

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, More Pupil than Victim

RUDOLF BADER, *University of Berne*

There is general agreement that Theodore Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), is the work of an American Zola.¹ The novel has usually been referred to as one of the foremost examples of naturalism in America,² not only because of its realistic depiction of rather sordid living conditions and its inherent tragic view of life, but also because of its strong reliance upon determinism.³ The characters of the novel are not granted the least command over their lives and destinies. Charles C. Walcutt, in "Theodore Dreiser: The Wonder and Terror of Life,"⁴ expressed what many other critics seemed to feel too: "The movement of the novel does not depend upon acts of will by the central figures."⁵ Richard Lehan wrote about the element of chance in *Sister Carrie* and also mentions the characters' lack of control: "Given their respective temperaments, given the setting and situation they find themselves in, what occurs to characters in *Sister Carrie* happens with an inevitability, with a predictability, beyond their control."⁶ And, pointing out the sequential pattern of the novel, he adds: "Behind the appearance of chance in this novel is a necessary relationship between scenes, a realm of causality, a river running from its source to a destined end. Carrie, Hurstwood, and Drouet are compelled to act as they do."⁷

However, most of these assessments were made with reference to a novel which had been cut down considerably by Dreiser himself, by his wife, by his friend and mentor Arthur Henry, and by typists. Now, after the carefully prepared Pennsylvania Edition of *Sister Carrie* appeared in 1981,⁸ it is time to reassess a number of previously unquestioned features of the novel.

My aim, in this fragment of an essay, is to show that the interpretation of *Sister Carrie* as a novel in which determinism reigns and in which none of the characters

¹See Jack Salzman, "The Critical Recognition of *Sister Carrie* 1900-1907," *Journal of American Studies*, 3, No. 1 (1969), 126; and Charles C. Walcutt, "Theodore Dreiser: The Wonder and Terror of Life," in *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), p. 63.

²See e. g. David Brion Davis, "Dreiser and Naturalism Revisited," in *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 225-36.

³See Philip L. Gerber, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Twayne, 1964), pp. 51-70; also Ellen Moers, *Two Dreisers* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), pp. 133-52.

⁴Charles C. Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 180-221, reprinted in *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, pp. 57-91. An earlier version appeared in *PMLA*, 55 (March 1940), 261-89, under the title, "The Three Stages of Theodore Dreiser's Naturalism."

⁵*Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, p. 66.

⁶Richard Lehan, *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 74.

⁷*Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*, p. 75.

⁸Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). More widely available is the new edition of the Penguin American Library (1981), which is a photo-offset reproduction of the Pennsylvania Edition. All references are to this edition.

are able to influence their fate is an oversimplification. My interpretation sees Carrie's development in the course of the novel not primarily as a fall and a rise,⁹ but rather as a constant rise from innocence to knowledge.

At the outset, Caroline Meeber is described as a young country girl, "eighteen years of age, bright, timid and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth" (p. 3). Even in this modest beginning there is a seed for later growth, expressed by the word "bright." If one of her initial qualities is going to help her later it is her brightness. Once the author has settled her comfortably on the train to Chicago, there follows a more elaborate characterization (p. 4). As it appears, most readers are tempted to take note of her rudimentary mind, her self-interest, her lack of learning, and her materialistic ambitions. But this is only one side of her characterization, it is a purely negative view of Carrie. In what Dreiser tells us about her there is also room for a positive interpretation of these first paragraphs: Carrie has obviously known true affection from her family back in Columbia City; her mind may be rudimentary because there have been no stimuli for its development yet, nevertheless it is there: "rudimentary" can also mean a beginning, material for later growth. And it is not insignificant that Dreiser should refer the aspects of her mind which await development to the "power of observation and analysis," because this is the very power that his protagonist is going to develop through the novel.

Her capacity in the power of observation is shown when she meets Charles Drouet on the train, only a few paragraphs after initial characterization. She uses her power of observation in a naive way, as the unspoiled country girl that she still is, for "she had not yet learned the many little affectations with which women conceal their true feelings" (p. 8). "Neither was she wise enough to be sure of the working of the mind of the other" (p. 9). But as soon as she meets her sister Minnie in Chicago, she accomplishes her first step in her learning process: "Carrie realized the change of affectional atmosphere at once" (p. 11). Her sense of intuition is fairly well developed and, together with her as yet slight power of observation, it lets her take a keen account of her new environment.

