

Spring 3-31-2023

Masculine Desire and Feminine Imitation: Contextualizing Heterosexual Relationships in Sister Carrie

Jennifer L. White
Southeastern University - Lakeland, newenglandjen@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://firescholars.seu.edu/classicalstudies>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

White, Jennifer L., "Masculine Desire and Feminine Imitation: Contextualizing Heterosexual Relationships in Sister Carrie" (2023). *Master of Arts in Classical Studies*. 4.
<https://firescholars.seu.edu/classicalstudies/4>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by FireScholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Classical Studies by an authorized administrator of FireScholars. For more information, please contact firescholars@seu.edu.

Masculine Desire and Feminine Imitation:
Contextualizing Heterosexual Relationships in *Sister Carrie*

by

Jennifer Lyn White

A thesis in the field of Literature and Rhetoric
for the degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Classical Studies

Southeastern University

April 2023

Abstract

Theodore Dreiser is generally considered one of the greatest American naturalist authors across the genre. His depiction of life is gritty and harsh, his characters at the mercy of their natural impulses and their unforgiving environment. However, there is also a sentimental element to Dreiser's work, especially in his portrayal of romantic relationships. In the face of unrelenting adversity, there is a glimmer of possibility in the longing for meaningful human connection, if only under different circumstances. While Dreiser's naturalistic approach suggests that such relationships can never be truly fulfilling due to either the innate frailty of the participants or the outside forces acting upon them, he does not discount the value of love and affection. This thesis analyzes Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, and the relationships among its three principal characters: Carrie Meeber, Charles Drouet, and George Hurstwood. Close attention is given to the female perspective, particularly what romantic relationship requires her to compromise or sacrifice. With respect to male desire and female imitation, heterosexual relationships are presented as transactional, the primary motivators of which are biological and socioeconomic, and are informed according to gender.

Keywords: Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, gender, desire, imitation, relationship

Dedication

Dedicated to my mother, Lyn M. Hrivnak, BSN, IBCLC, whose example taught me that it's never too late to chase your passions. I love you, Mom.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
SCHOLARLY VIEWS ON THE REPRESENTATION OF BIOLOGICAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC DRIVE IN <i>SISTER CARRIE</i>	4
NATURALISM AND <i>SISTER CARRIE</i> : RELIEF AND DESIGN.....	10
IMITATION: CARRIE’S FORCE.....	17
DESIRE: HURSTWOOD’S UNDOING.....	25
CARRIE’S EMERGING INDEPENDENCE.....	31
FOREVER UNFULFILLED: CARRIE’S FATE.....	36
WORKS CITED.....	39

Introduction

“I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister – anything that a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is a part of my mind. You influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don’t realize it. You really are a part of me.”

—Jim Burden in *My Antonia*, by Willa Cather

The relationship between a man and a woman is perhaps the most explored topic in all of literature. These relationships are commonly portrayed through the lenses of love and romance, the focus of which is often a deeply emotional attachment, intentionally cultivated over time, that prompts fidelity, loyalty, and selfless action. What is less commonly explored is the unintentional, even involuntary, origin of these relationships, i.e., what is the catalyst that brings a pairing into existence? What drives a man to pursue a relationship with a woman? What prompts a woman to accept or reject a man’s advances? In what behavior does either party engage, even on a subconscious and basic level, to attract the other? These are the questions and circumstances that Theodore Dreiser addresses in his first novel, *Sister Carrie*.

In his essay “An American Document: *Sister Carrie* Revisited,” Philip Gerber opens with the profound statement that *Sister Carrie* is the only American novel of its publication year, 1900, that is now remembered, reprinted, and re-read: “despite attempts to smother the novel in its cradle, and a killing barrage of criticism, Dreiser’s book lives...it has become a ‘classic,’ no less than eleven editions currently [as of 1999] circulating in paperback alone” (3). Gerber suggests that this may be best understood by viewing the novel not as a work of literature, but as a “slice of history,” focusing instead on its values as a study of its times (3). Gerber goes on to list all the ways in which *Sister Carrie* provides commentary on contemporary social issues that

also hold significant relevance today: immigration (i.e., Carrie as a pilgrim in a new-found land), wealth, narcissism and exhibitionism, transportation and industry, celebrity, and female emancipation. Regarding the latter, Gerber notes that “Carrie’s story presents one of our earliest and most authentic pictures of woman moving along through a man’s world, *in* it but never *of* it” (19). What Gerber does not address is Dreiser’s approach to heterosexual relationships, which is their formation based on biological criteria and their socioeconomic purpose, indifferent to love and romance. Dreiser portrays the male characters Charles Drouet and George Hurstwood as bound to a profound and innate desire for women, whereas Carrie Meeber’s drive to make herself desirable is attributed to the socioeconomic gain found in heterosexual relationship. While Carrie naturally possesses what Dreiser calls the “indescribable thing,” that which makes her a coveted object of male desire, she also strives to imitate the behaviors of other women for the purposes of attracting male attention, insofar as that male attention offers her the benefit of security and success. Indeed, Carrie’s use of rather than love of Drouet is explicitly stated when Dreiser informs the reader that she does not “really” love him, for “she was more clever than he” (68).

To provide a thorough analysis of the gender dynamics in *Sister Carrie*’s heterosexual relationships, there must be a basic understanding of literary naturalism and its origins. This is crucial because of the problems associated with defining naturalism as either a philosophy or a sub-genre of realism. The stance of naturalist authors fundamentally differs from their predecessors in that they “tried to discipline themselves to a stricter level of objectivity,” asserting that humans acted far less out of wisdom than from instinct, “that physical needs may override the conscience, that life is a chancy process rather than a path toward redemption.” (Budd 29). Miriam Gogol, co-founder and former president of the International Dreiser Society,

develops the idea of naturalism offered by George J. Becker in the introduction to her book *Theodore Dreiser: Beyond Naturalism* as “no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some realists” (ix). Donald Pizer, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*, recalls Louis Budd’s opinion on the origins of naturalism when he writes that, while there is often disagreement among critics as to defining and delineating realism and naturalism, there is a commonly and nearly universally held belief that realism and naturalism arose in large part as responses to what Budd terms “disjunctures” between rhetoric and actuality in American life, between “the language of hope in America’s civil religion and the actuality of the world encountered” (16). Gogol’s position that literary naturalism is an expression of the author’s philosophy is a defining tenet of Dreiser’s naturalism, and in *Sister Carrie* it manifests almost exclusively in heterosexual relationships. In complement to Gogol, Pizer’s recollection of Budd points up that naturalism is not without hope; rather, humanity’s blind pursuit of fulfillment in the face of hopelessness, albeit in vain, is characteristic of naturalistic literature and a main theme of *Sister Carrie*. Moreover, the objectivity of naturalism foregrounds Dreiser’s creation of male characters who are driven by desire and female characters who are driven by socioeconomic security. In what may be best described as distinctively “Dreiseresque” fashion, Dreiser’s philosophy marries the concrete with the abstract, the natural with the enigmatic, exploring both the innate self and the external environment to provide a schema for contextualizing heterosexual relationships.

Scholarly Views on the Representation of
Biological and Socioeconomic Drive in *Sister Carrie*

Several authors have explored Dreiser's depiction of sexuality within the context of romantic relationships and the individual. Perhaps the most prolific of those with respect to Dreiser is Donald Pizer. Pizer may very well hold the honorary title of today's leading scholar on both Theodore Dreiser and American naturalism. He has authored numerous books, articles, and essays on these subjects, several of which are referenced herein. Of particular significance to my thesis topic is Pizer's article "Theodore Dreiser and the Late-Nineteenth Century American Debate over Realism and Naturalism." In this essay, Pizer analyzes Dreiser's brief essay "True Art Speaks Plainly" and its appeal to the debate surrounding the social and ethical nature of realism and naturalism in America. According to Pizer, Dreiser "responds to the distaste and the fear of change underlying a distrust of realism and naturalism and to the conventional religiosity underlying a refusal to countenance the depiction of a man's sexual nature" (145). Pizer states that Dreiser's essay is a notable exception to his general form of literary criticism which, according to Pizer, would most often "merely reflect his like or dislike of a specific kind of writing, and too often his philosophical essays careen into impenetrable fuzziness" (76). It is worth noting that Dreiser "pursues an insistence on the relation of the sexual to ultimate truths about experience even more directly and fully" (85). In his essay, Dreiser points to the biological drive associated with sex as the motivation for men when pursuing heterosexual relationships. Moreover, Pizer asserts that Dreiser argues that the depiction of sexuality in a novel "does not imply a writer's preoccupation with the base character of man but rather an effort to render truthfully and artistically human nature in its fullness," further supporting this approach to

heterosexual relationships as simultaneously true to the philosophy of naturalism while also stylistically unique to Dreiser (86).

