
Booknotes for Sister Carrie

Authorial Background:

In 1871, Theodore Dreiser was born into a large, impoverished family in Terre Haute, Indiana. For newspapers in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis he began his writing career. When an editor friend, Arthur Henry, suggested that he write a novel, Dreiser's result was Sister Carrie, based on the life of Dreiser's sister Emma. The novel sold poorly but was recognized as a breakthrough in American realism; Dreiser's career as a novelist then began. He wrote other books as The Financier (1912) and The Titan (1914), but his later Broadway-dramatized novel, An American Tragedy (1925) that earned him recognition. In later years he became an unorthodox Communist, having written the political treatise America is Worth Saving (1941); with the gradual decline of his artistic powers he moved to Hollywood in 1939 and made a living from the sale of his earlier works' film rights. At Hollywood, in 1945, Dreiser died at seventy-four.

Literary Period/Country:

A breakthrough in realism, America of the 1890-1900s.

Setting:

Sister Carrie took place in the cities of Chicago, Montreal, and New York just before the turn of the century, beginning in 1889. Socioeconomically, the populace was driven by a desire for material assets as clothes, homes, and high-status jobs; society was critical about the amount of money and experience a person had. As a result, different levels of society could be discerned by Carrie, mostly the impoverished many and the content few she wanted to belong with. The buildings of the cities are often portrayed as one of two types: either fancy and ornate, or bleak and destitute.

Characters:

Carrie: The main character, she begins at eighteen years of age, having moved from her rural home in Columbia City, Ohio. After meeting a traveling salesman who rescues her from the poverty she must endure at her sister Minnie's house, she is unable to find a job and moves in with him. She lives, unwed, with the salesman and turns to a married man because of dissatisfaction with her life. Later, she pursues a career, acting in comedy-drama plays and earning herself a large sum of money. However, she is never thoroughly satisfied with life, having money but no true friends to share her success with.

Drouet: He is a traveling salesman, partly French, who befriends Carrie, with flush, colorful cheeks and a light mustache. He dresses sharply, belonging to an order of the Elks. As he begins to know Carrie, he is insensitive to her wants and later feels deserted when she leaves him for Hurstwood. Slowly he realizes that relations between Carrie and himself will never be the same after her acting career, and goes on about his life.

Hurstwood: Harboring an unmitigated love for Carrie, he forsakes his family and all that he owns, even resorting to stealing money to be with Carrie. He "is a virile man of the world, with a cosmopolitan charm and an intelligence competent to all the demands that his life might place

on him--exactly the characteristics that attract Carrie" (ix). Working as the manager of the Fitzgerald and Moy company, he had made a high-standing reputation for himself. When he pulls Carrie away from Drouet and has her in New York, he cannot find a job; the couple's standard of living declines, and Hurstwood begins to grow despondent about his financial situation. However, as his wife Carrie soars in fame with her acting career, Hurstwood is reduced to nothing and must beg for food. Remembering the things he had achieved in life, he kills himself from gas inhalation in a fifteen-cent hotel room.

Theme:

One of the more important themes in Sister Carrie is the "assault upon innocence" (viii). At the beginning of the story, Carrie is seen as a picture of innocence, unharassed until Drouet comes up and whispers in her ear, "assuming theology's favored position for the Devil," luring her into a life she knows nothing about (viii). The "assault upon innocence" can be expanded to include a mental "assault" upon the value and worth of the underexperienced; in the novel, nearly every company refuses to hire underexperienced workers. Hurstwood dislikes Carrie's desire to act because he prematurely believes it would not suit her. Also, during the final period of Hurstwood's life, people are reluctant to give him any money for food because of his haggard appearance.

Another theme is sexual morality and fidelity. On one hand, Hurstwood is married but wishes to have an affair with Carrie because of his "love" for her. On the other hand, Carrie neither has love for Drouet or Hurstwood. This contrast had been brought about because of the values held by society in the 1890s. People were not supposed to express love for one another until it was certain they were to be married; that was why Carrie wanted Hurstwood to marry her before they would go anywhere. That was also why Carrie left Drouet and Hurstwood left his family (they were too dull and could not satisfy their spouses). The consequence of infidelity is clearly presented in Hurstwood's case; his family, friends, property, and life were all gone.

A final theme is the socioeconomic setting. "The Dreiserian universe is composed of merchants, workers, club-men, managers, actors, salesmen, doormen, cops, and derelicts--a population unified by the rules of commerce and the ideals of property. It is the rules of commerce and the ideals and desires of property that cause the fragmentation of social classes in the book. Carrie constantly fights for the high--life of being rich; Hurstwood later died, having achieved many fine things in his life.

Author's Unique Style:

Dreiser's novel is a breakthrough in realism, unconventionally including references of the sexual lives of the characters. His novel represented a drastic change from the earlier romantic styles of writing, shifting from the careful, perfect, natural Romance period to the harsh, factual, blunt Realism period. The point of view is third-person omniscient, but once, midway through the novel, Dreiser uses the personal "I" in direct discourse. Dialogue is used to express the characters' thoughts as well as their emotions; diction, such as "I'm almost roasting" or "Amid the babel of voices" help to express emotion (309, 337). Use of the vernacular is also found in the German grocer's speech, "Oh, dat iss all over. . . I vill not sell now," and the words of an old, rioting Irish woman, "May God starve ye yet. . . you bloody, murtherin' thafe!"