On being offered a humble job, Carrie's cheerful optimism breaks through: "Surely Chicago was not so bad if she could find one place in one day. She might find another and better later" (p. 27). Dreiser's use of the word "surely" is always ironic, it always signals a character's naive illusions. Here, the irony of Carrie's illusions is quite obvious. However, what has been presented so far clearly indicates Carrie's honest intention to do the right things and her eagerness to learn from the world about her. At her new job in the shoe factory, although her idea of work has been entirely different, she quickly learns about all the aspects of her work, about the characters of her fellow workers, and about her own ambitions. At Minnie's flat she learns about the difference in human characters, about her own superiority in the realm of imagination, and about the reality of her loneliness. Her first interest, besides looking for work, is the theater (p. 32). This interest, together with her strong imagination, points ahead to the source of her later success. If Carrie takes to a stance of observation at an early stage (p. 51) and keeps it up through the novel (the symbolic significance of her rocking chair having found ample comment by critics), this is not primarily due to her passive nature but rather an expression of her readiness to learn and acquire the ways of the world through observation.

It has been pointed out that "Carrie can hardly talk or think,"¹⁰ but if her method in observing people and phenomena of her environment and drawing

⁹Cf. Charles C. Walcutt, in *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, p. 64; Ellen Moers, *Two Dreisers*, p. 151; Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), pp. 53, 55; and Richard Lehan, *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*, p. 67.

¹⁰T. Moers, *Two Dreisers*, p. 149.

reasonable conclusions for herself from these observations, according to the value system available to her, is not thinking, then what else is? Her power of speech, on the other hand, is indeed undeveloped and has to wait for its chance. But the chance does come, and after Carrie's first success on the stage, which comes because she hits upon the right words in a subtle stage situation (p. 431), it would be rather odd to call her inarticulate. It becomes clear, then, that Carrie's positive development from innocence and ignorance, through observation, imitation, mistakes and reasonable conclusions to knowledge, compassion and her own self, guided by instincts, the desire to do the right things in the quest for life and true happiness, and the eagerness to learn about life and nature, begins early in the novel, long before she even meets Hurstwood. From this point of view it is quite absurd to say that her rise depends upon Hurstwood's fall.¹¹ He is merely the next stage after Drouet, another rung in her ladder.¹² Carrie's rise is not only material or even just ironic,¹³ it is not only moral or ethical either, it is a learning process of a vulnerable individual in the difficult and complex jungle of society.

It is true that Carrie is often presented as a passive person in the novel. But this is not the whole truth about her. Her choice not to do certain things can be interpreted as an action of will.¹⁴ For instance she refuses to accept a life like Minnie's; this becomes clear when Hurstwood is at the end of his financial resources and it is the primary force that makes her go out and search for a job on the stage: "She was not going to be dragged into poverty and something worse to suit him. She could act" (p. 378). And there are more instances in the novel where Carrie shows determination and initiative, the most important one being her decision to leave Hurstwood (pp. 434-39).

What has been stated so far establishes two important facts: first, Carrie's development goes through the whole book; second, her famous and often-heard passivity is not always apparent and often she even shows considerable initiative. Perhaps it is the important element of chance that leads so many readers into the acceptance of Carrie's passivity. Another valid interpretation of what appears to be Carrie's weakness or, from a moral view, her "fall," has been offered by Donald Pizer: "Carrie, as Eve, 'falls' not because she is weak or because her human tempters, Drouet and Hurstwood, are evil, but because the apple is beyond resistance in its attraction."¹⁵ This still leaves room for her positive actions in many ways, and it manages to explain an important facet of the novel without seeing Carrie as a weak character.

The novel presents a continuing growth; almost with every new adventure Dreiser tells us something about Carrie's progress. By checking through the whole book and looking for passages that inform the reader about Carrie's impressions and intentions, one can only confirm this development, this learning process. Soon after moving in with Drouet she is "beginning to see where he lacked" (p. 93), and Dreiser tells us: "Ah, how rapidly women learn. In the main they are Jesuits by instinct" (p. 93).

When Carrie feels attracted by Hurstwood, the main reason for the effect of his appeal to her is not a selfish one, but she thinks of Hurstwood's needs first.

¹¹R. Lehan, *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*, p. 67; and *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, p. 64.

¹²Cf. D. Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 59; and Philip L. Gerber, *Theodore Dreiser*, p. 56.

¹³Charles Shapiro, *Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 11.

¹⁴Donald Pizer, for example, describes Carrie's not getting off the train between Chicago and Montreal as "a paradigm of the way in which she reaches decisions," *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 61.

