Carrie Meeber's Desire and Vanity in **Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie***

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ABSTRACT

Sister Carrie, as a masterpiece by Theodore Dreiser, has been criticized for its awkward style, bad grammar, and proverbial slovenliness since its publication in 1900. However, these unfavorable comments do not lessen the novel's importance and Dreiser's role as a major writer in American literature. Despite his stylistic flaws, or some "controversial" opinions as Donald Pizer mentions in his "Preface" to *Sister Carrie* (ix), Dreiser has won for himself as an important literary figure, a pioneer who writes straightforwardly in the novel his keen observation of American society. Three of the main characters in the novel, Carrie Meeber, Charlie Drouet, and George Hurstwood, all drift and are drawn more by their desire and vanity at heart. As far as Carrie is concerned, whenever she makes a choice, she reveals more the hard fact that she doesn't really have much option in the decision she makes. In the following study, I shall focus on Carrie and try to elaborate upon the themes of the novel and analyze how Dreiser displays his artistic craftsmanship to portray vanity and desire as the underlying forces that constitute Carrie's city adventures in Chicago and New York.

Keywords: Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, Vanity, Desire, Late Nineteenth-Century American Novels

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* has been much criticized for its awkward style, bad grammar, and proverbial slovenliness since its publication in 1900. Some earlier critics, such as Alfred Kazin and Lionel Trilling, do not favor this novel very much. Trilling assumes that Dreiser's prose style is "full of roughness and ungainliness" (41); Kazin alleges even more unreservedly that Dreiser makes "painful reading" and "stupefies with reality" (47). However, these unfavorable comments do not lessen the novel's importance and Dreiser's role as a major naturalist writer in American literature. In fact, it is Dreiser's "naturalistic frankness," as F. O. Matthiessen asserts, that successfully challenges the "genteel tradition" of that time (62). Dreiser, in his interview with Otis Notman, emphasizes that *Sister Carrie* is "close to life. It is intended not as a piece of literary craftsmanship, but as a picture of conditions done as simply and effectively as the English language will permit" (475). Though "not intended as a piece of literary craftsmanship" as Dreiser claims, *Sister Carrie* is, without doubt, a masterwork by Dreiser, and Dreiser's words prove true and effective in the sense that the studies of his literary works have continued to thrive ever since the 1950s. For Dreiser's achievements, William J. Handy comments that *Sister Carrie* is "in many ways the most successful" novel by Dreiser (522); Sheldon N. Grebstein stresses as well that *Sister Carrie* is Dreiser's "pivotal novel," the "first American novel without moral bias" (544). For Dreiser's contributions to the development of American literature, Grebstein speaks out what most critics agree:

> Critics and scholars agree almost without dissent that Dreiser, rather than Crane or Norris, was chiefly responsible for establishing those attitude—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. (541-42)

Thus, despite his stylistic flaws, or those "controversial" opinions as Donald Pizer mentions in his "Preface" to *Sister Carrie* (ix), Dreiser has won for himself as an important literary figure, a pioneer who writes straightforwardly in the novel his keen observation of American society.

In recent years, critics, according to Jeff Jaeckle, care less about the "analyses of Dreiser's form" than about his "content based on cultural studies mainstays of race, class, and gender" (3). For example, in his study of "The Hidden Polemics in *Sister Carrie*," Kiyohiko Murayama elaborates upon the so-called "free indirect speech" that "abounds" in the novel (57). Tracy Lemaster, in her "Feminist Thing Theory in *Sister Carrie*," holds that Dreiser's "use of things" becomes an "important means of

characterization" rather than "merely contributing to the monotony of his style" (41). Emily Rosenbaum, in "Performance Anxiety in *Sister Carrie*," also has an in-depth study of Carrie's role in the novel. Rosenbaum explains that Dreiser's metropolis is "a lonely place," where only money and fame distinguish people (11). Thus, despite her theatrical success in the later part of the novel, Carrie, in Rosenbaum's opinion, only reaches "a heightened loneliness" in a society that allows people to "buy" their sense of superiority (17). As Pizer claims in his "Introduction" to *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, Dreiser is a "profound observer" of the "underlying myths and emotional realities of the American experience" (xii). It is Dreiser's keen observation that adds to the uniqueness of his craftsmanship, and it is the realities which Dreiser describes in his novels that attract critics' lasting interest in him and his works. For Dreiser's insightful as well as realistic presentation of American living experience in *Sister Carrie*, Robert H. Elias puts it in this way:

> For although a number of the first reviewers expressed reservations, condemning matters of details and style, they praised the book's power, its characterization, and the author's vision and insight into human nature. If some found the tale unpleasant, they also recognized its importance. (115)

Indeed, *Sister Carrie* presents us a story about how human society works and how people live and interact with each other in such a milieu of realistic harshness. Three of the main characters in the novel, Carrie Meeber, Charlie Drouet, and George Hurstwood, all drift and are drawn more by their desire and vanity at heart. As far as Carrie is concerned, whenever she makes a choice, she reveals more the hard fact that she doesn't really have much option in the decision she makes. Thus, in the following study, I shall focus on Carrie and try to elaborate upon the themes of the novel and analyze how Dreiser displays, in this fin de siècle novel, his artistic craftsmanship to portray vanity and desire as the underlying forces that constitute Carrie's city adventures in Chicago and New York.