However, it is not only the biological that is crucial for contextualization of heterosexual relationship dynamics. In fact, from the female perspective, heterosexual relationship stems largely from socioeconomic benefit. Charles R. Lewis suggests in his article “Desire and Indifference in *Sister Carrie*: Neoclassical Economic Anticipations” that *Sister Carrie* is a novelist representation of American capitalism toward the end of the nineteenth century, “with extensive descriptions of department stores and working conditions, conspicuous consumption and grinding poverty, and individual desire and class conflict” (18). Lewis argues that economic identities and relations are “crucial to Dreiser’s many representations of desire, such as sexual drive, the longing for fame, or the exhibitionist wish to be seen as a spectacle” (18). Indifference and neoclassical theory are the two main areas of discussion in his article, which Lewis asserts often suffer “critical neglect regarding Dreiser’s representation of desire and its relation to his economic subject matter,” specifically as pertains to Carrie’s relationships with men (19). Although Lewis acknowledges that while the novel “cannot be read as an exact mimetic performance of neoclassical utility theory,” he posits that “its concepts do provide a useful trope for exploring desire and indifference” (20). This exploration of the characters’ different representations of desire, including many analyses from other scholars, complements Pizer’s analysis to provide a more complete picture of my position supporting a uniquely Dreiseresque model of heterosexual romantic relationship.

Lori Merish marries the concepts of desire and imitation with socioeconomic gain in her article “Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction.” Merish begins with a scene from *Sister Carrie* in which Carrie and Drouet have their

first Chicago stroll; it is during this walk that Carrie is made aware of Drouet's eye for feminine attractiveness, and she resolves to learn and imitate both his ability to ascertain desirable characteristics and the characteristics themselves. Merish goes on to use Lily Barton from Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* to illustrate concepts such as consumption, visibility, gender, publicity, the commodified body, selling gender, commodity self-fashioning, and domestic nostalgia, relating them all back to naturalism as manifestations of desire that are decidedly either feminine or masculine in nature, often with one reinforcing or depending upon the other, and their function or benefit to either party within the construct of heterosexual relationship. Tracy Lemaster offers a nuanced perspective on Merish's assertion that women are both motivated by consumerist desire as well as objects of consumption with her feminist approach to *Sister Carrie*. Specifically, Lemaster analyzes *Sister Carrie* using feminist thing theory. In her succinctly titled article "Feminist Thing Theory in Sister Carrie," Lemaster suggests that Dreiser's rhetorical preoccupation with the word *thing* and its compounds *something*, *anything*, and *everything*, which are usually attributed to his "seeming sense of the insufficiency of his linguistic medium" and his "supposed uncertainty about the efficacy and interpretative power of language...unfairly frame[s] his rhetorical strategies as passive report" (42). Lemaster argues that, in fact, "'thing rhetoric' documents Carrie's development both as an actress and as a 'stand-in for the figure of the writer' through her gradual appropriation of Dreiser's authorial voice" (42). Where Merish's article is an exploration and analysis of "naturalism's structure of masculine voyeurism" and the tendency of naturalist texts to "enact gendered fantasies of surveillance that work to contain the radical potential of feminine consumer desire," Lemaster expands on Merish's position, arguing that the application of feminist thing theory to a reading of *Sister Carrie* "offers a proto-feminist depiction of a woman whose desire for things bring a

psychological, sexual, and aesthetic development that positions men on the periphery,” further supporting my assertion that Dreiser depicts a woman’s pursuit of romantic relationship as motivated almost entirely by benefit to self (Merish 323-324; Lemaster 53).

Shifting back to the innate, Bertil Nelson’s paper “William James’ Concept of the Self and the Fictive Psychology of Theodore Dreiser in *Sister Carrie*” approaches *Sister Carrie* and Dreiser’s naturalistic style from a psychological perspective; he argues that *Sister Carrie* is “not simply a novel dealing with the forces external to the individual...it is a novel that deals with the inner person; the psychological process is as significant in human development as the environment in which the development takes place” (46). He then attempts to deal with Dreiser’s characters in *Sister Carrie* in relation to William James’s theory of self. Nelson explores this relationship from a scientific, non-biased perspective, arriving at the conclusion that Dreiser was likely not intentionally writing with any specific psychological agenda in mind, but more realistically he “became conscious of the possibilities suggested by the theories [of the day] and employs these ideas through his skill as an artist and student of human nature” (62). While Nelson’s position is somewhat controversial when considered alongside the fundamentals of naturalist philosophy, combining the Dreiseresque elements of biology and socioeconomic status with the psychological establishes an important connection between Dreiser and other naturalist authors, highlighting philosophical similarities between Dreiser and his contemporaries as well as fundamental differences in Dreiser’s approach to heterosexual relationships.

Finally, I turn to the essay “City Consciousness: A Comparison of Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* and Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*.” Although the epigraph at the start of my introduction is from *My Antonia* and not *The Song of the Lark*, Armstrong’s essay “City Consciousness” establishes its relevance and brings Cather into the conversation as one of Dreiser’s

contemporaries by stating that, although Cather and Dreiser are “disparate in stylistic idiom,” the novels are strikingly similar. Armstrong argues that her essay is an attempt to provide a “common language for a dialogue between these two works” (257). In particular, she explores in each novel the “portrayal of urban life and its interconnectedness with the main female character (257). Armstrong goes on to list those similarities between the novels as readily apparent: both occur at the same historic time, both focus on a young girl striking out on her own and eventually finding some level of success. Both female heroines from small midwestern towns and leave home for Chicago, and both turn their backs on family and home with striking firmness. Ultimately, Armstrong posits that, despite the stylistic differences between Dreiser and Cather, both accomplish the same affect, which is a realistic portrayal of urban life in all its harshness, as well as the fierce competition of the entertainment industry and its terrible toll on the artist. What Armstrong does not address is the disparity in Cather’s and Dreiser’s approach to the romantic relationships of their main female characters, specifically how those relationships operate in terms of personal and professional success.

Pizer opens the conversation with the assertion that readers of Dreiser must consider the implications of the overtly sexual nature of man if they are to fully appreciate his work; denial of this fact would result in a reading that lacks pull and glosses over Dreiser’s genuine depiction of true humanity. Nelson expands on Pizer’s claims with his use of theory of self, reinforcing the idea that naturalism is just as much a study of the inner workings of the individual as it is external forces. Likewise, Merish extends Pizer’s view of male desire to include the female counterpart that is security, attained through imitation in the interest of male attention. With her assertion that women are simultaneously compelled by consumerist desire to such an extent that they transform themselves into commodity objects for male consumption, Merish opens the door

for Lemaster to offer analysis of *Sister Carrie* through the lens of feminist thing theory, and Lewis establishes contextual relevance with his new historical perspective that *Sister Carrie* is a novelist representation of American capitalism toward the end of the nineteenth century. It is also important to note that current scholarship on Dreiser is lacking, particularly within the last twenty years. Most scholarship was produced in the mid- to last-quarter of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. As a result, my project invites an opportunity for new critical exploration. Using Armstrong's omission of romantic relationship in her comparative analysis of Dreiser and Cather as a springboard, my thesis examines *Sister Carrie*'s romantic relationships within the context of imitation and desire, specific to gender, as the innate motivation.