¹⁵D. Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 53.

Her reasons are more altruistic than selfish. The new possibilities with Hurstwood help her develop her power of initiative: "She had some power of initiative, latent before, which now began to exert itself" (p. 131).

Just as Carrie has learned to see through Drouet and his motives, she begins to see Hurstwood for what he is. And when she meets Robert Ames, it is clear to the reader at once that this is the person to guide Carrie on towards higher aims (!); (p. 335). When her material success at last sets in, Carrie has reached a stage that is a platform from which she can look back on her experience, and a starting point for her further development. This further development will necessarily be influenced by Ames's ideals: "Experience of the world and of necessity were in her favor. No longer the lightest word of a man made her head dizzy. She had learned that men could change and fail. Flattery in its most palpable form had lost its force with her. It required superiority—kindly superiority, to move her—the superiority of a genius like Ames" (p. 432). This passage marks the last stage in Carrie's development that the reader can witness. On this stage, at last, it is possible for her to consider her "old illusion" that someone else might need her aid in a different context. On receiving her first 150 dollars she has to think of less fortunate people (p. 457). This points towards her duties in the future. Ames tells her to read Balzac, which she does; and this strengthens her wish to contribute to human happiness.

Looking back over the whole development through the novel, one can see that there is a direction towards the positive. It has been maintained that the backbone of *Sister Carrie* is "expounding the purposelessness of life,"¹⁶ but from this perspective life does not seem completely purposeless. There is hope at the end of the novel, particularly since there is room for change and for a higher aim in Carrie's further career. Her own thoughts of the poor, the influence of Balzac and Ames, and the force of her own experience all point out the path for her: "Not money . . . Not clothes . . . Not applause . . . but goodness—labor for others" (p. 486). Since Ames has told her, "If you have powers, cultivate them" (p. 483), her path towards "labor for others" can only lead through her talents as an actress, through art. There is hope in art, but the artist must be selfish to a certain degree. Carrie's art, the theater, can only be fully realized in the great city. Thus, if Carrie was yearning for beauty in true nature,¹⁷ she was right in looking for it in the great city.¹⁸ Her initial move to Chicago, naive as it might have appeared at the time, proves to be a step in the right direction for her.

There have been extensive critical arguments about Dreiser's weaknesses. The character portrait of Carrie was praised at an early stage in Dreiser criticism; it often seemed to be the only acknowledged quality of an otherwise heavily flawed novel. Carrie's art connects her with other social classes and opens the path towards genuine sympathy and compassion for the needy. I do not agree with the opinion that "her sympathy for the difficulties of others is superficial and fleeting."¹⁹ On the contrary: she convinces as a character who learns to feel sympathy. Whether she manages to act on the strength of this new capacity or not lies outside the novel, but there is evidence to show where her path might lead her.

¹⁶Charles C. Walcutt, in *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, p. 63.

¹⁷Cf. John J. McAleer, *Theodore Dreiser, An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), pp. 76, 79; also E. Moers, *Two Dreisers*, p. 145; R. Lehan, *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*, p. 69; and D. Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 59.

¹⁸Cf. E. Moers, *Two Dreisers*, p. 101.

¹⁹D. Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 71.

Dreiser has often been understood as a great novelist in spite of his naturalism.²⁰ I have tried to show that his naturalism is of a very particular kind; it allows for character development within the forces of society. If Carrie performs actions based on her own will, so does Hurstwood. Although the conditions of society are harsh and do not make it easy for him, his fall is his own fault to a considerable degree. His fault is that he does not allow himself to judge his position adequately. It has been asserted that Hurstwood and Carrie are both made victims of the American system.²¹ This is only one half of the truth. The other half, as I have shown, is the initiative (or lack of initiative) of the major characters. Carrie is referred to, early in the novel, as Drouet's "pupil and victim" (p. 100). As it appears, she emancipates herself from her victimized position, from dominating male companions and even, to a certain extent, from the limitations of the American system. And this is only possible through art. Art makes her more clearly a pupil than a victim. It is to be hoped that now, with the general availability of the original text of the novel, the character of Carrie will be granted more initiative in her capacity as a pupil of life.

²⁰See *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, p. 146; E. Moers, *Two Dreisers*, p. vii; and Malcolm Cowley, "Sister Carrie: Her Fall and Rise," in *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 176.

²¹Philip L. Gerber, *Theodore Dreiser*, p. 70.