

The Two Faces of Sister Carrie: the Characterization of Dreiser's First Heroine

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In 1903, Theodore Dreiser said "To express what we see honestly and without subterfuge"¹ must be the guiding principle of the true artist. Though he followed this principle faithfully throughout most of his career, it is hard not to see a certain amount of subterfuge present in the characterization of the heroine in his first novel, *Sister Carrie*. It appears as if there were two separate persons, both named Carrie Meeber, who, though inhabiting the same body, nevertheless possess entirely different personalities. Much evidence suggests Carrie is a sympathetic character, a naive but earnest young girl who attempts initially to survive, then broaden her horizons and ultimately realize her artistic potential. But there is also evidence pointing to a second Carrie, a hard, cunning, and ambitious egotist whose every movement is determined with self-interest in mind. Indeed, evidence for both Carries can be found throughout the novel; it is not simply a matter of a "good" girl turning into a "bad" one in the course of time. That we are being given two conflicting sources of information can be seen even in Dreiser's initial description of his heroine, where we learn that "Self-interest with her was high, but not strong. It was, nevertheless her guiding characteristic."² This passage actually contains two contradictory pieces of information. On the one hand we are told "Self-interest with her was . . . not strong," implying Carrie is not dominated by self-interest and is therefore basically unselfish. But we are also simultaneously informed that the degree of her self-interest "was high," if not "her guiding char-

acteristic," which would normally apply to a person in whom self-interest *was* strong, in that it is her most basic attribute.

The above example is far from unique. Indeed, the novel is replete with similarly conflicting information which has caused much confusion over the years, as evident in any sampling of Dreiser scholarship. To an early reviewer Carrie was "a sensitive, rather pure-minded girl . . . possessed of the rudiments of the artistic temperament,"³ an appraisal with which many others have concurred. Charles C. Walcutt considers Carrie "an appealing character," and her rise in fortune "welcome".⁴ Donald Pizer believes Carrie "has for Dreiser — and for us, I believe — meaning and significance and stature because of her capacity to rock and dream, to question life and pursue it."⁵ Other evaluations have been less charitable. Kenneth Lynn regards her as "the coldest of all" the novel's characters.⁶ Philip Gerber sees her as "unencumbered by moral values," motivated by an "overweening drive for self-interest . . ." ⁷ In marked contrast to Pizer, Gerber feels "Dreiser does not greatly admire his 'little pilgrim'" and feels not "a spark of . . . tenderness"⁸ for her. Clearly, something unusual is taking place within the novel for critics to reach such diametrically-opposed positions.⁹ Interestingly enough, both sides can be shown to be in a sense "correct." The favorable impression of Carrie many have received comes to us from certain rhetorical devices employed by Dreiser to protect his heroine from possible criticism. At various key points in the book specific images are used, incidental comments are made and seemingly-irrelevant philosophical digressions appear which provide us with evidence that Carrie is a woman of substance whose development is real and meaningful. The other, unfavorable impression of Carrie is derived primarily from her actual behavior which, by implication, speaks for itself.

Sister Carrie revolves around the heroine's unconventional decisions to leave one environment for another. These various moves — from the Hansons to Drouet, from Drouet to Hurstwood, and finally from Hurstwood to the Waldorf — the author spends much time and effort preparing us to accept sympathetically. The device most frequently relied on (especial-

ly in the early stages) is to describe Carrie in softened, sentimental language. We are told incessantly that she is a "bright," "timid," "waif" (p. 5), a "half-equipped little knight" (p. 6), "a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless, sea" (p. 13), a "sweet little being" (p. 47) of "sympathetic" nature, terminology which implies she is weak, pathetic, defenseless, and sensitive. In fact, Carrie is none of these things. Her very move to the city would suggest she is far from timid; though not affluent, she is not literally a waif; whenever forced to think or reason, she does not appear to be very bright; at no point in the novel is she ever literally alone; and, if her treatment of her lovers is any indication, she is by no means very sensitive or sympathetic.¹⁰ Yet Dreiser hopes the sheer force of his imagery will sway us in Carrie's direction.

