carrie ends, a fact which serves to recall that the kinesthetic effect of rocking itself is sexual, and that Dreiser saw the sex act as symbolic of the flux of Nature and as a powerful manifestation of its degree of presence. When Hurstwood finds Carrie has left him permanently with the coming of spring, winter imagery hovers about him."

John J. McAleer
Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation
(Holt 1968) 76-77, 80, 83-84, 91-92

"He was a powerful artist, but his artistic ambition was painfully intermingled with his ambition for money and fine clothes; in fact, he often saw his work as a mere instrument to satisfy his grossest aspirations. It is only natural, then, that success of the artist should, to him, seem as fragile and infected as that of Cowperwood, the hero of *The Financier*, or any Robber Baron. Let us remember that it is as an 'artist' that Carrie succeeds, and it is an artist who, in the apartment of the Waldorf, sits in the rocking chair that goes nowhere. But Carrie is not merely 'artist,' she is also 'artist as gold digger,' and so, we may ask, does this image represent another level of self-scrutiny on the part of Dreiser—who had his own rocking chair?...

It is a vivid and absorbing work of art... The kind of Realism that is associated with William Dean Howells had little relation to the depths that Dreiser inhabited...Howells...remained the outsider to that grim world that was Dreiser's natural home. And even if Frank Norris had shocked the country with the realism of *McTeague*, he had, in the end, gratified the moral sense of America by converting the novel of greed and violence into a cautionary fable. *Sister Carrie* was different from anything by Howells or Norris. What was shocking here was not only Dreiser's unashamed willingness to identify himself with morally undifferentiated experience or his failure to punish vice and reward virtue in his fiction, but the implication that vice and virtue might, in themselves, be mere accidents, mere irrelevances in the process of human life, and that the world was a great machine, morally indifferent. Ultimately, what shocked the world in Dreiser's work was not so much the things that he presented as the fact that he himself was not shocked by them. The situation was similar to that of Dreiser's hero Machiavelli."

Robert Penn Warren
Homage to Theodore Dreiser
(Random House 1971) 21-35

"Hurstwood's decline is measured by the shrinking of his space from a Chicago mansion to a modest apartment to a smaller flat to a room to a cubicle, and it is measured equally by the melting away of his savings, or rather his stolen savings.... An equation is made between the decline of his health, his eyesight, the amount of light in his world and the shrinking of his money. Throughout his decline the single act that Dreiser repeats again and again is his reading of the newspaper.... The newspaper possesses its reader with lives and events not his own in much the same way that a role does an actress. The newspaper is in fact a mediating object in New York. Hurstwood's only desire seems to be to go on reading it, Carrie's highest desire is to be featured in it. Breaking into the theater seems only a halfway point to breaking into the newspapers. The newspaper is retrospective, defining what happened yesterday. It is literally about what 'has been.' As Hurstwood reaches his nadir he is forced to root around for out-of-date newspapers to try to see if there is any news about Carrie.

Dreiser speaks of Hurstwood as 'buried in his papers.' On a park bench the newspaper is the blanket of the down-and-out tramp. When he no longer consorts with celebrities he reads about them in the newspaper stories. Once Carrie has gone she begins to appear in the papers and he can follow her there. The newspaper becomes a way of not quite dying to a life that he no longer lives. In one of those very lovely inconspicuous scenes that mark Dreiser's work at its best, Hurstwood, so cut off from the world that he would rather not look out the window, reads in the newspapers that a bad storm is due, then in later editions that it has begun, then that it is a record storm, then that it will end soon, and finally, that it has ended. To follow stars and celebrities who are in fact inaccessible is here put in its proper frame of meaning: the newspaper is the essential symbol of decline because it involves a preference for all experience as retrospective rather than lived, even the experience of a storm. The disappearance of Carrie from Hurstwood's life is brilliantly done, not by an article in the newspaper, but by the physical object of the paper itself. 'He knew that Carrie was not there not only because there was no light shown through the transom, but because the evening papers were stuck between the outside knob and the door....'

By means of two characters Dreiser can make simultaneous what is in actual experience consecutive, locating in two persons the prospective and retrospective phases of one life. To achieve this he carefully matches their lives as superficial contrasts, connecting deep structural similarities. Near the end Hurstwood lives at the Broadway Central Hotel. At this point they each live, as a favor, in a hotel where neither really pays. He lives there as a favor to him (a charity) on the part of the kindly manager. She lives there as a favor to the hotel (an advertisement). Carrie's meals are bought for her by men who compete for the privilege. Hurstwood's too are free at soup kitchens or as a result of begging from these same prosperous gentlemen. The public buys tickets to see Carrie and outside the theater they also buy tickets at the solicitation of the ex-soldier who harangues them to contribute the price of bed tickets for the hundreds of homeless men that he lines up like a chorus line, Hurstwood among them. Hurstwood marches down Broadway in an army of tramps and Carrie marches back and forth on stage in a harem of chorus girls. Carrie has won for herself a place in the chorus line and Hurstwood's life is made of calculations of his place in the soup lines, bread lines, and shelter lines.