Technically, Dreiser begins to cast light on Carrie's vanity and desire for "material things" as soon as she gets on the train bound for the Chicago city in the opening scene.[1] Young and timid as she is, Carrie observes that there is an "indescribably faint line in the matter of man's apparel," which somehow divides for

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Norton, 1970) 2. All citations of *Sister Carrie* are from this edition, which uses the 1900 Doubleday, Page edition as its copy text. I choose this edition because most people are more familiar with it than the Pennsylvania Edition (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1981). For more critical opinions about the text of *Sister Carrie*, also see Pizer's "The Text of *Sister Carrie*: Where We are Now," in *Dreiser Studies* 32.2 (2001): 42-48.

her “those who are worth glancing at and those who are not” (4). The very scale, which Carrie uses to weigh up people as above, shows her vanity as well as her practical attitudes towards life. However, due to the “worn state of her shoes,” Carrie is also conscious of her own insufficiency and the hard fact of social “inequality” that separates people. No wonder, when Drouet accosts her by introducing the moving scenes outside the window of the train, she turns alert and watches him closely:

> He reached down in his hip pocket and took out a fat purse. It was filled with slips of paper, some mileage books, a roll of greenbacks. It impressed her deeply. . . . The purse, the shiny tan shoes, the smart new suit, and the air with which he did things, built up for her a dim world of fortune, of which he was the center. It disposed her pleasantly toward all he might do. (5-6)

As quoted, Drouet catches Carrie’s attention by the “roll of greenbacks” in his purse, his “shiny tan shoes, and the “smart new suit.” The girl detects some “pride in his voice,” but it only adds to her admiration at heart about what the drummer “might do” with such ample means. The beginning scene is significant in the sense that Dreiser, technically, describes a money world from the view point of a girl like Carrie, “eighteen years of age, bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth” (1). On the other hand, Dreiser implies as well that the society is material-orientated and that young people like Carrie are interested in “pleasure of life, ambitious to gain in material things” (2). To put it in Jin Rong’s words, the development “of the industrialized society” inflames “people’s desires” for more things, including money, social status, and affection (1-2). It is the disparity between Carrie’s young age of ignorance and her practical calculations of the drummer, of things, and of people that impresses us to a great deal. As Matthiessen asserts, Dreiser’s narrative has “so much weight” (69). Dreiser’s delineation of Carrie’s desire and her inclination for the vanity side of life is indeed weighty as much as is it impressive at the very outset of the novel.

On Drouet’s part, he is more scheming than he appears to be. On the one hand, he knows that his dress or manners are “calculated” to elicit the “admiration of susceptible young women” like Carrie (3), so that he virtually takes advantage of Carrie’s observing him, to show the young girl his purse, the roll of greenbacks, and his business card in a dandy, airy way. On the other hand, the drummer recognizes “the indescribable thing” that makes up for “fascination and beauty” in Carrie (5), so that he can’t help feeling that he has “gained a victory” after securing Carrie’s name and address for later contact. Dreiser’s comments on Drouet’s “keen desire for the

feminine" are explicit:

> Good clothes, of course, were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing. A strong physical nature, actuated by a keen desire for the feminine, was the next. A mind free of any consideration of the problems or forces of the world and actuated not by greed, but an insatiable love of variable pleasure. His method was always simple. Its principal element was daring, backed, of course, by an intense desire and admiration for the sex. (3)

In contrast to Drouet's feeling of gaining a victory, Carrie, after giving the drummer her name and address, feels that she has "yielded something" to him (6). In fact, what Carrie has yielded to Drouet is the very explication of her desire for a pleasant and easy way of life. Drouet knows, as mentioned, what the girls like Carrie want and admire. He successfully and dexterously shows off himself as a man of money, who can possibly help fulfill young girls' yearning for "keener pleasure of life." Thus, in a moral sense, Drouet is low not for what he has done to Carrie, but for what he has intended to do to her. That is, he wants to have her, perhaps, as one of his sex preys when she is alert but inexperienced. Like what Pizer says in "Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism," Dreiser is "something of an ironist" (570). In the very first chapter of the novel, Dreiser displays his artistic technique in presenting us a vivid example of the kind of self-interested calculations among men and women. "Self-interest," as the writer describes, is "high" with Carrie (2). Ironically, it doesn't seem to occur to her that the dandy and amiable drummer in front of her is far more experienced and is by no means lower as far as self-interested calculations are concerned.

Self-interested calculations show the scheming side of human nature, and they hurt people's relationship with each other, too. For example, Minnie, Carrie's sister, does not think how to support her younger sister but, instead, calculates the "resource" which Carrie's board will help pay the rent and make "the subject of expenditure a little less difficult to talk about with her husband," Hanson (24). Though she feels a "quaver of conscience" when taking the money from Carrie, she does not know "how to explain" to Hanson if she takes less (41). As to Carrie, a sense of "mental rebellion" overwhelms her (41). The fact is that she has only fifty cents left after paying four dollars for her board. This money can't even "allow her car fare," let alone "finding clothes" for the coming winter (40-41). Dreiser's portrayal about Carrie's distress, as seen above, discloses the hard fact of human selfishness. In his interview with Notman, Dreiser reveals his fears and worries about the "infinite suffering and

deprivation of great masses of men and women" (474), and he emphasizes that a time is coming "when personal gain will rarely be sought at the expense of some one else" (475). Dreiser's emphasis reflects his hope for a better society. But, the hard fact remains. As William L. Phillips points out, individuals in their "desires for a secure harbor" make "perilous" the conditions of others (553). What the Hansons have done to Carrie, as seen above, shows that mutual help is discredited even among people who are of or from the same family. In this sense, it is the Hansons that fail Carrie to have a good starting point to launch into a new life in Chicago. Industrialization improves human life, inspires human desire for more pleasures, but it impairs, too, the kind of social value--that of people's intimacy, mutual care, and sympathy with each other, which actually help establish the foundation stone of human society.