Naturalism and *Sister Carrie*: Relief and Design

Although naturalism is not exclusive to America, having “flourished earlier in the European countries all the way eastward to Russia,” it is American naturalism and its tenets that are of particular relevance to my thesis topic, and it is there that I will focus my exploration of the philosophy (Budd 21). Budd treats realism and naturalism as “joined sequentially rather than as disjunctive” in his essay “The American Background,” noting that both the realists and naturalists saw “sentimental and adventurous fantasy and, behind that, the genteel tradition as the main source of miasma” (Budd 21). In other words, Budd argues that fanciful notions and overly emotional content within literature, ultimately unrealistic and unattainable, promoted a general sense of dissatisfaction with one’s own circumstance. The reader’s inability to identify with the impossibly idealistic situations of literary characters bred discontent that paved the way for an approach grounded in the glaringly harsh light of a truly human experience. It is from this “miasma,” to quote Budd, that naturalism emerged.

Naturalists recognized that, in the wake of the Civil War, industrialism and urbanism were not only irreversible, but they were also accelerating (Budd 42). Moreover, naturalists framed politics in “economics-oriented, systematic and explicit terms,” recognizing that science had traced humanity’s “animal heritage and chemical mechanisms” (Budd 42). Additionally, the landscape of the postbellum publishing industry changed drastically. In the wake of increased demand for “garish facts peddled in the mushrooming tabloids,” publishers and editors alike accepted “bright colors, louder tones, grubbier characters, and more brutal action” (Budd 42). Instead of redemption resulting from its exploration of humankind’s animal sides, where instinct

overpowered conscious will, naturalism promoted pessimism. Thus, a somber tone and lack of resolution or catharsis are hallmarks of the naturalist novel.

While Budd rather grandly suggests that naturalism “burst out” with Stephen Crane, followed by Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser, Pizer conversely contends that naturalism was often ignored when it emerged as a “major new form of expression at the turn of the century” largely due to social and moral suspicion of its subject, the early deaths of Crane and Norris, and Dreiser’s “long silence after the ‘suppression’ of *Sister Carrie* in 1900 (Pizer 8). However, he acknowledges the one notable exception is that of Norris’s “miscellaneous comments in various essays and reviews” (Pizer 8). According to Pizer, Norris believed naturalism demanded exploration of the “irrational and primitive in human nature,” substantiating the statement with Norris’s own quote that naturalism should be the study of ““the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man”” (Pizer 8).

Paul Giles notes in “Dreiser’s Style” that Lionel Trilling once famously declared that Dreiser “writes badly” and “thinks stupidly,” which Giles claims “set the tone...for the institutionalization of Henry James as a writer of the highest artistic ‘quality’ and the downgrading of Dreiser as a sympathizer with the Communist Party who lacked ‘flexibility of mind”” (47). That Dreiser would be cast in such an unpleasant light opposite James is interesting because the two men once shared space on a list of American authors representative of those charged with philistinism, cultivated by Sorbonne professor M. Charles Cestre (Swanberg 252). Gogol disagrees with Trilling, arguing that while Dreiser and James both offer “in-depth studies of the psychic struggles of his characters,” Dreiser in fact surpasses James in his willingness to “get his hands dirty” (viii). Although Giles does not attempt to discredit the perception of Dreiser

by some critics as “artless,” nor does he argue against Dreiser’s “rigid exclusion” from the “academic canon” of the 1950s, he does echo the views of Gogol. According to Giles, one of the major strengths of Dreiser’s work lies in its “capacity to bring into view the new scenes and situations of urban life...ugly, vulgar, otherwise lacking in the virtues of gentility” (48-49). Giles goes on to assert that Dreiser’s gritty, detached approach to literature is reflective of “not what should happen in love or finance, but what actually does” (49). Dreiser uses naturalism to establish a pragmatic tone in *Sister Carrie* that portrays relationships as mechanistic in both design and function. This differentiation between a more typical naturalistic philosophy and that of the Dreiseresque allows for a nuanced analysis of *Sister Carrie* and the relationships therein.

Despite Dreiser’s notable absence from the literary scene after the publication of his first novel (there is an 11-year gap between *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*), he remains at the forefront of scholarly discussion. In their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, Leonard Casuto and Clare Virginia Eby quote Sinclair Lewis on the occasion of becoming the first American writer to receive the Nobel Prize for literature:

Dreiser, more than any other man, marching alone, usually unappreciated, often hated, has cleared the trail from Victorian and Howellsian timidity and gentility in American fiction to honesty and boldness and passion of life. Without his pioneering, I doubt if any of us could, unless we liked to be sent to jail, seek to express life and beauty and terror.

(1)

Casuto and Eby go on to insist that readers of Dreiser must be cognizant of his personal style, overtly naturalistic and yet as “distinctive as a signature” (2). In his writing, Dreiser moves beyond the scope of the internal person, showing the external forces at odds with the individual and at work in the molding of his characters’ lives. Jennifer Fleissner argues in “The Work of

Womanhood in American Naturalism” that there is a tendency to rely on the “manly-men account of naturalism” which is to “ignore its ongoing concern with women’s relation to modernity” to a fault; but Dreiser tackled ideas and subjects that even now continue to engage the imaginations of contemporary readers, particularly those of cultural stereotypes, feminism, and romantic relationships (57). These distinguishing elements of Dreiser’s writing separate him from his naturalist contemporaries.

What many critics consider the “naturalist” element of Dreiser’s writing was most certainly influenced by the work of Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer.¹ According to W.A. Swanberg in his biography *Dreiser*, Huxley’s works *Science and the Hebrew Tradition* and *Science and the Christian Tradition* assert that the Bible is based upon erroneous dogma and as such should be regarded as superstition; whereas Herbert Spencer, through his work *First Principles*, offers a detached and logical argument against any form of ultimate meaning for the individual. Swanberg maintains that Dreiser, having been raised in the Catholic tradition, was profoundly impacted by these ideas, for it caused him to question beliefs he held very intensely. “Spencer,” asserts Swanberg, “snatched God away, turned him into an impersonal force” (60). In the wake of this personal crisis, Dreiser took the first steps toward what would ultimately prove a lifelong journey of attempting to reconcile humanity’s predicament within such a harshly unforgiving universe. Dreiser’s fascination with the personal characteristics of the individual consumed him and he maintained a compassionate view of the universal human struggle, depicting man as a victim of his own innate strengths and weaknesses, unable to completely rise

¹Thomas Henry Huxley, 1825-95 & Herbert Spencer, 1820-1903. English biologist and educator, and English philosopher, respectively. Together with Charles Darwin, they popularized and encouraged the acceptance of the theory of evolution. Spencer’s work, *Synthetic Philosophy*, applies the principles of evolutionary progress to all branches of knowledge. Huxley, an agnostic, questioned the validity of anything that could not be substantiated by logical analysis or scientific verification (Swanberg 60-61).

above or move beyond his frailty. Thus, it was with this mindset that Dreiser began work on his first novel, *Sister Carrie*.

During this early period of his career, “[Dreiser] wrote,” Swanberg boldly states, “with a compassion for human suffering that was exclusive with him in America. He wrote with a tolerance for transgression that was as exclusive and as natural” (83). *Sister Carrie* became Dreiser’s creative outlet through which he struggled to make sense of the suffering he had seen in his family, of poverty which forced an alteration of morals, of helplessness which bordered on despair (Zender 73). His religious beliefs, threatened by Huxley, caused him to wonder if there existed any merit in morality. Perhaps in response to the situation of his sister Emma, who traded virtue for a way out of her family's poverty-stricken existence, Dreiser created his protagonist Carrie with a type of temperament that virtually guaranteed her financial success.²

Dreiser’s locus, then, “meditates between two different conceptions of truth: the received wisdom of social custom on the one hand and the uncertainties of philosophical agnosticism on the other” (Giles 54). As is seen in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser places the tangible, yet artificial, constructs of gentility and moral convention alongside the universal truth of human frailty. This is most obviously seen in the relationships between Carrie and Drouet, and Carrie and Hurstwood. Carrie becomes one of only a few of Dreiser’s characters who “wins,” but it is only because Dreiser endows her with qualities especially suited to survival in a world which, according to Dreiser, granted no reward for honest struggle. Carrie’s success comes at no small loss; what she trades for this coveted position is her virtue, a condition presented by Dreiser as of minimal value to the individual or society when compared to economic benefit or personal security, such as that which Carrie finds in her relationships with men.