Hurstwood's one final job as a strike-breaker is in fact described as a performance. We see him rehearse his role, practicing with the trolley in the yards just as Carrie practices her moves as a chorus girl. The strike-breaking 'play' is performed by running the streetcar with two policemen on board through a hostile audience of strikers and their families who jeer and hoot as though at a bad opera. The streetcar runs are fictional and symbolic since their purpose is not to carry passengers but to break the strike by demonstrating to the public, via the newspapers, that all of the strikers have lost their 'parts' and have been replaced in their roles by new actors, men simulating drivers.

Hurstwood spends a day rehearsing, then goes out to play his role on the city streets. He is pelted like a bad actor and runs offstage in mid-performance, abandoning his role as motorman or, as the strikers name his role, 'scab.' When he gets cold on the trolley 'he shivered, stamped his feet, and beat his arms as he had seen other motormen do in the past.' His play is woven by Dreiser directly into Carrie's rehearsals, performances, and breakthroughs. He is pelted off the stage just on the day when she speaks for the first time and begins her rise to stardom. The strike is the aging performer's nightmare, just as Carrie's rise is the neophyte's dream. Dreiser's highly conscious repetition of elements in the two lives derives from his intention that they be seen as stages. Throughout his novel 'Carrie' [Meeber, Wheeler] has only a first name and 'Hurstwood' has only a last. They are first and last names that combine to make one life; first stage and last stage, rise and fall of fortune's wheel."

Philip Fisher

"The Life History of Objects: The Naturalist Novel and the City"

Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel

(Oxford 1985) 162-78

"It is well known that *Sister Carrie* opens on two discordant narrative registers: the documentary description of a young girl's journey to the city, and the sentimental commentary on the moral ramifications of her venture. The first, most notable in the opening paragraph, details 'her total outfit,' consisting of 'a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse.' The second casts her in a melodrama or sentimental novel, where 'either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse.' This narrative disjuncture follows a long tradition of the realistic novel in which the romantic illusions of the characters are dashed by their contact with the commercial reality of urban life. Stylistically, in this tradition, the dispassionate journalistic descriptions dismantle the black-and-white moralism of the sentimental commentary. The problem with this reading, however, is that Dreiser's narrative proceeds not to debunk Carrie's dreams but to fulfill all her romantic and material aspirations of the first chapter....

One of the most vexing problems for Dreiser criticism has remained how to reconcile his power as a realist—power that has been located in his challenge to moral and literary conventions—with his reliance on sentimental codes. Although sentimentalism has its own complex literary history, critics equate it in its broadest sense with Dreiser's notoriously bad writing: his cumbersome prose style, his high-flown moralizing, his investment in the tawdry dreamworlds of his characters, his melodramatic chapter titles, and his flowery endings; in other words, everything that seems the antithesis of a realism that directly portrays social conditions in lucid and unencumbered prose. Leslie Fiedler even relegated *Sister Carrie* to the tradition of popular sentimental women's fiction....

Sandy Petrey...argues that the straightforward narrative style of Dreiser's 'social realism exposes sentimental posturing as absurd,' as a hollow, outdated tradition no longer capable of attributing meaning to modern urban experience. Other critics have shown similarly how Dreiser's plots and characters parody sentimental conventions to 'confront all the basic messages of popular fiction.'... Domesticity in *Sister Carrie*, however, is never abandoned; rather it is reencoded as a marketable value... Dreiser describes the interiors she decorates for Drouet in Chicago and Hurstwood in New York in more detail than he does the sensuality between the lovers. Even these two men seem to value Carrie less for a risqué liaison than for a cozy domesticity. Drouet proudly invites guests to his home, and when Hurstwood flees to New York, he is especially gratified by his homey interior created with furniture bought on the installment plan. Hurstwood's final disintegration is marked not only by Carrie's abandonment but by his being forced to

send back the furniture. If sentimental domesticity is exposed as a convention in families at the beginning of the novel, it is reconstructed later in improvised settings, as though the couples were playing house....

In *Sister Carrie*, the rocking chair mediates not only between motion and stasis in a mechanized society, or between private and public space...but between sentimentalism and realism, as the chair magically resurfaces, not in the kitchen, but in each rented room, from the Hansons' apartment to the Waldorf Astoria. The rocking chair is the place where characters do not just observe the world outside their windows, but where they dream their sentimental fantasies of escape.... The consumption of commodities in *Sister Carrie* functions in the novel to compensate for social powerlessness. Although Carrie and Hurstwood occupy opposite ends of the social scale, both are driven by their lack of social power.... By marking the longing of the characters as sentimental, Dreiser shows how capitalism in the late nineteenth century gives rise to desires for 'goods' that it cannot fulfill."