In the opening chapters much is also made of Carrie's miserable employment prospects and scanty finances, by way of providing another excuse for her when she later moves in with Drouet. We are constantly reminded of how physically cold Carrie is in her thin summer coat, so inadequate as protection from a Chicago winter: "There came a day when the first premonitory blast of winter swept over the city . . . Carrie now felt the problem of winter clothes. What was she to do? She had no winter jacket, no hat, no shoes" (p. 51). After making her move, Carrie questions the rightness of what she has done; but "There was always an answer, always the December days threatened. She was alone; she was desirous; she was fearful of the whistling wind. The voice of want made answer for her" (p. 83).

In spite of all this, as Ellen Moers has observed, even in the opening section "Carrie, although momentarily unfortunante, 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."¹¹ As such, despite what Dreiser would like us to believe, we cannot help but conclude that what really attracts Carrie to Drouet is her insatiable "craving for pleasure" (p. 31) more than anything else. Certainly it is not a question of her "growth," as Moers goes on to argue. For there is nothing to suggest that Drouet represents a sphere of life which we could consider qualitatively superior to that offered by Minnie and Sven Han-

son. Stripped of his flashiness, Drouet is a stupid, bumptious ass of a man who offers Carrie nothing other than good meals and a life of comparative ease. Understandable though Carrie's attraction to him may be, it seems far-fetched to term this a sign of "growth" on her part in any meaningful sense of the word.

At the same time, since the life of a factory girl is undeniably unpleasant, one would be inclined to sympathize and let it go at that were it not for the way Carrie makes her move. For when Carrie leaves Minnie, she offers her no real explanation of her behavior, at no point makes the slightest effort to communicate and let her know all is well, and provides her with considerable worry. Though our attention is not drawn to this side of Carrie, it is no less important an aspect of her nature merely because of Dreiser's silence.

Another device used by Dreiser is to present Carrie as a passive individual who only submits to Drouet's advances reluctantly. Dreiser hopes we will conclude that, if Carrie is genuinely forced into her affairs by her lovers, she need only shoulder a minimal amount of moral responsibility. Unfortunately, the argument is rather weak, for Carrie's "reluctance" can without difficulty also be seen as an example of her cunning ability to cloak her inner feelings. Though Carrie's behavior may seem to be the result of pressure put upon her, close analysis reveals she rarely if ever does anything she has not already decided to do on her own. More often than not, she feigns opposition to a lover's suggestion, even though in secret agreement with it. This forces the lover in turn to "dominate" the situation and go through the motions of convincing her; only after this will she "capitulate." The burden of responsibility for the decision conveniently appears to have fallen on her lover, and Carrie has also in the process absolved herself to her own satisfaction of any personal wrongdoing for a course of action that seems to have been forced upon her. The best early example of this occurs when Drouet suggests she move in with him. Carrie refuses, making statements we know she does not believe. Drouet asks her "What can you do back at Columbia City?" (p. 63) and actually echoes thoughts Carrie had entertained on her own — "Columbia City, what was there for her?" (p. 60) — but despite this, she remains

silent, saying only "I don't want to leave them [the Hansons] so'" (p. 65), a statement of concern for Minnie and Sven that is demonstrably false, as seen in her subsequent indifference to them. What she really does is cunningly allow Drouet to do her rationalizing for her.

Now, such dissembling is common enough in real life, and it is to Dreiser's credit that the above scenes are presented to us so realistically. But they cannot be taken as evidence of true moral concern on Carrie's part, simply because she so obviously *is* dissembling. Indeed, they could be the stuff of a very telling character-portrait, were Dreiser content to let them speak for themselves. But there is not the slightest hint of irony in the passages. On the contrary, Dreiser appears to take Carrie's side, informing us in the midst of her later argument with Drouet over her infidelity — during which he quite accurately observes that she has been using him — that after all, Carrie is but "an anchorless, storm-beaten little craft which could do absolutely nothing but drift" (p. 191). Likening Carrie to a small boat at the mercy of the sea and adding that she is "in a most helpless plight" (p. 192) are again nothing more than misleading authorial interpolations designed to reinforce our belief in her passivity and divert our attention from the extent to which she is responsible for the situation confronting her.