² Dreiser’s older sister, Emma, had an affair with a married man. After Emma's lover embezzled money, they fled to Canada (Dreiser 384-385).

Dreiser's ideology posits, according to Laura Niesen de Abruña in her recollection of June Howard, a "harsh yet beautiful universe made up of forces indifferent to man and inscrutable" (51). Niesen de Abruña expands on Howard's description, arguing that human desire is one of those inscrutable forces, although "desire is also the...characters' response to their world" (51). While Dreiser presents both Drouet and Hurstwood at the subconscious mercy of their biological impulses, it manifests differently in each of the men respective to their environment. Ultimately both men are driven to pursue Carrie because of their innate desire for her, but where Drouet is motivated by conquest and pleasure, Hurstwood's primary motivation is a brief reprieve from his inescapable circumstances. Drouet is, quite simply, unable to curtail his libido, that which is described by the narrator as "an insatiable love of variable pleasure" (3). Even during Drouet's greatest moment of attachment to Carrie in chapter twenty, he cannot seem to stop himself from flirting with the chambermaid. Likewise, Hurstwood is the portrait of passivity, his complacency resulting from a jealous and shrewish wife, snobbish and demanding children, and a general dissatisfaction with his middle-aged status. In his desire for Carrie and subsequent relationship with her, Hurstwood realizes he can temporarily recapture the sensation of youth. Like an addict, Carrie becomes his drug and the high he feels when he is with her becomes his goal, even as it grows ever elusory and brief with every hit.

The starkly varied outcomes for Carrie, Drouet, and Hurstwood cannot be attributed to individual personality difference or choice of the lack of free will indicative of naturalism. Dreiser "dismisses the virtues associated with character" as inconsequential in a world governed by "impersonal forces" (Diebel 124). For Dreiser, personality is "without volition on our part, fate and circumstance cause it to blaze for us whether we will or no" (qtd. in Diebel 124). It is Dreiser's position that personality is innate, not something that can be developed or cultivated;

for better or for worse, we are what we are and nothing more. Thus, the fates of these three characters are a classic example of the Dreiseresque, or what Giles terms Dreiser's "stylized mediation between alternative versions of truth and different categories of representation" (60). Whether it be Drouet's inability to curb inexhaustible skirt-chasing, Carrie's abandonment of her values in her consumeristic climb up the ladder of success, or Hurstwood's self-abasing descent into squalor following his financial ruin, the importance of gender dynamics within romantic relationships cannot be denied. In my analysis, I will argue that Dreiser's locus of gender dynamics, informed by naturalist philosophy, offers a representation of heterosexual relationships wherein love is virtually nonexistent, the primary motivators of relationship are biological and socioeconomic with respect to gender, and those motivators are expressed as masculine desire and feminine imitation.

Imitation: Carrie's Force

Dreiser establishes the nature of gender dynamics in heterosexual relationship at the start of the novel with the meeting of Drouet and Carrie in chapter one. Carrie is introduced first, described as “eighteen years of age, bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth” (1). The narrator goes on to offer a seemingly benign and indifferent certainty about the fate of young girls who leave home in such a manner, not only providing context to Carrie's situation but also foreshadowing her eventual fate: “When a girl leaves home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility” (1). The narrator's description of Carrie's choice between becoming better or worse is described by Jeff Jaeckle in “Dreiser's Universe of Imbalance” as “pessimistic in tone” but leaves “space for balance,” suggesting that, under other circumstances, “equilibrium is possible” (7). However, Jaeckle notes that the chapter title, “The Magnet Attracting: A Waif Amid Forces,” calls to mind Herbert Spencer's “concept that the persistence of force gives rise to the continuity of motion and perpetual change,” which suggests that even different circumstances would be “bound to produce only a ‘rough balance’” (7). Thus, Carrie is presented from the start as in need of a savior, although the nature of such a savior is left unspecified. Dreiser's use of ambiguity alludes to the possibility of a nefarious savior, one who fulfills the role of savior economically but at the cost of propriety.

By introducing Carrie in such a manner, Dreiser invites the supposition that a woman is incapable of meeting her own fundamental needs. The refusal to acknowledge the possibility of a middle ground between a counselor's saving influence or moral destruction suggests that women

are unable to make choices in their own best interest. A woman's vulnerability is further highlighted by the insinuation that the savior might be a corrupting influence if a young woman sets out into the world without first learning how to accurately judge a man's character. Dreiser's foregrounding at the outset is vital to understanding Carrie's instinctual decision-making because it enables the reader to visualize her as a real person. Jake Ferrington suggests this in "Theory of Mind and Agency in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*," wherein he points out that the novel "demands a great deal of the reader's attention to its main character's state of mind" (313). It is impossible, Ferrington argues, for the narrator to "communicate enough about any textual moment to preclude the filling in that our minds are designed to do" (314). The information the narrator provides of Carrie's current dilemma is generalized to all eighteen-year-old girls, leaving room for the reader to decide for herself how Carrie's individual experiences prior to the start of the novel influenced her personhood up to this point; Carrie's transition from the rural to cosmopolitan landscape nearly "obliterates" her past, the remnants of which are "overcome by the lure of material things made valuable, enviable, and possible by the city (Armstrong 262). The reader must make assumptions about the circumstances of Carrie's social and economic upbringing, and these circumstances must follow a natural and believable progression such that Carrie's eventual moral sacrifice is inevitable, not for the sake of the material objects themselves, but for the security they represent.

It is with this circumspect backdrop of moral dichotomy that Drouet arrives on the scene. The reader sees him through Carrie's eyes: their initial interaction begins when Drouet speaks to her, but the reader then becomes aware that Carrie was conscious of his physical presence some time before he spoke. During their exchange, Carrie's reaction to Drouet is characterized by her "instincts of self-protection and coquetry mingling confusedly in her brain" (2). With that

statement, the narrator suggests that it is instinctual, and therefore natural, for a woman to simultaneously seek to protect herself from a man while also inviting attention from him. I would go so far as to suggest that the narrator is alluding to the conundrum that, while a woman may be innately aware of the risk a man may present to her physical safety and moral reputation, she is also innately aware of the physical protection and economic security he may provide. This positions Carrie as Dreiser's mouthpiece on social issues such as femininity, agency, and class (Davies 147). Dreiser also suggests that a women's instincts toward what he terms self-protection and coquetry must be honed through instruction; Carrie instinctually recognizes that she is "of interest" to Drouet, and in her flirtation with him she inadvertently reflects the boldness he shows her, having "not yet learned the many little affectations with which women conceal their true feelings" (5). Here the narrator suggests a woman must learn dishonesty as a means of survival. A woman's imitative nature is a complicated, nuanced exercise in self-denial for the sake of attracting the right sort of attention from the right sort of man, a man who offers security and stability, and with whom a relationship is morally correct in the eyes of society. It is thus in marriage, the ultimate imitative act, that a woman may unequivocally secure her enduring livelihood.

In "Personality in Dreiser's Early Journalism and *Sister Carrie*," Anne Diebel reviews what many critics have suggested, that Carrie's imitativeness means she has no core self (133). Diebel disputes this, positing that Carrie has "brightness; throughout the novel she is associated with light," and "drive," but "she needs others to help realize her potential" (133). Diebel goes on to cite Dreiser's unflattering initial description of Carrie as evidence of her potential:

In the intuitive graces she was still crude. She could scarcely toss her head gracefully.

Her hands were almost ineffectual. The feet, though small, were set flatly. And yet she

was interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things. (2)

Diebel rightly argues that Carrie's crudeness "implies that she is merely late in cultivating her 'graces,' not incapable of doing so," and her being "'interested in her charms' implies that she might someday capitalize on her now-inchoate attractiveness" (133). Carrie is unformed, mentally and physically, and her future seems to rest on her learning to present herself more effectively. Thus, while imitation may be instinctual, it must be cultivated if it is to be put to its proper and most beneficial purpose. Without correct guidance from a benevolent savior, a woman's imitative nature may lead her to sacrifice her true self in exchange for the personal security offered by romantic relationship.