Amy Kaplan
"The Sentimental Revolt of *Sister Carrie*"
The Social Construction of American Realism
(U Chicago 1988) 140-51

"Why has *Sister Carrie* so resolutely defied interpretation?... Few scholars dispute its importance—but as an event in the history of American mores and morals more than as a novel interesting for being just that: a work of fiction. Signs of change have appeared recently, including disagreements over what the novel may mean. Is the book for or against capitalism? Is it as sentimental as it often sounds? And the 'bad' writing every critic, even the friendliest, has deplored—is it perhaps intentionally bad, Dreiser's effort at parody of the language of 'false consciousness' to highlight a style of 'realism' as antidote to the romantic pap, the 'linguistic junk of commodified language' bred by consumer capitalism? What are the generic relations between 'romance' and 'realism' in the book?..."

More recent studies show that recurring patterns of images and actions—imagery of water, weather, doors, windows, rocking chairs, and acts of drifting, glimpsing, rocking—cannot be ignored as at least rudimentary signs of a motive to build rather than merely to recollect... Markels concedes that Dreiser's 'bad' writing (his 'thick prose') coexists with his 'good,' and concludes that the author's 'method of construction, which is his true source of strength,' is 'also his source of weakness,' for it 'disables Dreiser from portraying the emergence in human experience of moral consciousness and its corollary, literary style.' Style has been the sticking point in efforts to pinpoint the narrative form of *Sister Carrie*. 'Granted that he often writes as if language itself were a bore,' Richard Poirier remarks, echoing F. R. Leavis, 'there remains the mystery of Dreiser's undeniable power over the imagination of even his severest critics.'... The 'fluctuations of voice' page after page represent a perverse self-fragmentation. Dreiser provides 'no plastic coherence among the lurid varieties of self-characterization that emerge from his language.' And all this is to the good, for 'the fractured characterization Dreiser gives of himself as narrator of *Sister Carrie* is evidence of the integrity of his vision.'...

Dreiser's is a vision, Poirier argues, 'in which character—as a derivative of language and the power of language—is regarded as negligible.' For Poirier the incoherence of narrative voice is the very sign of the coherence of the novel's asocial vision, its negation of the bourgeois ideology of the English novel, the vision whereby selves and societies are made by 'characters' engaged in purposeful and self-reflective acts of language—in short, in conversation. Determined not to write a traditional novel, Dreiser 'seems not even to care about achieving through language any shaped social identity.'...

Handy's most radical suggestion is that Dreiser installs himself as something more than or different from a technically omniscient narrator; he puts himself in the narrative as a subjective presence.... And the final or totalizing effect for Handy is that the Dreiserian voice represents an 'integration of self and art'—what Ames helps Carrie realize, and which at the end Carrie moves tentatively toward.... To ask 'who is speaking' in the Dreiserian discursive passages is to find oneself wrestling precisely with the problem Poirier and Handy raise: the actual presence of a figure called 'Dreiser' within the narrative. If he is there, then discourse has its clear, unequivocal source, its *someone*.... The unusual character of Dreiser's narrative in *Sister Carrie*, as both Poirier and Handy in their different ways apprehend it, derives from an innovative fusion of narrative and discourse, an equivocal and premodernist reordering of the priorities of

the two modes—for the sake, it seems likely, of allowing the novice author greater freedom to make the story he recounts both its own and his own story: the story of his subjective experience of it mediating the story proper....

Consciousness is precisely what this novel is largely about—a notion of consciousness which remarkably resembles that which William James developed in the same years. According to James, consciousness is (1) the *experience* of thought, rather than an abstract capacity as such, and (2) inseparable from the world of things which we speak of being conscious *of*. Dreiser's thingness of words and the wordness (or articulateness) of things, rendered by the narrator as voices, corresponds closely to James's argument that thoughts and things, rather than different substances, represent different functions, different experiences of the same nameless thing.

Thus Dreiser's typical discursive practice of departing from narrative proper at certain key points reveals a consistent motive: to provide in direct address to the reader (as discourse) an account (often figurative, in tropes of water, tides, weather, and so on) of inner experience, of intersubjective awareness of the other, which neither Carrie nor Drouet nor Hurstwood is capable of supplying in a conversational or meditational voice—yet which constitutes the form and content of each character's self-awareness. They cannot say so for themselves; it takes the narrator to say it to us for them.”