In preparing us for Carrie's desertion of Drouet for Hurstwood, Dreiser also begins to make more of Carrie's sensitive soul, which he now tells us is trapped in a stifling environment. Soon after her relationship with Drouet begins, we learn for the first time that Carrie, "delicately moulded in sentiment" (p. 91), "was affected by music," the implication being that she is a type of individual the now oafish (but once "radiant") Drouet could never satisfy because he "had not the poetry in him" (p. 91). We are also told that

On her spiritual side, also, she was rich in feeling, as such a nature might be. Sorrow in her was aroused by many a spectacle — an uncritical upwelling of grief for the weak and the helpless. She was constantly pained by the sight of the white-faced, ragged men who slopped desperately by her in a sort of wretched mental stupor.

(p. 124)

Always compassionate, "Her sympathies were ever with that under-world of toil from which she had so recently sprung, and which she best understood" (p. 125).

When employed, however, Carrie showed no such sympathy with her fellow workers, and rather considered herself their superior, if anything: "She was not used to this type, and felt that there was something hard and low about it all" (p. 38); "The machine girls impressed her even less favorably. They seemed satisfied with their lot, and were in a sense 'common'" (p. 49). On another occasion, when meeting a beggar on the street, Drouet was genuinely moved by the sight, but "Carrie quickly forgot" (p. 119). If we are to believe she has a genuine capacity for sympathy, we have every right to expect Dreiser's statements to this effect will be accompanied by some demonstrable proof through corresponding action on her part. But when he describes scenes such as the above, he seems to have in mind a different personality entirely. The Carrie whom the beggar accosts never gives a dime to a starving stranger; for that matter, there is nothing anywhere in the book pointing to a generous or sympathetic Carrie, other than Dreiser's baseless claims that she is such.

As the second section proceeds to its climax, it presents Dreiser with new problems. For one, though Carrie has been tricked onto the train by Hurstwood — a fact both Dreiser and Carrie make much of — we must not forget her prior commitment to Hurstwood and her effective rejection of Drouet both took place long before she was fooled into leaving for Canada and New York. Carrie's fear of destitution, which proceeds from her belief that Drouet will not return following their argument, also occurs after her shift in allegiance to Hurstwood has taken place. Accordingly, it is difficult to see Carrie's move to Hurstwood as purely the result of circumstance. Perhaps for this reason, Dreiser's defense of Carrie becomes more insistent and shrill in this section, and much less convincing. He tries to justify her desertion of Drouet by telling us she regarded the move to Hurstwood as honorable; elsewhere he comments that "Hurstwood seemed a drag in the direction of honour" simply because his affection for her seemed such a "fine thing" (p. 114).

Even more weakly, Dreiser suggests she is blameless because she does not physically resemble a cunning, manipulative woman: "In the mild light of Carrie's eye was nothing of the calculation of the mistress. In the diffident manner was nothing of the art of the courtesan" (p. 106). But the reader has no cause to see Hurstwood as honorable — on the contrary, he would appear to be anything but — and can only conclude that Carrie is extremely stupid in being taken in by him, or, more likely, is rationalizing once again.

Granted, we are told she had "misgivings — and they were as plentiful as the moments of the day" (p. 139). But, although much is made by Dreiser of these "misgivings," close inspection reveals that when they do occur, they center almost exclusively around what advantages she can gain. "She remembered a few things Drouet had done, and now that it came to walking away from him without a word, she felt as if she were doing wrong." So far, so good. But then her "average little conscience" tells her to "'Stick to what you have'" (p. 184), not for any moral reason or out of any sense of obligation to Drouet, but merely because to remain with him may be *strategically* the more expedient course of action; her "misgivings" stem only from a realization of the practical risks she may be taking. A typical example of Carrie's "conscience" at work can be seen when she is on the train with Hurstwood. Upon learning that she has been tricked, her righteous indignation pales as soon as she sees there is a possibility of personal gain in the form of an expense-paid trip in store for her. It is again difficult not to conclude that terms such as right and wrong have meaning for Carrie only as they pertain to self-interest and self-preservation, and that despite her mild eye and diffident demeanor she is virtually as calculating as the "mistresses" and "courtesans" whom Dreiser alluded to by way of contrast.