After the brief initial interaction between Carrie and Drouet, the narrator brings awareness to the "most striking characteristics of (Drouet's) most successful manner and method" in reference to his outward appearance, those which to Carrie's untrained eye are indicative of his potential to provide (3). The narrator insinuates that physicality is both a reflection of a man's single-minded sexual appetite and a means of accomplishing those related ends: "Good clothes, of course, were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing. A strong physical nature, accentuated by a keen desire for the feminine, was next" (3). The narrator reiterates the importance of clothes, particularly when it comes to men attracting the attention of women, drawing particular attention to the "indescribably faint line in the matter of man's apparel which somehow divides for her those who are worth glancing at and those who are not" (4). In other words, a well-dressed man gives the impression of a well-to-do man, a gentleman of means who cares for himself and will presumably care for any woman who has endeared herself to him. Not only are women drawn to well-dressed men because their refined

appearance insinuates financial security, but also because men are aware of this female preference, and they use it to their advantage.

The relevance of money itself cannot be overlooked from either the male or female perspective; for as much as wealth, or the appearance of wealth, communicates socioeconomic security to women, so too does the possession or lack of wealth directly correlate to a man's success with the object of his desire. In other words, the level of financial security a man communicates to a woman is dependent upon his material display. In describing Drouet, the narrator pointedly states that although he did "very well with more pretentious women...the burden of expense was a slight deterrent" (4). Not only is a man's wealth necessary for attracting women, but it also dictates which women he might set his sights on; in the case of Drouet, if a woman demands more from his purse than he might easily afford, the cost proves more than the benefit. Christophe Den Tandt argues in "Amazons and Androgynes" that "Dreiser's urban market seduction is intimately linked to salability since both commodities and persons need to stir desire in others in order to be exchanged" (659). Den Tandt points to Dreiser's uneven playing field between the sexes and the commodification of women: a man might be discretionary in choosing a woman to pursue, standing to lose nothing besides the monetary cost of wooing her, whereas a woman must transform herself into a commodity object, sacrificing her personal standard for the sake of self-preservation. Indeed, after Drouet ingratiates himself with Carrie, he discourages her from working. Carrie sees this as a sign of his affection for her and a byproduct of his desire to provide for her whereas Drouet recognizes that financial independence for Carrie is necessary to perpetuate her dependence upon him.

The double standard of morality between men and women is particularly obvious in chapter ten, when the narrator pontificates on both the basis and perception of morals. He writes:

...we have but an infantile perception of morals. There is more in the subject than mere conformity to a law of evolution. It is yet deeper than conformity to things of earth alone. It is more involved than we, as yet, perceive. Answer, first, why the heart thrills; explain wherefore some plaintive note goes wandering about the ruddy lamp in light and rain. In the essence of these facts lie the first principles of morals. (65)

The narrator goes on to state the general attitudes of both Drouet and Carrie, who by this time are living together as a married couple, though they remain unwed. Drouet is content and satisfied, having triumphed: "Oh, how delicious is my conquest," is his general attitude (65). This points up Drouet's commodification of Carrie; she is as food to him. Contrarily, Carrie contemplates her situation with "mournful misgivings," thinking to herself, "Ah, what is it I have lost?" Carrie's self-directed question suggests that her awareness of her sacrifice is somewhat unknown to her, both in origin and nature. Yet she is cognizant, at least to some extent, that her success is tainted with something unsavory. Her relationship with Drouet has provided Carrie with, "in the view of a certain stratum of society," many creature comforts: their apartment is in a respectable area of town with a lovely view and the furnishings are pleasant, and Drouet has provided Carrie an ample wardrobe, warmth, food, and comfort (66). Upon looking at herself in the mirror, Carrie notes that she appears to herself more attractive than ever before; yet, upon holding up the mirror to her innermost being, she finds herself reflected most unbecomingly. Carrie refuses to contemplate the fundamental nature of her discontent for any length of time for she "had not the mind to get firm hold upon a definite truth...when she could not find her way out of ill-logic which though upon the subject created, she would turn away entirely" (68). This is not to suggest that Carrie is unintelligent or simple; rather, the reality of what she has given up in her quest for self-preservation has been at such great personal moral cost that persistent contemplation is too

painful. It is from this place of subconscious self-awareness that Carrie's goal turns toward the legitimizing act of marriage.

Desire for marriage is a manifestation of the feminine imitative nature, for in Drouet's promise of marriage, Carrie finds a "sort of salve to her conscience, a pleasant way out...under the circumstances, things would be righted...her actions would be justified" (68). Carrie's desire to marry is not specific to Drouet; it is simply a means to an end. Carrie's time in the city has opened her eyes to possibilities she previously never considered. Now more than ever she is acutely aware of what marriage represents, and what she is denied in its absence. Carrie is cognizant of marriage as a provisional act, one that will legitimize her actions and ensure continued economic security, but also one that will allow her coveted access to the inner sanctum of high society. Love is never a consideration or a motivator. On the contrary, the narrator states that Carrie considers Drouet uninteresting and dull:

She was not really enamoured of Drouet. She was more clever than he. In a dim way, she was beginning to see where he lacked. If it had not been for this, if she had not been able to measure and judge him in a way, she would have been worse off than she was. She would have adored him. (68-69).

Dreiser indicates that affection is a detriment to women in romantic relationship, for if Carrie loved Drouet, she would not be able to clearly see him for who he is and what benefit he offers her. Not only that, but a woman's ability to remain emotionally distant in her romantic relationships is perhaps her most powerful imitative tool. It is a direct result of Carrie's emotional ambivalence toward Drouet that she turns her attentions to Hurstwood. In a sense, Carrie's time with Drouet causes her to outgrow him, their relationship indirectly functioning as a means of cultivating her higher standards. Carrie's growing awareness of Drouet's lack of

refinement creates in her a desire for a man whose attention is hard-won, and thus more meaningful. Carrie's imitative nature is revealed through self-commodification: she becomes the object of desire to procure the thing which she desires. Here Dreiser claims for Carrie a more general superiority, celebrating her mental fortitude as much as her physical charms (Seltzer 192).

Drouet's deficits are also reflective of what Carrie finds wanting in herself, or what Lori Merish terms "the practice of compulsory self-scrutiny that feminists have seen to be endemic to consumer culture" (320). According to Merish, Carrie is "learning to see herself as an object according to increasingly exacting commodity standards of taste and social distinction" (320). Carrie's recognition of Drouet's shortcomings is dictated by both a male and cultural perspective, one that Merish further describes as "underwritten by male economic power" (321). Merish compares Carrie to Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, suggesting that the characters are similar in their passion for things rather than passion for men. For Lily, the only alternative to life as a "hapless commodity destined by the laws of market to lose value" is what Merish calls a "Christian renunciation, an alternative inscribed in the text's sentimental vision of (re)absorption into domestic invisibility" (324). In contrast to Lily, domesticity is Carrie's goal because it is a means to an end; relationship with Hurstwood offers her a bridge to legitimacy. By transforming herself into an object of desire, Carrie surrenders herself to the world of men, but her commodification is not in vain.