Carrie's working experience also proves that she doesn't have much choice for the way of life she desires. In the shoe factory, Carrie is assigned to work like other girls in front of "clacking machines," to punch "eye-holes" in the pieces of leather used for shoes production (27). The work itself is simple, but the boring repetition of the same action tires her. Dreiser describes:

> Carrie at last could scarcely sit still. Her legs began to tire and she wanted to get up and stretch. Would noon never come? It seemed as if she had worked an entire day. She was not hungry at all, but weak, and her eyes were tired, straining at the one point where the eye-punch came down. . . . Her hands began to ache at the wrists and then in the fingers. . . . (29)

Bending over her work, Carrie feels as if she could hardly "endure such a life," which is "entirely different" from what she has expected (31), a life which she has once hoped to "establish herself on a paying basis" (10). According to Olga Volkova, this is the reality of working conditions, "the sweat shop," where workers "have been dehumanized" in regard to industrialization at the turn of the century (10). Carrie is thus fired by the sweat factory on account of her absence and illness.

However, on Carrie's part, she appears to be quite determined for her expectation of a better life. Though she feels "shamed in the face of better dressed girls," she believes that she should "be better served;" she has no intention to "make friends with" other girls in the factory, because she thinks herself higher (31). Even when she is out of job, she holds Drouet's money in her hand and bethinks willfully: "Money," something "every body else has and I must get" (48). Consequently, instead of following the Hansons' hope of her to return home, Carrie decides to stay in the "admirable, great city" of Chicago, which is "so fine" when one is not poor (53). Concerning this, Grebstein also points out that modern life, as "symbolized in the big

city," is Carrie's "seducer" (547). Indeed, only by staying in the city can Carrie have a chance to fulfill her desire for the "peculiar little tan jacket" and the "bit of finery," which have attracted her so much (51). Besides, Drouet reminds her of the Hansons' coldness and indifference to her by saying: "Come out of it, they won't care. I'll help you get along" (55). In Ellen Moers's opinion, Carrie is "far from destitution; she has two decent homes to go back to" (205). However, the crucial point is that Carrie can't and she won't. As a matter of fact, Carrie is, like Drouet, "vain" and more easily "deluded by fine clothes" (49). She wants to have pleasures for her life, to look better among people, the so-called "pecuniary emulation" as Volkova alleges (12). Thus, Carrie's determination can as well be looked upon as her submission to vanity and heart's desire. In other words, Carrie appears to be determined because it is her vanity and her material desire that have power over her, rather than she them.

In relation to Carrie's submission to vanity and desire, Moers emphasizes that this is Carrie's "move from decent poverty to comfortable disgrace" (207). Especially, when Carrie recognizes the "glance" among a "group of poorly dressed girls" (59), she feels that she is now divided from them and that "some great tide" seems to be rolling between them. There occurs at Carrie's heart a sudden surge of conscience, which reproaches her severely:

> "Look at those about," came the whispered answer. "Look at those who are good. How would they scorn to do what you have done. Look at the good girls; how will they draw away from such as you when they know you have been weak. You have not tried before you failed. (70)

However, this kind of self-reproach doesn't last long, because Carrie doesn't really think that she is to blame. This accusing voice speaks to her only "infrequently" when she is alone, when "the pleasant side" is not too apparent, and when Drouet is not with her (70). With the approaching of December, Carrie feels more justified about her decision. She admits that she is "desireful" (70), but the "whistling wind" and the practical "voice of want" can "answer for her" all blames or reproaches from her conscience (70). This further proves that Carrie doesn't have much difficulty in calculating things practically. She is convinced that she will stay with Drouet legally and that her living in the flat with him under the false name of "Mrs. Drouet" is only expediency for the time being (71). Thus, Drouet's promise of marriage is a "basis for hope," a sort of "salve to her conscience, a pleasant way out" (72). With Drouet's commitment, Carrie believes that "things" will be righted and her actions will "be justified" (72). Ironically, Carrie doesn't know that her rationalization only shows how practical she is rather than how right she is. To put it in George M. Spangler's

words, Carrie is "materialistic" (505) as she ever is and as she ever will be. In comparison with her willful desire and vanity, her self-reproaches or voices from her conscience prove to be only too weak and too infrequent.

Cohabitation also offers Carrie a chance to reflect upon her relationship with the drummer. In her time of destitution, Carrie is afraid of losing Drouet's interest, of "being swept away and left without an anchorage" (72). But, as soon as she is secured from the immediate threat of coming winter, Carrie thinks quite differently. She admits that she is really "not enamored of Drouet," and she believes that she is "more clever" than he (72). Concerning this, Drouet, too, thinks that he is "lucky" to have "found a woman" like Carrie tumbling "into his lap" (72). This is because, Drouet, "assured" as he is, has often "failed dismally where" the woman is "slightly experienced" and possesses some "innate refinement" (72). Drouet seduces Carrie successfully, but he offers her as well an opportunity to survey him closely, to see what he has and to see "where" he lacks (72). This explains why Carrie appears to be in no hurry for her marriage with the drummer and why she now feels "at ease in waiting" (72). As Charles R. Lewis says, indifference actually functions "as a sort of master-signifier of all that opposes individual desire or marks its absence" (21). Carrie's indifferent or careless attitude toward marriage issue, which she has once deemed so important for her self-justification, signifies, to a great deal, the essential fact that Drouet is not her Mr. Right.