In the third section, Dreiser's problems in defending Carrie grow even greater, for Carrie's desertion of Hurstwood is definitely not forced upon her by economic factors; she is making reasonably good money by the standards of the time. In addition, her departure is plainly inconsistent with Dreiser's previous reminders of her passivity, since the decision to desert him is not forced upon her by circumstance and is one she makes

on her own.¹² In short, her final move appears to be motivated by her ambitious nature and seems to be the action of a rather cold and unfeeling person as well. Dreiser attempts to circumvent this problem in two ways: first, by establishing to his own satisfaction that Carrie is perfectly happy with Hurstwood until his lassitude and apathy become so revolting she can bear him no longer, and secondly, by stating that economic factors again force her to seek employment in a field where she meets people who recognize her innate talent and vault her, willy-nilly, into fame and fortune.

Accordingly, we are told she is initially perfectly contented with her lot; she "accepted the things which fortune provided with the most genial good nature" (p. 252). She thinks "nothing upon her lack of entertainment such as she had enjoyed in Chicago" (p. 254) for, "Being of a passive and receptive rather than an active and aggressive nature, Carrie accepted the situation. Her state seemed satisfactory enough" (p. 253). The lure of fame and fortune do not really cause Carrie to leave Hurstwood, so Dreiser argues, but rather his untidy clothes and general apathy which "drove Carrie to seek relief in other places" (p. 328).

Yet almost immediately after her arrival in New York Carrie had begun to regard Hurstwood in a critically negative light:

For all her acquiescence, there was something about the way Hurstwood spoke which reminded Carrie of Drouet and his little deal which he was always about to put through . . . Other things followed from time to time, little things of the same sort, which in their cumulative effect were eventually equal to a full revelation. (p. 250)

Far from being satisfied, even initially, "She noticed, also, that he did not suggest many amusements" (p. 250); within a few pages of this, we learn that Mrs. Vance's affluence "served . . . to augment Carrie's dissatisfaction with her state" (p. 259). When Hurstwood is taken ill, Carrie only sees him as "a helpless creature in sickness, not very handsome in a dull-coloured bath gown and his hair uncombed" (p. 294). Being told "She wanted to be good-natured and sympathetic" or that Hurstwood's apathy was "inexplicable" to her does little to alter our aware-

ness of her actual coldness and lack of sympathy for him. Nor can her observation, when she first gains employment (" 'If I can he surely ought to. It wasn't very hard for me' " (p. 318), statements which Dreiser attributes to her "enthusiasm") be seen as anything but insensitive. To be told, as an excuse, that she never really loved him, but was "imagining herself in love" (p. 185) only reinforces the reader's awareness of her hypocrisy. Earlier, it will be remembered, she confessed her love for him "frankly and tenderly" (p. 172).

It is essential for Dreiser to convince us that Carrie possesses artistic talent. Indeed, as the novel proceeds it becomes evident he means to use this as the ultimate device whereby the unconventional aspects of Carrie's behavior can be excused. Early in the novel there appears a brief comment on the nature of mortality that, although seemingly irrelevant at the time, turns out to have great bearing on the final evaluation of his heroine. In Chapter 10 we are given certain examples of morality "in action" which, upon examination, appear out of place in a supposed discussion of ethics:

Answer, first, why the heart thrills; explain wherefore some plaintive note goes wandering about the world, undying; make clear the rose's subtle alchemy evolving its ruddy lamp in light and rain. In the essence of these facts lie the first principles of morals. (p. 81)

But the thrill of the heart, the undying nature of a plaintive note and the rose's alchemy are all instances not of *moral*, but of *aesthetic* sensitivity. At first glance, one is inclined simply to question the examples and suspect Dreiser has in sheer sloppiness confused the two. But closer inspection reveals the confusion is deliberate. By first equating moral with aesthetic sensitivity and then reminding us of Carrie's significant aesthetic gifts whenever she does something we might regard as callous or immoral, Dreiser hopes we will be convinced that her artistic genius somehow makes her immune to moral criticism, since the two attributes have been shown to be fundamentally one and the same. As she is artistically sensitive, so the argument runs, she must be morally sensitive as well, given the essential similarity of the two character traits.