Desire: Hurstwood's Undoing

From Hurstwood's perspective, although his attraction to Carrie is rooted in desire, it is not overtly physical. Rather, his interest in Carrie is attributed to "the ancient attraction of the fresh for the stale," his waning desire "rekindled" by her "bloom and unsophistication which is the charm of youth" (75). Indeed, Hurstwood's desire for Carrie rests not precisely in her physical youth and beauty as much as the feelings those qualities evoke within Hurstwood; her presence allows him the opportunity to feel young again himself, and that is an intoxication Hurstwood finds irresistible. So too does Hurstwood find pleasure in the idea of conquest, but his desire for domination is not specific to Carrie herself. In fact, Hurstwood is enamored with the idea of a rivalry with Drouet. Hurstwood imagines himself besting Drouet, as if the ability to woo Carrie away from Drouet would be proof of his superiority: "He began to 'size up' Drouet from the standpoints of wit and fascination. He began to look to see where he was weak...He could hood-wink him all right" (77). Hurstwood's initial fascination with Carrie thus devolves into an obsession with winning her; meanwhile, the narrator notes that Carrie is wholly focused on her own situation and moved by neither man, "busy adjusting her thoughts and feelings to newer conditions...not in danger of suffering disturbing pangs from either quarter" (77). Carrie's thoughts never divert from the way in which she might secure her economic future; her "personal desire and satisfaction" as well as the "social causes and consequences of those personal states" are "rendered in terms of economic consumption" (Lewis 25). As much as she is a commodity object to Drouet and Hurstwood, Carrie is also a consumer.

Hurstwood's and Carrie's attraction toward one another is intensified by their mutual dissatisfaction in their current relationships, Hurstwood with his wife and Carrie with Drouet.

The important difference is that Hurstwood is aware of Carrie's unhappiness with Drouet and uses it to his advantage, while Carrie remains ignorant of Hurstwood's status as a married man. This is once again representative of unequal gender dynamics. Hurstwood's dishonesty about the existence of his wife and children allows him greater control in his attempts to coerce Carrie into romantic relationship; Carrie believes that, as with her relationship with Drouet, she alone has something at stake, something to lose, and finds herself once again in a morally compromising position. By leaving Drouet, Carrie stands to gain a more sophisticated, worldly, and interesting partner. However, if Hurstwood refuses to marry her, she has left the comfort and security, however tenuous it was, afforded her by Drouet; more to the point, she will remain in her current state of moral dereliction. Ultimately, Carrie's decision to leave Drouet for Hurstwood results from her resignation to the fact that Drouet has no plans to marry her. With no reason to doubt the sincerity of Hurstwood's intentions, Carrie's desire to improve her reputation wins out:

She looked more practically upon her state and began to see glimmerings of a way out...Her feelings were exceedingly creditable, in that they constructed out of these recent developments something which conquered freedom from dishonour...She only took his affection to be a fine thing, and appended better, more generous results accordingly. (94)

For Carrie, the possibility of a legitimate marriage with Hurstwood is enough motivation to persuade her to take the risk. Not only does this appeal to her innate desire for economic security, but also to her imitative nature. Carrie sees in Hurstwood the possibility of a proper place in society, that which observation has taught her is only possible for women through marriage, and so she seeks to replicate for herself.

Hurstwood, in contrast, “had only a thought of pleasure without responsibility...Carrie’s love represented only so much added pleasure” (94). It is important to consider that when Carrie and Hurstwood speak of “feelings,” “affection,” and “love,” these concepts are perhaps better understood as emotions that, while not necessarily imagined or illegitimate, are fleeting manifestations of Carrie’s perception of her worth to Hurstwood or Hurstwood’s pleasure in Carrie’s desire for him. In other words, while they are representations of innate desire, they are also byproducts of socioeconomic security for Carrie and conquest for Hurstwood; they are secondary rather than primary motivators for romantic relationship. For example, when Carrie refuses to be satisfied as Hurstwood’s mistress, he is all the more enraptured with her: “He saw clearly that this [marriage] was her idea—he felt that it was not to be gotten over easily...She increased in value in his eyes because of her objection. She was something to struggle for, and that was everything” (106). Hurstwood’s desire for Carrie, as well as his perceived affection, is directly tied to the difficulty of the conquest. The same is also true of Carrie, for when she informs Hurstwood that she will not stay with him if he does not marry her and he assures her that he would never want her to, she is overjoyed: “She was extremely happy now that she understood. She loved him the more for thinking that he would rescue her so” (107). Just as Hurstwood mistakes thrill for affection, so too does Carrie mistake honorability for love.

In the “The Two Endings of *Sister Carrie*,” Stephen Brennan offers a different perspective on the feelings of love and affection between the characters. Specifically, Brennan draws attention to the beginning of chapter nine and what he terms a “rare Dreiserian pun” (15). In reference to Dreiser’s mention of Hurstwood’s domestic life, lacking a “lovely home atmosphere,” Brennan recalls a passage from the text wherein Dreiser suggests that those who have never known such an atmosphere “will not understand where the tear springs glistening to

the eyelids at some strange breath in lovely music. The mystic chords which bind and thrill the heart of the nation they will never know” (Dreiser 81). Brennan asserts that this quotation, “though banal, expresses an important truth, that human beings find true freedom and profound emotions only in intimate human bonds,” then goes on to state that this defines Carrie’s ultimate goal (Brennan 15). Brennan’s suggestion invites consideration of the possibility that, while Dreiser’s depiction of the romantic relationship between a man and woman is one built upon instinctual desire and self-fulfillment, Dreiser does not consider this model to be complete or ideal. Brennan discusses the scene where Drouet first finds Carrie alone on the streets of Chicago, buys her a hot meal, and gives her money for clothes: “the least quaver in [Carrie’s] voice” arouses Drouet’s “genuine sympathy,” and his offer of clothes strikes “the keynote” while her “lips trembled a little” (Dreiser 61). Brennan also examines the carriage ride when Hurstwood wins Carrie’s affection, noting the way Hurstwood’s tremulous voice drops “to a soft minor” and Carrie feels “bound up completely in the man’s atmosphere” (128-129). Brennan reminds us that we would be remiss to suppose the emotional aspect of romantic relationship fails to create motivation, however far removed it may be from the primary motivator.

Returning to the concept of honesty within romantic relationship, it is worth noting that deception does not function solely as a mechanism used to the male advantage for unequal distribution of power, as Drouet and Hurstwood both suffer for their deception. Drouet’s false proclamations of his intent to marry Carrie temporarily appease her, but eventually she realizes he will never commit, and thus she is compelled to leave the relationship. Hurstwood’s lie of omission regarding his marital status invites Carrie’s affection, but when the deception is revealed to Carrie by Drouet, it serves as the catalyst for Hurstwood’s eventual self-destruction. The extent of Hurstwood’s lies seems to directly correlate to the totality of his ruin when

compared with those of Drouet. Mrs. Hurstwood's majority ownership over their marital finances and her determination to see him destitute coupled with Carrie's refusal to see him due to his lies, what she believes is "evidence of human depravity," send Hurstwood into a downward spiral of despair. This is relevant to the current discussion because, as Hurstwood's life begins to unravel, his desire to maintain a relationship with Carrie transforms into a crazed obsession. Hurstwood is unable to separate need from want, "drawn by such a keen desire for Carrie, driven by such a state of turmoil in his own affairs" (185). It is this unrelenting desire that further contributes to Hurstwood's demise when he contemplates, and eventually steals, money from the saloon where he works. Although the safe locks accidentally while Hurstwood is contemplating theft, he quickly turns to intentional dishonesty. Hurstwood believes that if he can convince Carrie to run away with him, again under false pretenses, he can use the stolen money to provide for them, thus solving the problem presented by his wife's control of their wealth.

Bertil Nelson uses theory of mind to explore the psychological processes of Hurstwood in this pivotal scene. Nelson argues that reading Hurstwood through the theory of mind lens reveals the internal circumstances of his decline; Dreiser plays these "internal costumes," or "psychological conditions," against the conditions of Hurstwood's shifting environment (46). Nelson astutely notes that it is Hurstwood's lack of foresight regarding the title to his home and other equity that compromises his "total assertion" of his interests at home; Hurstwood's home situation, though strained, remains stable as long as Hurstwood projects an acceptable "façade" to the world (52). When those domestic circumstances come into conflict with his selfish, material interests, the illusion is shattered and Hurstwood easily abandons his wife and children. Without love or affection as a tether to those relationships, Hurstwood barely considers them as he seeks to satisfy his own desire, "resort[ing] to trickery and lies" in what Nelson terms a shift

in Hurstwood's "dominant social Me" to a "dominant material Me" (53). Ultimately, posits Nelson, Hurstwood's decline comes about due to a change in psyche; when Hurstwood's attitude toward Carrie goes beyond the thoughts "of pleasure without responsibility" and his passion for her is "no longer coloured with reason," he begins to lose his hold upon the world (Dreiser 114, 173; Nelson 59). Hurstwood's unwieldy desire exacerbates his erratic. Now completely at the mercy of his biological impulses and unable to reconcile them with the shifting constraints of his environment, he becomes increasingly incapable of rationalization. This mental fracturing leads Hurstwood to behave with indifference toward the natural consequences of his actions, leading to further deception in his pursuit of Carrie.

