

CONCISE ANALYSIS

Sister Carrie (1900)



Theodore Dreiser

(1871-1945)

The omniscient voice of the narrator is conventional in the tradition of the Victorian novel, as are the didactic tone and the titles of chapters with trite metaphors like headlines in the popular women's magazines Dreiser would later serve as Editor. The novel is a synthesis of popular and high culture. The basic plot is one of the oldest in literature, the innocent youth coming from the Countryside into the City, encountering opportunities and evils, rising or falling. Frank Norris is pastoral in *McTeague* (1899) and *The Octopus* (1901), affirming the interests and values of the Country against the evils of the City, whereas Dreiser is the first in American fiction to exalt the City, like the poet Walt Whitman.

A precursor of urban Postmodernists later in the century, Dreiser scorns traditional country values as romantic and unreal to him--family, religion, conventional morality--while romanticizing the City: "The approach to a great city" evokes mystic wonder, promise, hope, and freedom. Identifying with Carrie, he is enchanted, replacing the traditional pursuit of salvation in Heaven with the pursuit of success in the City, a magnet of the American Dream. The City is what the young Dreiser had instead of God. He identifies with and exalts those like Carrie and Cowperwood who overcome deterministic forces and exploit them, as Carrie does her pretty face and charm, to achieve success. *Sister Carrie* is also in the pop cultural tradition of the late 19th century Horatio Alger novels, about rising by luck and pluck.

The double tone--both conventional and cosmopolitan--of Dreiser is evident in the third paragraph: "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." As it turns out, Carrie falls into saving hands and becomes better off by adopting the cosmopolitan standard of virtue. Contrary to his pose here, appearing to affirm conventional morality by calling the cosmopolitan standard "worse," Dreiser thereafter subverts conventional morality with his plot and his underlying tone. Carrie becomes "better," in the sense of more evolved or individuated, by disregarding the conventional morals of society. Clearly the successive men in her life represent steps upward that are developmental as well as social, culminating in Ames, who helps her to see drama as art rather than merely popular spectacle

and awakens her to “the call of the ideal.” Ames transcends the cosmopolitan standard and inspires her to higher aims: “She was rocking, and beginning to see.”

The City, like the conscious mind in relation to the unconscious, floats on the “sea of life”—deterministic forces of Nature and society—evoked throughout the novel by motifs of currents, drifting, rocking, and sinking, in the case of Hurstwood. Carrie is carried along by currents of feeling, Hurstwood cuts himself adrift from his family, when they meet in the park to run away together she is wearing a sailor hat, New York is an “ocean” and so on. Carrie refuses to dock herself, declining to accept the stasis implied by marriage and the name *Mur-dock*. Instead she takes the name Wheeler, steering her own wheel, rising on the wheel of fortune while Hurstwood, unable to adapt to his new environment, goes down.

The symmetrical contrast of their fates gives the structure of the novel thematic clarity, dramatic power and the bite of irony. The rocking chair symbol accumulates connotations from one rocking character to another as circumstances change. By the end Carrie’s face is “representative of all desire,” as Dreiser gives his realistic narrative an allegorical dimension. Carrie is all humanity at the present stage of evolution: “Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her.” However, during her romance with Hurstwood in Chicago, the individual Carrie is “as happy, though she did not perceive it, as she ever would be.” That is, ironically, her subsequent psychological development and rise to success are futile in her pursuit of happiness.

Carrie is unhappy because she is unfulfilled. Though her taste in reading improves, she has not yet evolved beyond “the tinsel and shine of her state”—the false values of materialism and social status: “For the first time, it was being borne in upon her how silly and worthless had been her earlier reading, as a whole. Becoming wearied, however, she yawned and came to the window, looking out upon the old winding procession of carriages rolling up Fifth Avenue.”

CHARACTERISTICS OF NATURALISM

1. Omniscient narrator: The voice of Dreiser is like God, seeing all from a cosmic perspective in the context of evolutionary history, as in the first paragraph of Chapter 7 when he lectures the reader on “the true meaning of money.”
2. Philosophical interpretation of life: as in the first paragraph of Chapter 8 where he sets forth his Naturalism explicitly, seeing man as half “beast” at a middle stage of evolution, his “free will not sufficiently developed to replace his instinct.” In contrast to Victorian idealism, Naturalism emphasizes the animality of humans in accord with Darwin, as implied by Dreiser’s similes: Drouet is a moth, Carrie a sheep.
3. Scientific empiricism: In the first chapter his tone is that of a social scientist: “...she was a fair example of the middle American class.” In the first paragraph of Chapter 8, outlining the history of human evolution, he speaks as an anthropologist. In Chapter 33 he is a chemist (from the Middle Ages): “Now it has been shown experimentally that a constantly subdued frame of mind produces certain poisons in the blood, called *katastates*, just as virtuous feelings of pleasure and delight produce helpful chemicals called *anastates*. The poisons generated by remorse inveigh against the system, and eventually produce marked physical deterioration. To these Hurstwood was subject.”
4. Documentary method: as in the first chapter, describing a *masher*: “Lest this order of individual should permanently pass, let me put down some of the most striking characteristics.”
5. Frankness, especially about sexuality, rejecting Victorian inhibition: The only erotic scene in the novel consists of one passionless kiss: “‘You do?’” he said, pressing his lips to her own. For answer, her lips replied.” Matter-of-fact, like the treatment of Carrie’s relationships. That and not eroticism is what shocked Mrs. Doubleday and got the book suppressed—that Dreiser did not express moral disapproval of Carrie and that, rather than punish her, he rewarded her with fame and fortune. Dreiser was less inhibited about sex than Norris and London, but the genteel culture would only tolerate so much offense, as Mrs. Doubleday demonstrated.

6. Deterministic, minimizing or denying free will: Carrie “felt her own helplessness without quite realizing the wisp on the tide that she was.” Dreiser’s implicit formula is mechanistic: *chemistry* of character plus *environment* plus *chance* equals Fate. At a number of critical points, he emphasizes chance, as when Carrie just happens to be in the right place at the right time and replies, “I am yours truly” (a conventional closing that opens doors for her--ironic, since she is never truly anyone’s). “‘Well, you’re in luck,’ remarked another member of the chorus.” As the theater critic writes later, Carrie is “merely pretty, goodnatured, and lucky.”
7. Biased selection of circumstances, usually lower class: Carrie rises because she is lucky, she has a pretty face and is able to charm men into supporting her until she achieves success. Hurstwood fails because he has bad luck, poor chemistry, and cannot adapt to a new environment.
8. Biased selection of characters, usually not very bright: Carrie and Hurstwood are common types, but their lives are not common. They make themselves more vulnerable than most people do. Most girls do not become successful actresses and most men are not bartenders who rob their employers. By late 20th century feminist standards Carrie is a Victorian gender stereotype: She “could never arrange her thoughts in fluent order. It was always a matter of feeling with her...”
9. Life is a trap: Hurstwood traps himself when he steals the money and the safe closes on him, sealing his fate. He traps Carrie into fleeing with him to Canada: “‘Let me go,’ she said. ‘How dare you?’ and large tears began to gather in her eyes.” In the end he is trapped by poverty, inertia and despair, suffocating in a closed room, a victim of chemistry and environment.

Michael Hollister (2015)