Of course, Dreiser's implied premise — that moral and aesthetic sensitivity are identical — is in itself an arbitrary one. Even if we were to grant the validity of the premise for the sake of argument, there is little to suggest Carrie is aesthetically sophisticated or very talented. Her initial experience on the stage was not convincing, despite Dreiser's strident claim that "Carrie was possessed of that sympathetic, impressionable nature which . . . has been the glory of the drama" (p. 134). The only evidence we have to indicate her first performance was at all remarkable comes from Hurstwood and Drouet, whose critical skills we have little cause to respect. As she performs, "Hurstwood realized that he was seeing something extraordinarily good" (p. 155), but no weight can be given to his reaction, given what we know of him and his foolish infatuation with her. That Drouet, Hurstwood and the lodge brothers are moved to mawkish displays of emotion over the spectacle of Carrie's idiotic (and ironic!) utterances about a woman's love being "the treasure without money and without price" (p. 160) is surely not enough to convince us she is anything but mediocre at best.

As a result, Hurstwood's suspicions — that Carrie "would get on the stage in some cheap way and forsake him" (p. 309) — might well be our own. Despite this, Dreiser attempts to reassure us that this assessment of her is incorrect because Hurstwood "did not understand the nature of emotional greatness" (p. 309). Accordingly, he tries to make her rise appear meaningful, and thus convince us of her "emotional greatness," by telling us "people recognized ability" (p. 335) and that Carrie was "strong in capability" (p. 358). But nowhere in the final section is there convincing proof of any such capability, for all her good fortune is so obviously the result of chance. Her interpolation of the line "I am yours truly" (p. 357), while it reveals spunk, does not suggest we are witnessing the emergence of a new Bernhardt. Her famous frown — so appealing to the portly gentlemen in the front row — is purest accident; she happens to be in a bad mood, and is not acting, or consciously improvising.

These attempts to assure us that the emotionally-great Carrie has been impelled to a higher sphere seem somewhat weakened by the "delight" she feels when entering a sumptuous

dressing room; her thrill to the "sweetness" of an audience's applause; or the petty satisfaction she derives when realizing "she was as good as" or "perhaps better" than the once-envied Mrs. Vance. Most damning, of course, is Dreiser's own presentation of now-affluent Carrie — presumably no longer a materialist — who "could think of nothing in particular to do" (p. 380) with her money, despite the fact that Hurstwood, whom she has recently seen, is starving to death. "Growth" or "emotional greatness" Dreiser also presents in the form of Carrie expressing dissatisfaction with her new male companions, because nothing they say "lifted her above the common run of clothes and success" (p. 367), or sentimentalizing over the plight of working girls. But when she does encounter Hurstwood, now a beggar on the street, "She felt [only] the strain of publicity" (p. 399). As a further testimony of her sympathetic nature, we are told in all seriousness of her "excessive pity" for him: "For days, this apparition was a drag on her soul before it began to wear partially away" (p. 399). That the "wearing-away" Dreiser speaks of was more than "partial" is seen on the ensuing page, where we are told "Hurstwood was forgotten" (p. 400). Surely if Carrie does grow dissatisfied, upon realizing that "the door to life's perfect enjoyment was not open" (p. 381), it is simply because no one as egocentric and misguided as she is could ever form lasting relationships with others or embrace new values to make life truly meaningful. Yet Dreiser demands we take his word that such dissatisfaction is a legitimate sign of growth and greatness.