Undeniably, Drouet is not a man of culture or elegance. He likes to make advances to women because of his "inborn desire," urging him to that as "a chief delight" (49). To a Madame Sappho, she will call Drouet "a pig," because of his sensuality, vanity, and his "boastful" manners (49). Thus, when Hurstwood, graceful and refined in his manners and appearance, comes to visit the so-called Mr. and Mrs. Drouet, he appears to be "a great charm" to Carrie and successfully catches her attention at the first sight. For Carrie, Hurstwood is cleverer than the drummer "in a hundred ways" (72), a much better one she admires:

> He was in the best form for entertaining this evening. His clothes were particularly new and rich in appearance. The coat lapels stood out with that medium stiffness which excellent cloth possesses. . . . His cravat was a shiny combination of silken threads, not loud, not inconspicuous. What he wore did not strike the eye so forcibly as that which Drouet had on, but Carrie could see the elegance of the material. . . . She noticed these things almost unconsciously. . . . (73)

The "elegance of the material" which Carrie sees in Hurstwood is the very vanity of

life she adores; his clothes which are "new and rich" in appearance and his cravat of silken threads also represent the better and more delicate material things she desires. Above all, Hurstwood is "rather dexterous" in avoiding things which might suggest that he knows "anything of Carrie's past" (73). Hurstwood's circumspection, thoughtfulness, and his fine clothes, all strike the very core of Carrie's heart, which has "never come in contact with such grace" (75).

Drouet himself is, to some degree, responsible for Carrie's losing interest in him. Despite his limited capability to tell women's "intellect," Drouet likes to give opinions upon women, judging them according to their faces, dresses, and the "swaying" of their hips (76). Drouet's habitual criticism has an influence on Carrie:

> "Yes, she is," she returned, cheerfully, a little suggestion of possible defect in herself awakening in her mind. If that was so fine, she must look at it more closely. Instinctively, she felt a desire to imitate it. Surely she could do that too. (76)

As Lemaster points out, Drouet fails to "recognize Carrie's ability to grow" (49). He does not think Carrie smarter, and neither does he ever believe that Carrie may listen, learn, and then adjust herself toward "something better" (77). For example, her "gossip" with Mrs. Hale helps open her eyes; she learns to be "affected by music" from a young girl of another neighbor, who plays the piano "not infrequently" (77). Thus, as Carrie becomes a girl of "considerable taste" (79), the drummer remains the same "egotist" (72). He sees Carrie getting "vain" when dressing before the glass (81), but is too blind to be aware that he can't actually satiate the shop girl's growing desire for something better, for something more refined. Neither does Drouet expect that it is the lifting of Carrie's taste that soon catches Hurstwood's attention, the experienced manager who is able to detect in her the "little vanity" which has "touched him as a pleasant thing" (79).

Fascinated by the city life, Carrie thus never looks inside to see what she has had; rather, she always looks outside and admires what she doesn't have. For the dwelling place of Mr. and Mrs. Drouet, Dreiser describes:

> In the view of a certain stratum of society, Carrie was comfortably established—in the eyes of the starveling, beaten by every wind and gusty sheet of rain, she was safe in halcyon harbour. Drouet had taken three rooms, furnished, in Ogden Place, facing Union Park, on the West Side. (69)

Fairly speaking, if Carrie is contented with what Drouet has provided for her, she can enjoy, at least, a period of comfortable life in the "halcyon harbour" of Ogden Place. However, desire and vanity give her no peace. Instead, she is further inspired by Mrs. Hale's "extended harangues upon the subjects of wealth and position" (86). She learns to "distinguish between degrees of wealth," and is "perfectly certain" that big houses, which she has seen in her ride with Mrs. Hale, are the places where "happiness" can be found (86). Concerning this, Carrie is, as mentioned, not only "materialistic" but also upside down for her value of life. It never occurs to her that happiness is nowhere to be found but inside herself. Seeing the "comparative insignificance" of her rooms, Carrie falls into a low mood as she does in the Hansons's house, and keeps "rocking to and fro" in her chair (87). [2] As Pizer calls our attention in "Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism," the naturalistic novel is not "so superficial or reductive" as assumed to be (569). In portraying Carrie's city adventures of desire and vanity, so far as we have seen, Dreiser seems to propose the fact that contentment at heart is the only true source of happiness. Carrie's example shows us how she is not satisfied with her life. It also casts light on the in-depth meaning of contentment and happiness, which needs us to reflect upon ourselves inwardly rather than outwardly.