Carrie's Emerging Independence

Carrie is initially disgusted with Hurstwood when she discovers that he has lied to her a second time to convince her to take him back, luring her onto a train to Detroit under the guise that Drouet is hospitalized and asking for her. As they heatedly converse on the train, the narrator notes that while Carrie thinks Hurstwood “terrible” for his repeated deception, “there is something in such daring and power which is fascinating to a woman, especially if she can be made to feel that it is all prompted by love of her” (192). To this end, Carrie agrees to travel with Hurstwood after he assures her that he will pay for her to return to Chicago if she changes her mind. Carrie further acquiesces when, upon their arrival in Montreal, Hurstwood asks Carrie to marry him. Her first impulse is to refuse, despite never having been “ill-disposed” toward Hurstwood; yet still she feels “opposition, which rose feebly” (197). This is almost certainly the instinctual self-preservation Dreiser mentions at the beginning of the novel. However, Carrie’s antipathy is quickly superseded by a more pressing realization: “This man, to whose bosom she was being pressed, was strong; he was passionate, he loved her, and she was alone. If she did not turn to him—accept his love—where else might she go? Her resistance half dissolved in the flood of his strong feeling” (197). Carrie recognizes that to accept Hurstwood’s proposal is to gloss over the dishonest and immoral way he pursued her, yet her desire for the economic provision and societal acceptance offered by marriage is too great to resist. So great is the temptation, in fact, that Carrie does not question Hurstwood when he obtains a marriage license for them under a false name.

Dreiser amplifies his message about the “natural” relationship between men and women with his repeated portrayal of male dominance and feminine submission; thus far in the novel,

Drouet and Hurstwood have wholly dominated Carrie, objectifying her to satisfy their desires and whims (Lindquist). In Tracey Lemaster's reading of Carrie's actions through feminist thing theory, she asserts that thing theory offers contextual analysis for the men's objectification of Carrie in the way they speak to her, such as when Hurstwood says to Drouet, "Come around after the show. I have something to show you," and Drouet replies, "Is she a blonde?" (37). But Carrie, too, is "fluent in the rhetoric of things" (Lemaster 44). Lemaster explains that in her anger and embarrassment at learning of Hurstwood's married status, Carrie "recognizes and denies" her objectification by Drouet, reacting by "dematerializing" their relationship (44). In this interaction we see this first inkling that Carrie is coming into her own by resisting her natural inclinations to self-commodify for the purpose of consuming. When Drouet accuses her that she, like most women, is profiting from their relationship, she ignores him. This suggests that Carrie's refusal "to accept Drouet's reduction of their relationship to a commercial exchange of love for things" is the beginning of Carrie's "affirm[ing] her position as subject" (45). However, this is not altogether accurate, for there can be no denying that Carrie has most certainly profited from her relationship with Drouet; rather, Carrie's refusal to entertain Drouet's accusation is better described as the first in a series of events that highlight Carrie's growing awareness of her utter reliance upon men and her desire to break free from those entanglements.

The change in setting from Chicago to New York signifies a shift in the balance of power between Hurstwood and Carrie. This becomes evident on the train ride to New York, long before the couple even arrives in the city. For the first time, we see male loss and sacrifice for the sake of romantic relationship. Hurstwood, disgraced by his theft, is now at a complete loss; he is without social status, without employment, in possession of no property, and has only \$1,300 to his name; even this is a loan allotted from the funds he stole and must be repaid. Thus,

Hurstwood's slavish obedience to his desire has resulted in personal ruin. Carrie, none the wiser to his theft or to the illegitimacy of their marriage, is finally vindicated; she enjoys their journey through the countryside. However, once they arrive and she realizes the city's landscape is stark and industrial when compared with Chicago, Carrie announces that she does not like it. With this comment the narrator states that Carrie "was coming to have a few opinions of her own" (205). That Carrie is expressing her individual opinion, irrespective of the feelings or desires of others, indicates that she is taking the first mental steps toward independence.

Landscape plays an important role in gender implications, and the move to New York is not without difficulty for Carrie. In "'Where are the ladies?'" Wharton, Glasgow, and American Women Naturalists," Donna Campbell uses Mary Lawlor's examples of Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf* and Frank Norris's *Moran of the "Lady Letty"* on the Western frontier to illustrate the impact of "limited and often limiting geographical space" within the context of the naturalist novel (155). Lawlor cites the West's "inhospitable landscapes" for "epitomizing the conflict between man and an indifferent universe," but Campbell extends Lawlor's claims to encompass both women and the "urban jungles with which [naturalism] is so strongly associated" (155-156). Campbell cites Mary Hallock Foote's "The Maverick" and "The Fate of the Voice" for depicting women as doubly restricted, trapped both by gender and by "landscapes of isolation" that reinforce their powerlessness (156). For Carrie, this manifests as a slow and disorganized journey toward self-awareness and its resulting self-sufficiency. Despite her initial dislike of New York, she finds satisfaction in keeping house for Hurstwood. Although she finds no personal fulfillment in her relationship with Hurstwood, she accepts it, "being of a passive and receptive rather than an active and aggressive nature" (212). Once again a stranger in a strange

land, Carrie resigns herself to the domestic sphere despite its lack of excitement and vibrancy in exchange for what she perceives as economic stability.

The arrival of Mrs. Vance and Carrie's subsequent acquaintance with her reignites Carrie's previous longing for fashion and entrance into high society. Carrie's realization that her marriage to Hurstwood, which she thought would be the legitimizing act capable of righting all her previous moral wrongs and providing her with lasting happiness, has returned void. However, it is her conversation with Bob Ames that prompts Carrie to seriously question the values and assumptions to which she once was bound. Carrie is intrigued by Ames, but he does not affect Carrie in the same way as Drouet or Hurstwood. David Humphries suggests in "Bob Ames Reading and Re-reading of *Sister Carrie*" that the evolution of the interaction between Ames and Carrie "points to Dreiser's evolving ideal of art and implies a method of how to read art" (37). Functioning as a "spokesman of Dreiser's own views" Ames's statement that excessive wealth is not necessary to happiness gives Carrie pause (Humphries 36). She considers him with a sort of inspired awe, thinking to herself that Ames "probably could be happy all alone...he's so strong" (Dreiser 228). Valuing Ames's opinion and pleased that he approves of acting as a career, Carrie is resolved. For the first time she is able to imagine a future in which relationship with a man might not be necessary to her survival: "Through a fog of longing and conflicting desires she was beginning to see" (229).

Even after men have consistently and totally disappointed her, Carrie is most powerfully swayed by the opinions of a man. This points to the enduring influence of men over women; the distinction between the female's true self and her invented self remains blurred. Try as she might, Carrie is unable to separate her own values from those of the men she encounters. Yet Ames's influence alone is not enough to nudge Carrie over the precipice of forsaking traditional

domesticity for independence. Rather, it is the revelation from Hurstwood himself that their marriage is not legally binding that forces her hand. After divulging this inconvenient truth in a moment of anger at Carrie's embarrassment of him, Hurstwood realizes that he is on the brink of losing her. In a last-ditch effort to maintain some modicum of civility, he determines to "live like a gentleman—or what he conceived to be a gentleman—which took money" (259). Hurstwood reluctantly reveals to Carrie that he is down to his last hundred dollars, which is the final motivation she needs to pursue a job in the theatre. As Hurstwood feared, Carrie's growing financial independence severs the final connection tethering the two. While Carrie is not without sympathy for Hurstwood, she grows resentful of his lack of ambition and realizes that she cannot support them both with her earnings. Carrie's decision to leave Hurstwood is transactional, based upon practicality and economy. Even so, Carrie feels shame, "not that she cared for him...she did not want to make anyone who had been good to her feel badly" (306). Carrie once again chooses self-preservation, and this time it requires abandoning the relationship.