Quotes:

1. "Her soft eyes contained in their liquid luster no suggestion of the knowledge of disappointment" (115). This may be an instance of foreshadowing (of Carrie's eventual dissatisfaction with everything in her life), or it may represent Carrie's purity of mind which will soon be corrupted by desire and vanity--if she knows nothing of disappointment, then Carrie never had to encounter things that would make her feel disappointed.
2. "She wanted pleasure, she wanted position, and yet she was confused as to what these things might be. Every hour the kaleidoscope of human affairs threw a new luster upon something, and therewith it became for her the desired--the all" (115-116). This quote represents a problem that has haunted Carrie continuously throughout the novel. Carrie does not know what she wants from life; she runs to whatever might make her feel better, not knowing what it is.
3. "[Hurstwood] never attempted to analyze the nature of his affection. It was sufficient that there was tenderness in her eye, weakness in her manner, good-nature and hope in her thoughts" (116). Here is the reason why Hurstwood removes himself from Carrie near the last quarter of the novel. He does not know exactly why he loves Carrie; he loves her only on impulse, but unwilling to make a commitment to her.
4. "There had been so much enthusiasm engendered that she was believing herself deeply in love. She sighed as she thought of her handsome adorer. Yes, she would get ready by Saturday. She would go, and they would be happy" (163). The tone of this quote is too good to be true, and adds a hint of foreshadowing; also, Carrie does not love Hurstwood willingly. It was only because of the "engendered enthusiasm" that caused her to believe "herself deeply in love."
5. "Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason" (60-61). This gives the two major sides of human thought and explains the uncertainty involved when a person tries to judge another's thoughts.

Glossary:

1. Realism: a style of writing that represents life as real as possible, the way life really is. It is often harsh instead of gentle, and is characterized by forthright, open dialogue and narration. All of Sister Carrie is written in realism; an example is Carrie's struggle to make money and the immoral ways of people like Drouet and Hurstwood who begin with good intentions, but ultimately reveal a different side of themselves.
2. Direct discourse: a section where the author interrupts the narration to present a point. On page 261, Dreiser uses the personal "I" to add the emphasis of his thoughts to the narration. "If one thinks that such thoughts do not come to so common a type of mind--that such feelings require a higher mental development--I would urge for their consideration the fact that it is the higher mental development which does away with such thoughts."
3. Vernacular: the use of language that resembles the way people speak in a certain region; the native language or spoken language mostly used. Like the vernacular but different are colloquialisms, informal (spoken) language, and slang, as are the words of an old, rioting Irish woman, "May God starve ye yet. . . you bloody, murtherin' thafe!"
4. Dialogue: the designation of a conversation between two or more characters. This is used often to highlight the characters' emotions and dispositions. Hurstwood: "What makes you put

so much butter on the steak?" Carrie: "To make it good, of course." Hurstwood: "Butter is awful dear these days." Carrie: "You wouldn't mind it if you were working". . . It was the first cutting remark that had come from her (282).

5. Aphorism: a statement, pointed and pithy, that expresses a wise observation about life. "A thought will color a world for us," since thoughts are the only things individuals can rely on to interpret the environment. Nothing can be directly sensed without first becoming a thought; it was later through thoughts that caused Hurstwood to love Carrie for some unknown reason. Also, thoughts can be highly emotional, inciting a more vivid "color" to the world.

Plot Summary:

Carrie, just leaving her rural home in Columbia City at eighteen, arrives in Chicago, having met Drouet, the traveling salesman, on the train. She later finds and loses a job at a shoe factory and eventually decides to leave her sister Minnie's home in expectation of a better life and more exciting company with Drouet. When Drouet introduced Carrie to his friend Hurstwood, Carrie felt dissatisfied with her life and she began to like Hurstwood more. Being introduced very slowly into upper-class life, having brought herself clothes with Drouet's money and gone out to stylish dinners with Hurstwood, she soon begins her future career as an actress. After Carrie's performance at the play, Hurstwood feels hard-pressed to ask her to come away with him, although he is married. This creates problems; Drouet finds out that Hurstwood was courting his supposed "wife," Carrie finds out that Hurstwood is married, and Hurstwood steals ten thousand dollars out of intoxication and foolishness in hope of supporting his life with Carrie. When Hurstwood takes Carrie with him to Montreal and then to New York, he has to return the money and then has almost no money from which to live. Hurstwood begins to look old and unappealing, and does not take Carrie anywhere she wants to go. They are forced to live in a despicable poverty, and Hurstwood does nothing about it. He remains stuck up with pride until the end of the story, when Carrie begins to support herself and gets rich and famous from her acting career, and Hurstwood becomes a beggar and eventually kills himself. Drouet returns to his own affairs, and at the end, no one found what they were looking for--whether it be love, friendship, or true happiness.

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