Blinded by her skin-deep admiration of those who are rich or well-dressed, Carrie actually invites for herself the second seducer, Hurstwood, whose rich clothes, above all, are the very "vast persuasion" to her (75). As far as this is concerned, Paula E. Geyh also lays it bare by saying that clothes, for Carrie, are "useful primarily as indicators" of what she "might have and be" and that they are also "indicators of what she is not, of her class-bound status as a daughter of working-class parents and thus of all that exceeds her grasp" (419). Deluded by Hurstwood's finery and his eloquence, Carrie listens to the manager's confession of love attentively during their first ride along the new Boulevard. For Carrie's response to the seducer's sweet words, Dreiser describes:

> It was an important thing to her to hear one so well-positioned and powerful speaking in this manner. . . . How was it that, in so little a while, the narrow of the country had fallen from her as a garment, and the city, with all its mystery, the man of money and affairs sitting beside her, appealing to her. Behold, he had ease and comfort, his strength was great,

[2] Critics' interpretations are many for Dreiser's employment of the rocking chair as a recurrent image in the novel. For example, according to Christopher G. Katope, the "famous rocking chair," which recurs throughout the novel, has been "interpreted as symbolic of Carrie's 'unsatisfied longing'" (70). Similarly, Philip Fisher also believes that the non-linear movement of the rocking chair, in which Carrie sits, symbolizes her frustration with her static position in society (155). Lemaster points out as well that Carrie's rocking chair and Hurstwood's safe are "not commodities at all" and seem to "take on a life of their own" (43)

> his position high, his clothing rich, and yet he was appealing to her. . . . She troubled herself no more upon the matter. She only basked in the warmth of his feeling. . . . (96)

The repetition of Hurstwood's "appealing to her" reinforces the fact that Carrie is very pleased with Hurstwood, who is capable of lifting her up to a higher social level and helping fulfill her dream to explore all the "mystery" of the city life. Besides, Hurstwood emphasizes that he is actually "unhappy," working in a place where there is "noting but show and indifference" (96). This confession further strikes "a chord" which finds "sympathetic response" in Carrie, who also believes that she is "at this very moment quite alone" (96). Thus, when the manager asks Carrie to own it up that she loves him, the shop girl makes "no answer" (97). Nevertheless, Hurstwood, as does Drouet, feels "his victory" (97). Not knowing Hurstwood a married man, Carrie, ironically, considers him as "a way out" for her, a "drag in the direction of honor" (98). Hurstwood, however, deems Carrie only as "added pleasure" with the slightest sense of "responsibility" (98). Rich and flamboyant as he is, Hurstwood, in a moral sense, is even lower than Drouet, who has seduced Carrie, too, but in a less deceitful way.

From above, we see that the triangular relationship between Carrie and his two lovers or seducers is actually established upon the basis of deception. On Drouet's part, he assures that Carrie and he will "get married" as soon as he is finished with some "real estate deal" (100). Carrie, however, owing to her devaluation of the drummer and her clandestine rendezvous with Hurstwood, replies to Drouet "ruefully" by saying "I don't believe you ever intend to marry me, Charlie" (100). As far as this is concerned, Carrie is quite right to discredit the drummer's assurance, because he is not really a man very sincere about marriage. Rather, he prefers enjoying his life in a careless way:

> He went merrily on, assured that he was alluring all, that affection followed tenderly in his wake, that things would endure unchangingly for his pleasure. When he missed some old face, or found some door finally shut to him, it did not grieve him deeply. He was too young, too successful. He would remain thus young in spirit until he was dead. (92)

In other words, Dreiser seems to suggest that even if Carrie runs away with Hurstwood or someone else, it won't really hurt the drummer's feeling. He doesn't care very much about Carrie, but he pretends to, lying to her with some excuse of marital promise. In this sense, Carrie is nothing but Drouet's sex prey, used for sensual pleasures under the false name of "Mrs. Drouet." When discussing with

Carrie about his recommendation for her to take the role of Laura in the play *Under the Gaslight*, Drouet even breathes a "sigh of relief," because he actually has been "afraid" that he is "about to precipitate another conversation upon the marriage question" (119). However, after watching Carrie's remarkable performance in the play, Drouet exclaims to himself that he will "marry her," because she is "worth it" (139). The sudden surge of Drouet's determination is derived from his vanity rather than love. The next morning after the play, Drouet reassures Carrie that they will "get married" after he straightens out some "little deal" this month (144). Though he seems to have changed his mind to marry Carrie more willingly, he receives but doubtful response from her again. Drouet, thus, feels that Carrie is no more "helpless and pleading" and that the "shadow of something" seems to be "coming" (144). As a matter of fact, Drouet, like Carrie, fails to know that he doesn't really have much option for something or someone he desires and that "affection" doesn't always follow "tenderly in his wake."

As to Hurstwood, he deceives himself more than he does others in his love affair of "added pleasure" with Carrie. He is convinced that he will be "happy with" Carrie, that he will not "complicate his life," and that his "home life" and his "position" as the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's are "secure" and "undisturbed" (98). However, this self-assurance only blinds him from seeing reality as it is. Mrs. Hurstwood, for example, is a "cold, self-centered woman," who waits and broods, studying the "details and adding to them" until she may summon all her power to fulfill "her desire to revenge" (83). Mrs. Hurstwood's later retaliation upon her husband fully proves Hurstwood's miscalculation and his bigoted self-assurance. Besides, he also fails to see that Carrie has no intention to continue her life with him in the same clandestine way as she does with Drouet. Carrie takes "his love upon a higher basis" (98), and she tells the manager that she won't even marry him if they continue to "live in Chicago" with Drouet in the same city (110). For the first time, Hurstwood is shocked to feel the immediate threat to his job and his home life, which he has once alleged to himself as "undisturbed." Dreiser writes:

> The suggestion of marriage struck Hurstwood forcibly. He saw clearly that this was her idea—he felt that it was not to be gotten over easily. Bigamy lightened the horizon of his shadowy thoughts for a moment. He wondered for the life of him how it would all come out. . . . (110)

Though Hurstwood is surprised, he is not awake. Instead, he conceives what "a thing" it is to have Carrie "love him, even if it be entangling!" (111) Owing to his passion for Carrie, Hurstwood has dreamed "a new dream of pleasure," which actually contradicts

with his present condition (109). Self-assurance and passion deceive Hurstwood and keep dragging him a further step toward his downfall, which he may possibly avoid if he cuts further connection with Carrie at once. Unfortunately, Hurstwood, like Drouet, is also inspired by Carrie's marvelous performance in *Under the Gaslight*. His vanity soars even higher than that of Drouet. He convinces himself that Carrie is "his" woman (135), who is worth fighting for at whatever costs, or even selling "his soul" to be with her alone (141).