As if aware the case for Carrie's growth is weak, Dreiser tries to give it some strength through the unconvincing but supposedly aptly-named Ames, who echoes Dreiser's own favorable assessment of her. We first encounter Ames dining with Carrie at an expensive restaurant. Between bites, he suggests "it's a shame for people to spend so much money this way" (p. 269), an observation Carrie considers particularly profound. It is on the basis of this, plus Ames' passing reference to the size of a woman's brooch, his incidental comment on the poor literary quality of *Dora Thorne*, a remark he makes that he " 'shouldn't care to be rich' " and a belief expressed in the value of the theatre,

that Carrie considers Ames to be “far ahead of her . . . , wiser than Hurstwood, saner and brighter than Drouet” (p. 271). It is not surprising to see vapid Carrie impressed by the “good looking” (p. 265) and “well dressed” (p. 266) Ames; or, that she should make of him an “ideal” and that “the ideal brought into her life by Ames” (p. 281) should remain. But Dreiser hopes the reader will be moved to take Ames as seriously as Carrie does, regard him as a true ideal, and see Carrie’s adulation of him as compelling evidence of her spiritual growth. When Carrie encounters Ames again, late in the novel, he suggests she try something more serious than musical comedy, because “ ‘I should judge you were rather sympathetic in your nature’ ” (p. 401). Dreiser is hoping his readers, similarly impressed by Ames, will see his praise of Carrie as proof of his own claims regarding her superior nature. But Ames is himself so unconvincing and dubious a figure that the attempt fails miserably. Carrie, of course, is “thrilled to be taken so seriously” (p. 401) — precisely the way a vain and empty-headed woman would be expected to react to such transparent flattery —but Ames’ words cannot be taken very seriously by the reader, who must find it difficult not to see her latest male acquaintance as little more than a more sophisticated “masher,” of the same species as Drouet or Hurstwood.

Ames introduces Carrie to the world of literature and we soon observe her reading *Pere Goriot* while Hurstwood, that very evening, is being kicked about in the snow. Balzac’s tale of a man who sacrifices everything to his ungrateful daughters, being read amidst comfortable surroundings by a woman who, though never having made a sacrifice for anyone in her life, is greatly “moved” by the experience, would be an extremely ironic and telling conclusion to the novel, were it intentional. Yet there is no indication the irony is conscious. Dreiser seems to have chosen the book merely because it is a well-known classic, and presents Carrie’s ability to read it as another sign of her growth, telling us “she caught nearly the full sympathetic significance of it” (p. 411). As proof, Carrie is shown putting the book down and wistfully expressing pity “ ‘for all the people who haven’t anything tonight’ ” (p. 412). Hurstwood is again conspicuously absent from her supposedly deep and thoughtful musings on the derelicts of society.

In concluding the novel, Dreiser presents us with one last, edited vision of Carrie as he wishes us to see her, rocking and dreaming, in the same class as poets and artists, her entire existence having been devoted to the "pursuit of beauty," the search for "everything most lovely in life." If she has deviated from social convention in such pursuits, who are we to "cast the first stone" (pp. 417-18), Dreiser adding elsewhere that "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" (p. 417). The way she has treated others in the attainment of these worthy goals is of course not mentioned. But what one also notices, after all Dreiser has said on her behalf, is the absence of any hard evidence suggesting her defiance of convention — or for that matter, anything she has done — has indeed been motivated by a desire for anything we could term "goodness" or "beauty" or "that which is better," despite what Dreiser wishes us to think. If she has been driven, it has only been in the direction of the flashy, brittle world of fame and fortune. Yet many reputable critics have taken this final scene as sufficient proof of her growth. Pizer, for example, argues that "her very dissatisfaction and questioning of what she has gained [implies] . . . the greater reality of the mind and spirit that dreams and wonders."¹³ But surely the mere capacity to dream and wonder, isolated from the objects of these dreams, cannot be taken as sufficient evidence of substance and potential. Any examination of Carrie's values reveals them to be *at best* vague and nebulous, at worst disconcertingly banal. Never does she move genuinely beyond a preoccupation with the most superficial and materialistic of society's concerns to embrace new values we could genuinely respect.