Alan Trachtenberg
“Who Narrates? Dreiser's Presence in *Sister Carrie*”
New Essays on Sister Carrie, ed. Donald Pizer
(Cambridge U 1991) 87-102

“As a Naturalistic novel, *Sister Carrie* dramatized biological determinism through a plot that made every action consequential. No matter how casual a character's gesture, look, or comment seemed, it became the cause of an effect, the stimulus to a response that could produce a significant but unforeseen, and perhaps tragic, outcome. Determinism evoked Dreiser's famous comparisons of human beings to insects and animals, all subject to ineluctable drives that characters experience as desire. Desire is a natural force in the novel, but the objects of desire are socially constructed artifacts imbued with impossible dreams of happiness. Instability is thus ontological and cultural, an innate human condition and the sign of social conditioning. Poor Carrie. Her desire is illimitable, but her imagination is limited to the world of goods. Carrie is always looking to see what else in the world she could want, and as Dreiser shows, she is conditioned biologically and culturally to want and buy—or buy into—what she sees.”

Blanche H. Gelfant
“What More Can Carrie Want? Naturalistic Ways of Consuming Women”
Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies 19
(1994) 389-417

“To move on to the relationship of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* to the general issue of the failure of connection between the ideology and fiction of American literature Naturalism... [Its] centrality arises from his personal background in a poverty-stricken immigrant home, his immersion in late nineteenth-century thought and his effort to reflect the ideas derived from this reading in his fiction (he is far more the ideologue than his contemporaries Stephen Crane and Frank Norris), and his public role as lightning rod for the movement given the length and prominence of his career. Furthermore, of all of Dreiser's fiction, it has been *Sister Carrie* which has conventionally served as an introduction to his Naturalism and thus to American Naturalism as a whole.... How, then, has *Sister Carrie* served the purpose of the various interpretive schools...which seek to discuss Naturalism in America as above all a flawed movement because of its failure to express a coherent Naturalistic ideology of determinism?...”

What is common in all of these critical readings of *Sister Carrie* is not only the stress on the presence of a significant strain of determinism in the novel, but also the discovery of equally significant elements which compromise or contradict this strain. We return via this criticism, therefore, to the problem posed initially: Is there a way of reconciling a reading of *Sister Carrie* as Naturalism with the failure of the novel to fulfill the principal criterion for Naturalism implied by the origins of the movement and still held by most critics as one of its essential constituents.... Two points in relation to the history of this problem which should be

obvious by now are that there is no clear-cut answer to this question, given what actually occurs in the novel, and that the failure to readily find an answer in the actualities of the novel has often been used as a sure sign of the limitations of the work. But the failure of criticism to produce a clear-cut philosophical reading of *Sister Carrie* as deterministic fiction 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 moment....

What kind of Naturalism, then, in the sense of a drift or tendency toward an expression of a large-scale view of human nature and experience, does *Sister Carrie* express?... The first is the central role of inherent qualities of temperament in achieving success.... A second major drift toward Naturalism in *Sister Carrie* is that of the significance and power of social circumstance. This tendency...is not to be confused with a clear-cut attempt to achieve an effect of environmental determinism, as in Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, with its depiction of the residents of a slum as fully imprisoned within a slum culture.... A third and last major instance of a Naturalistic tendency in *Sister Carrie* is that of the novel's open acknowledgment of the great role of the sexual in human affairs. By the 'great role of the sexual' I do not mean a depiction of sexual need as an uncontrollable gross animality, as occurs several times in Frank Norris' *McTeague*, but rather as the writer's recognition of the vital role of sexual desire in shaping a destiny....

It has long been observed that Dreiser in *Sister Carrie* is not interested in confirming conventional moral ideas.... What is necessary now is to accept the corollary premise that Dreiser is also not interested in confirming the conventional idea of the Naturalist as determinist...life itself, as he perceives it, is far more complex (and thus perhaps ultimately less solvable) than the clear readings of the nature of existence present both in traditional and (in his own time) more recent systems of belief. Nevertheless, without offering a clearcut endorsement of the Naturalistic premise that man lives in a fully conditioned universe, Dreiser buys into a qualified acceptance of portions of that premise.

His characters do survive or go under on the basis of specific aspects of personal strength; they are deeply responsive to the social conditions of their existence; and they live in a world in which sexual desire colors almost all human activity. In short, more than most novelists before the turn of the century, Dreiser questions the notion of the autonomous self by testing it within such concrete and often unyielding contexts as the irreducible givens of temperament in a specific self, the social setting within which the self functions, and the sexual nature of selfhood. Thus, while not writing a deterministic novel in *Sister Carrie*, his portrayals of Carrie and Hurstwood reveal his acceptance, with significant qualifications, of the notion of a conditioned existence. And it is indeed this complex qualification of a simple premise, rather than its coherent and consistent endorsement and representation, which constitutes the power and permanence of *Sister Carrie* and which also suggests the great usefulness of the novel in any attempt to understand the nature of late nineteenth-century American literary Naturalism.”

Donald Pizer
“The Problem of American Literary Naturalism and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*”
American Literary Realism 32
(Fall 1999) 1-11

Michael Hollister (2015)