On Carrie's part, she feels shame at the "exposure" of her secret dealings with Hurstwood (163). She gets angry with Drouet, because he has not told her the truth about Hurstwood. On the drummer's part, he listens to Carrie "in astonishment" (163), because he has never seen her behave as such when anger and shame overwhelm her. As seen earlier, Carrie, on account of the coming winter, rationalizes for her needs easily. Likewise, she won't admit to herself that she is actually drawn to Hurstwood by his rich clothes rather than love. She keeps "imagining herself in love" when she is not (161). Concerning this, Dreiser gives us his comments as follows:

> Women frequently do this. It follows from the fact that in each exists a bias toward affection, a craving for the pleasure of being loved. The longing to be shielded, bettered, sympathized with, is one of the attributes of the sex. This, coupled with sentiment and a natural tendency to emotion, often makes refusing difficult. It persuades them that they are in love. (161)

In other words, Carrie's love, like her determination as seen above, is actually her material desire and vanity in disguise. Vanity and desire are the forces that take the lead in Carrie's responses to the outer world. On the one hand, Carrie deceives Drouet for her secret love affairs with Hurstwood; on the other hand, she, like Hurstwood, deceives herself, too. Hurstwood deceives himself by his self-assurance and is inspired by his rekindled desire for the rejuvenation of love which Carrie seems to promise him. Similarly, when "believing herself deeply in love" (151), Carrie is actually dragged again forcefully by her desire for "keener pleasures in life" and vanity of fine "materials things" which Hurstwood seems to guarantee her. As pointed out earlier, Carrie is a girl who only looks outside rather than inside. Instead of reflecting upon how she has incurred for herself "Hurstwood's perfidy" (164), she blames Drouet for not giving her a warning in the first place, and then even accuses him as a "conceited coward" (164), who virtually helps subvert her plan of a "happy" life, which now has to be given up woefully (151).

Remarkably, Carrie displays her toughness when things have taken a violent

turn against her. She admits that Drouet, in their argument about Hurstwood's perfidy, has never been very "harsh" on her (168). If she owns up that the drummer is "right," they can easily "patch up a peace and shut out Hurstwood forever" (168). In response to Drouet's question about "where" he stands in their argument, Carrie, however, answers him in a hurtful but forceful way by saying: "Whatever has happened is your own fault" (169). This further gores the drummer and so ends their relationship. For Carrie's immediate destitution, Dreiser describes her as an "anchorless, storm-beaten little craft," which can do "absolutely nothing but drift" (167). But, the fact is that Carrie, on account of her discouraging affairs with Drouet and Hurstwood, appears to be more positive and determined for what she is going to do with her "problem of self-sustenance" (179). Firstly, she proposes to depend on herself and tries to "earn her living honestly" by looking for some opportunities in the Chicago Opera House (179). Carrie's eager attempt to find a job also indicates her hope to begin a new life by cutting off her relationship with either Drouet or Hurstwood. Secondly, she shows no signs of retreat. That is, though she has only some dollars left in her purse, she will by no means go back to her sister for help or return to "her home at Columbia City," neither of which is her "direction" (181). As seen earlier, Carrie's expectation of life never dwindles. At hard times, she remains hopeful that "something might interfere" to preserve for her "the comfortable state" which she has occupied (179). Later when she finds herself virtually being abducted, or "tricked," by Hurstwood into the long journey to New York (203), she, instead of feeling defeated, looks forward to a new life hopefully:

> It was an interesting world to her. Her life had just begun. She did not feel herself defeated at all. Neither was she blasted in hope. The great city held much. Possibly she would come out of bondage into freedom—who knows? Perhaps she would be happy. These thoughts raised her above the level of erring. She was saved in that she was hopeful. (204)

Moreover, Carrie's living experience in New York follows, in some aspects, almost the same pattern as that of hers in Chicago. Being abducted by Hurstwood, Carrie first acknowledges that she doesn't really have much alternative for what she is going to do. She evaluates her situation and calculates practically: "If she did not turn to him—accept of his love—where else might she go?" (205) This echoes with Carrie's earlier expediency to yield up to Drouet's help when she is out of job and almost penniless in Chicago. Secondly, though Hurstwood assures her that he will "go into business again" as soon as they get to New York, there is no more "great passion in her." Instead, she feels "rather sorry for him," a "sorrow born of what" has only

"recently been a great admiration" (211). As she assumes that she is really not enamored of Drouet, so does Carrie now declare to herself that she has never felt true "love" for Hurstwood (211). Most of all, when Hurstwood, on account of his "modified state" (233), fails to afford Carrie a pleasant life in comparison with that of Mrs. Vance, Carrie's melancholy of dissatisfaction, like that at Ogden Place, overwhelms her in an even stronger way:

> She became restless and dissatisfied not exactly, as she thought, with Hurstwood, but with life. What was it? A very dull round indeed. What did she have? Nothing but this narrow, little flat. The Vances could travel, they could do the things worth doing, and here she was. For what was she made, anyhow? More thought followed, and then tears—tears seemed justified, and the only relief in the world. (242)

Carrie is indeed "vain" and easily drawn to men of wealth or rich clothes. In relation to "Carrie's depiction," Grebstein asserts that a "heroine of curious flatness" is the "greatest weakness" of the novel (550). Philip L. Gerber's comment on Carrie is even harsher. He explains that men are only Carrie's "stepping stones" when she is trying to climb up some higher social status (65). Despite these unfavorable comments, Carrie, at least, never deceives Drouet or Hurstwood with her pretty face in an active sense. On the contrary, she is quite an impressive character who keeps pursuing a "happy" life willfully and hopefully. She remains the same dream seeker, who is obstinate and determined to follow her heart's desires as she ever is and as she ever will be.