Why, then, did Dreiser give us these two separate bodies of information about Carrie which point in opposite directions? It must be recalled that as a naturalist, one of his primary purposes in writing the book was to show that extenuating circumstances, rather than abstract moral precepts, more often than not determine how an individual behaves. This assumption seems commonplace to us today. But to a typical reader of Dreiser's time Carrie would have been summarily condemned

for her unconventional sexual behavior (since her acts, regardless of circumstance, involved a loss of her "virtue") had Dreiser not taken certain steps to guard against this occurring. Realizing that people who were threatened by poverty and destitution usually were forced by circumstance to behave as they did, Dreiser attempted to show how inadequate and cruelly unrealistic conventional ethics were when it came to evaluating the morality of individuals in such situations. He also saw that people possess different degrees of moral sensitivity, and portrayed Carrie accordingly, as a person with minimal moral awareness. This explains why Dreiser makes so much of external circumstances in Carrie's situations, and also draws such attention to her passivity.

But, not content to stop there, Dreiser further reminds us repeatedly that Carrie's behavior was in the interests of attaining a higher goal, one with which he hoped his readers could easily sympathize. This was inserted to provide us with an additional excuse for her actions, afraid as he was that the mere desire for material security might not be enough to condone her behavior. Hence, the references to Carrie's emotional greatness, her instinctive interest in the theatre, and the frequent reminders of her sense of dedication and aesthetic sensitivity.

Dreiser's problems began when it became evident that Carrie's passivity was inconsistent with her rise to fame and fortune, that her moral insensitivity was incompatible with her supposed emotional greatness, and that the very events in her life pointed to a strong-willed rather than a passive individual. Put simply, successful, ambitious people are generally by nature strong and single-minded. But this suggested a far different Carrie from the innocent and passive one Dreiser had originally conceived when he set out to defend her from the charge of immorality. The passive Carrie was inconsistent with her single-mindedness and sense of determination, which were demonstrated in her various actions; but the ambitious and strong Carrie could not be squared with her passivity, belief in which was necessary, so Dreiser thought, to keep us from responding negatively to her sexual infidelities. At the same time, both characterizations of Carrie were vital to his respective

purposes; since neither presentation could be omitted without lessening the effectiveness of one or the other aspect of his defence, both were left in the text. Evidence for the strong Carrie was accompanied by the mollifying imagery and favorable comments examined above, which Dreiser hoped would be effective in keeping his sympathetic interpretation intact. But in going so out of his way to defend Carrie and steer our responses in a favorable direction, Dreiser forces us to see the extent to which we are being manipulated. As a consequence, we emerge perhaps even less prone to sympathize than we would have been, had the author simply let Carrie's actions speak for themselves.

NOTES

- ¹*Booklover's Magazine*, I (February, 1903), p. 129.
- ²*Sister Carrie*, ed. Claude Simpson (Boston: Riverside, 1959), p. 6. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ³"... the impression is simply one of truth..." (anon. rev.), *Newark Sunday News*, Sept. 1, 1901, rpt. in *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 64.
- ⁴*American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), p. 192.
- ⁵*Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Carbondale, Ill.: 1966), p. 24.
- ⁶*The Dream of Success* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1955), p. 28.
- ⁷*Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 54.
- ⁸Gerber, pp. 84-85.
- ⁹Those few critics who have noticed inconsistencies in the portrayal of Carrie have not examined them in any detail. F. O. Matthiessen had "a hard time" believing in her emotional greatness, but dismissed the incongruity as evidence of Dreiser's lack of skill. Sheldon Grebstein has also noted the confusion but regards it only as "curious." See Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Sloane, 1951), p. 73, and Grebstein, "Dreiser's Victorian Vamp," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 4 (Spring, 1963), pp. 3-12.
- ¹⁰Some may argue Dreiser is using these words in an unusual way. But when the same terms are employed to describe other characters, their meaning is obvious enough, and conforms with normal usage. Lola, for example, "one of the sweetest and most sympathetic" of the chorus girls, is described in the same language Dreiser had earlier used with Carrie. As proof of her sweet and sympathetic nature, however, we are told she was "good to her neighbour and charitable" (p. 325), indicating that Dreiser means the words in the usual way. No such consistency can be found in Carrie's case.
- ¹¹"The Finesse of Dreiser," *American Scholar*, 33 (Winter, 1963-64), pp. 109-14.
- ¹²The diminutive Lola cannot seriously be thought of as putting any real pressure on Carrie to leave Hurstwood; she simply suggests an alternative which Carrie finds attractive.
- ¹³Pizer, p. 24.