In fact, Carrie, as Mrs. Wheeler, acts more like a traditional woman in New York. As a wife, Carrie feels that she is "bound to" Hurstwood and that her "lot" is cast with her husband "whatever it might be" (243). She continues to fulfill "her household duties" even after Hurstwood's saloon business on the Warren Street has dissolved for a period of time (256). Fairly speaking, Carrie owes nothing to Hurstwood. Rather, it is Hurstwood who has deceived her, abducted her, but failed to offer her a decent and pleasant life as he has promised. Regarding this, Carrie doesn't even know that "Mrs. Wheeler" is, like "Mrs. Drouet," but a false name until Hurstwood, in a quarrel with her about Mrs. Vance's visit, owns it up that he "didn't marry" her legally in Montreal (266). Significantly, this revelation dissolves Carrie of all lawful or moral obligations to the ex-manager. For Hurstwood's dishonesty, Carrie sobs and asks fiercely: "What did you lie to me for, then?" and "What did you force me to run away with you for?" (267). Frustrated and despondent as he is, Hurstwood knows that his tongue's slip may ruin the last bit of affection left between him and Carrie. When Carrie tells him that she has "considered the stage as a door through

which" she can possibly find a job (270), the ex-manager disapproves and is alert at once that she may "get on the stage in some cheap way and forsake him" eventually (271).

Seeing Hurstwood's failure, Carrie conceives that she must succeed in earning a decent life for herself. As seen earlier in her Chicago experience, Carrie has proposed to "earn her living honestly" as soon as Drouet leaves her alone at Ogden Place. Likewise, despite Hurstwood's disapproval and disbelief in her ability, Carrie has "secretly resolved to try" her luck (272). To put it in Karl F. Zender's words, Carrie begins to be "newly aware of her inner worth" (67). As far as this is concerned, Carrie begins to change remarkably from an ordinary shop girl of vanity and desire, who only looks outside for what she doesn't have, to a grown-up woman who tries to look for what she has inside herself. Evaluating her conditions practically, Carrie draws for herself a more concrete "picture" of the kind of happy life she wants:

> It did not matter whether she was the star or not. If she were only once in, getting a decent salary, wearing the kind of clothes she liked, having the money to do with, going here and there as she pleased, how delightful it would all be. Her mind ran over this picture all the day long. Hurstwood's dreary state made its beauty become more and more vivid. (272)

Indeed, bruised by her experiences as Mrs. Drouet and Mrs. Wheeler, Carrie recognizes that she has actually no one to count on but herself. Carrie's success in securing a job at the Casino convinces her more that she is right about her self-expectation to be independent economically. She even makes it further to be critical of Hurstwood that the ex-manager "ought to" be able to find a job if he really wants to, because it proves not "very hard" for her (279). That is, Carrie believes that Hurstwood needs to rely on himself as does she on herself. Though the writer points out that Carrie forgets to consider "the handicap of age" as far as Hurstwood is concerned (279), Carrie, as mentioned, bears Hurstwood no obligation at all in a practical sense. Thus, when Carrie begins to catch the audience and becomes successful with her role as a leading chorus girl in the Casino, she feels that she must "be free" and that Hurstwood must "act for himself" for a living (316).

Also worth mentioning is that Carrie grows to be introspective on account of her sympathetic feelings with Hurstwood. Before moving out of the flat to end her cohabitation with Hurstwood, Carrie doesn't seem to care any more about what he has done to her and how he has deceived her. Dreiser portrays the pathos which Carrie feels for Hurstwood as follows:

> She looked at him the same evening she had made up her mind to go, and now he seemed not so shiftless and worthless, but run down and beaten upon by chance. His eyes were not keen, his face marked, his hands flabby. She thought his hair had a touch of grey. All unconscious of his doom, he rocked and read his paper, while she glanced at him. (318)

Carrie also thinks of the days how Hurstwood has “done well in Chicago,” his “fine appearance,” and the days he has “met her in the park” (318). For Hurstwood, Carrie now wonders, has it been “all his fault?” (318). Unlike her self-interested inclination, Carrie begins to consider the issue on Hurstwood’s behalf. Although she does not admit to herself that she is probably the partial cause for Hurstwood’s downfall and misery, she, for the first time, appears to hold that it is probably not “all his fault” to have an economic or even miserable life in New York (318). As to Drouet, Carrie feels “ashamed of her conduct” and regrets that she has “served him badly” (318). In other words, Carrie acknowledges that she is wrong to have had stealthy rendezvous with Hurstwood when Drouet is good to him. However, she is very sure that she does care about the drummer “with sympathy in her heart” when he is reported ill by Hurstwood (319). Carrie feels sorry about her parting from Drouet, because she does not want to make anyone who has “been good to her feel badly” (319). It is probably because of this same mood that Carrie wants to make Hurstwood feel some warmth by preparing, before departure, a good meal for him, who, seeing her kindness, thinks that “Carrie’s good-natured anyhow” (319). Carrie’s tenderness, sympathy, and sense of apology to her false husbands, all seem to make it more explicit that she has indeed experienced some degree of character growth. Carrie is no more the green and ignorant shop girl, who only desires rich clothes and admires the vanity side of city life. She has learned to look inside herself and considers things from others’ angles as well as from hers.

As far as Carrie’s growth is concerned, Ames is the third person, who attracts her attention but in quite a different way. While enjoying the kind of “high life” with the Vances (235), Carrie observes the young man, who appears to be “wiser than Hurstwood, saner and brighter than Drouet” (237). Especially, Ames’s viewpoints contradict what she admires in the money world of materials, and he tells her that he doesn’t “care to be rich” and that “a man doesn’t need this sort of thing to be happy” (237). According to Rosenbaum, Ames has “little influence” on Carrie because she does not “truly comprehend” what Ames says (17). However, the fact is that Carrie, despite limited understanding, has cherished the “ideal brought into her life by Ames” ever since she first met the young man (246). Later, with her gradual success on the stage, Carrie hears Ames’s words speaking “distinctly” to her again: “It’s fine to be a

good actress" (293). In a sense, what Ames has said sounds like a kind of encouragement for Carrie, for what she has done so far as a successful chorus girl in the Casino. Getting richer with her bigger fame as an actress, Carrie is surer of herself. She is convinced that her success has given her "the momentary feeling" that she is now "blessed with much of which" Ames may "approve" (354). This further testifies to the fact that Carrie cares about not only every word Ames has said to her but also every word he is going to say to her when they meet again. To Ames, he doesn't think that Carrie's wealth or "newspaper fame" has much significance. Rather, he suggests Carrie that she should "go into comedy-drama," because she has the "sympathetic" nature to "do well" in it (354), and because it can make her "powers endure" for its seriousness (356).

With Ames's suggestion, Dreiser seems to intend for Carrie some higher goal of life, which is durable and more meaningful for her to attain to, to go beyond the level of showy but trivial performances, which have, so far, brought for her wealth and great fame.[3] For Carrie, Ames's suggestion does appeal very much to her, because it corresponds to what she has experienced in the theater. Firstly, Carrie, with her success, grows to know that "the world of wealth and distinction" remains "quite as far" away from her "as ever" and that there is "no warm, sympathetic friendship back of the easy merriment" with which many approach her (324). Secondly, Carrie knows that her "name is worth something" but not everything (329), because she remains as "lonely" as she ever is (335). Above all, Carrie seems to achieve some apprehension of impermanence that nothing will last forever. In order to preserve her "present state," Carrie tries to make and save "a great deal more" money (335). But, this won't last long, because sooner or later she will leave her money, or, her money will leave her. Thus, what Ames has motivated in Carrie is "a new desire" to surpass her present achievement (356), a desire which is idealistic, rather than materialistic and monetary. Carrie, after thinking about Ames's suggestion for days, remarks to Lola "eventually" by saying, "I don't believe I'll stay in comedy so very much longer" (357).

Whether true or false, this is, at least, a revelation of Carrie's intention to try something higher or more endurable for her career. As Pizer points out in *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, there is an ascending structure in *Sister Carrie* when Carrie encounters Drouet, Hurstwood, and then Ames: "They are in hierarchical relationship to the quality of life which they represent and to Carrie's progress upward in

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[3] Critical opinions on the role of Ames are controversial. David T. Humphries, for example, holds that Ames is "a failed spokesman because the very idea of a spokesman implies a thinly developed character, or he is a failed spokesman because his apparently naive anti-capitalist message contradicts the desire which he incites in Carrie" (37). Nina Markov, however, points out that Ames plays "a pivotal role" in the novel. He serves as the novel's "vehicle for 'culture.'" His "taste and apparent disdain for money" mark his "superiority" to Drouet, the "dressy salesman," and Hurstwood, the once "distinguished saloon manager" (4)

understanding and values" (59). Regarding this, Dreiser seems to hint in the ending scene that Carrie may "never feel" the happiness she desires if she only sits and dreams in her rocking chair by the window (369). The remarkable point is that Carrie, though bruised by her experiences as Mrs. Drouet and Mrs. Wheeler, grows to be introspective on account of her sympathetic feelings with Hurstwood. Neither does she want Drouet to have a negative impression of her, for her serving him badly and for her sudden departure. According to Zender, many commentators have observed Carrie's "success" ultimately as an "equivocal" term in *Sister Carrie* (72). However, in my opinion, Carrie tends to see more clearly that "earthly success" does not mean "happiness" (369). In this sense, it is Carrie's growth and introspectiveness that help make what Ames has unveiled for her a goal of possible sublimation from temporary fame, wealth, and vanity to some idealistic and lasting significance as a theater star. Indeed, only when Carrie curtails her desire for materials and is disillusioned from the vanity brought about by her success, can she further recognize that happiness comes from nowhere but inside herself, from her willingness to take it as her responsibility to achieve something serious, something casting light on the true splendor of human sympathy. As Carrie dreams and keeps rocking in her chair by the window, so does she have a long way to go, not to anywhere outside the window but to her inside, to the very bottom of her heart, where she can possibly find the answer to her heart's contentment and peacefulness.

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