Forever Unfulfilled: Carrie's Fate

In the wake of Carrie's liberation from Hurstwood, she finds tremendous career and financial success; eventually earning a staggering \$150 per week, her professional advancement from chorus girl to comic actress to potential tragedian "intimates a deepening and enriching of her expressive capacities," yet it does not lead to any "immediate and direct expression of emotion in real life" (Zender 72). Drouet and Hurstwood resemble Carrie in "exhibiting a similar deficiency in the capacity to love and relate intimately to others" (Seltzer 208). They are all three alike in their superficial affection, yet their inability to make meaningful attachments is specific to the individual. Hurstwood's aggressive passion for Carrie leads him to abandon reason, resulting in his personal ruin and eventual suicide. Drouet's desire is finite, restricted by his egocentrism and intellectual limits; thus, when Carrie resolves to leave him for Hurstwood, his initial anger quickly burns out and reignites as passion for the next hypothetical encounter.

Carrie, unable to love, has chosen to "avoid serious personal alliances" (Seltzer 207). To some extent, this ambivalence is environmental, as Carrie is now defined by her relationship with the city she inhabits rather than the men whose company she once shared. Because she internalizes the city's "standards of success and its artificiality, she is condemned to its ceaseless longing and emptiness" (Armstrong 261). However, Carrie's emotional dissatisfaction is more accurately attributed to her creation of a fictive self in response to the pressures and influence of society and economy. This is the double-bind of the female: she is need of a savior but, in Carrie's case, her saviors cause her to fall. Redemption from this fall requires independence, but independence necessitates detachment, and detachment limits the emotional depth of romantic relationship. Thus, the very thing that allows Carrie to survive deprives her of contentment.

Pizer suggests that Carrie's desire for independence and her endless search for personal fulfillment are representative of Dreiser's own struggles. According to Pizer, Dreiser's "extraordinary history of...relationships with woman," when summarized "arithmetically," is nothing more than empirical proof of his desire to find a soul mate in a relationship, which for Dreiser was "someone who shared his response to beauty in various phases of human existence" (74). This may also be said of Carrie, for there are fleeting moments of emotional and psychological depth throughout the novel. In chapter eleven, Carrie is moved to tears by the piano playing of a girl in the apartment across the hall: "She was delicately moulded in sentiment, and answered with vague ruminations to certain wistful chords. They awoke longings for those things which she did not have. They caused her to cling closer to the things she possessed" (74). Near the end of the novel in chapter forty-seven, Carrie reads from *Père Goriot* at the suggestion of Ames; she reflects upon how "silly" and "worthless" her earlier reading was, delighting in her newfound ability to nearly comprehend "the full sympathetic significance" of *Goriot* (349). Occasionally the search for a worthy companion appears to be fulfilled, but for Dreiser as well as Carrie, the desire for "absolute freedom," the "discovery of flaws in the other's nature," and the "impact of contemporary social prejudices" prove conditions too impossible to overcome (Pizer 74).

Dreiser's pessimistic conclusion to *Sister Carrie* suggests that there is no clear path forward. Relationships as a matter of course require some level of self-denial, but for Drouet, Hurstwood, and Carrie, their relationship failures rest on more than this. Neither man can regulate his desire into a non-destructive form, nor can Carrie find a man to provide the economic support she requires in a way that fits the moral confines of society. Their innate features render them incapable of this self-recognition and growth, their ill fates irrevocably tied

to the characteristics dictated by their gender. While Carrie does not reconcile herself to a life of discontentment, instead waiting in perpetuity “for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real,” she nevertheless remains blind to the impetus of her situation (354). Carrie has reversed the balance of gender dynamics and forged her way in a man’s world, but it is not without great personal cost; she has sacrificed her true self, and with it, her ability to recognize the futility of her striving.

Works Cited

- Armstrong, Heather Stewart. "City Consciousness: A Comparison of Cather's *The Song of the Lark* and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*." *Willa Cather's New York*, Jan. 2001, pp. 257–65. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=EIS114197754&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Brennan, Stephen C. "The Two Endings of *Sister Carrie*." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 16 no. 1, 1988, p. 13-26. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/saf.1988.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.1988.0021).
- Budd, Louis J. "The American Background." *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*, edited by Donald Pizer, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 21-46.
- Campbell, Donna. "'Where Are the Ladies?' Wharton, Glasgow, and American Women Naturalists." *Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, 2006, pp. 152–69. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2006533439&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Cassuto, Leonard, and Clare Virginia Eby. *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Davies, Jude. "Women's Agency, Adoption, and Class in Theodore Dreiser's *Delineator* and *Jennie Gerhardt*." *Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017, pp. 141–70. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2018380634&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

- Den Tandt, Christophe. "Amazons and Androgynes: Overcivilization and the Redefinition of Gender Roles at the Turn of the Century." *American Literary History*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1996, pp. 639–64. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.seu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/alh/8.4.639>.
- Diebel, Anne. "'That Indescribable Thing': Personality in Dreiser's Early Journalism and Sister Carrie." *Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2014, pp. 123–46. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2016381346&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Edited by Donald Pizer, Norton Critical Edition, 3rd ed., W. W. Norton, 2006.
- Ferrington, Jake. "'Oh, Blind Strivings of the Human Heart!': Theory of Mind and Human Agency in Theodor Dreiser's Sister Carrie." *CEA Critic: An Official Journal of the College English Association*, vol. 78, no. 3, Nov. 2016, pp. 312–18. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.seu.idm.oclc.org/10.1353/cea.2016.0027>.
- Fleissner, Jennifer L. "The Work of Womanhood in American Naturalism." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1996, pp. 57–93. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=1998088005&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Gerber, Philip. "An American Document: Sister Carrie Revisited." *Dreiser Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1999, pp. 3–23. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=1999056661&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Giles, Paul. "Dreiser's Style." *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 47-62.

Gogol, Miriam. *Theodore Dreiser: Beyond Naturalism*. New York University Press, 1995. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=1995020079&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Humphries, David T. "'The Shock of Sympathy': Bob Ames's Reading and Re-Reading of Sister Carrie." *Dreiser Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2001, pp. 36–55. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2001533966&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Jaeckle, Jeff. "Dreiser's Universe of Imbalance in Sister Carrie." *Dreiser Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2002, pp. 3–20. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2003530531&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Lemaster, Tracy. "Feminist Thing Theory in Sister Carrie." *Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, pp. 41–55. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.seu.idm.oclc.org/10.1353/san.0.0008>.

Lewis, Charles R. "Desire and Indifference in Sister Carrie: Neoclassical Economic Anticipations." *Dreiser Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1–2, 1998, pp. 18–33. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=1998055946&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

- Lindquist, Barbara. "Theodore Dreiser, Thermodynamics, and the 'Manly Man': An Analysis of Gender Relations in the Cowperwood Trilogy." *Midamerica: The Yearbook of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature*, vol. 31, 2004, pp. 57–68. EBSCOhost, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2006531662&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Merish, Lori. "Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1996, pp. 319–45. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.seu.idm.oclc.org/10.2307/1345592>.
- Nelson, Bertil C. "William James' Concept of the Self and the Fictive Psychology of Theodore Dreiser in *Sister Carrie*." *Essays in Arts and Sciences*, vol. 19, May 1990, pp. 44–64. EBSCOhost, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=1990060477&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Niesen de Abruña, Laura. "'Naturalization' and Bonding in Dreiser's 'Naturalistic' Representations of *Sister Carrie*'s Women." *Midamerica: The Yearbook of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature*, vol. 14, 1987, pp. 51–57. EBSCOhost, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=1988063499&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Pizer, Donald. "Dreiser's Relationships with Women." *American Literary Realism*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2017, pp. 63–75. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.seu.idm.oclc.org/10.5406/amerlitreal.50.1.0063>.

---. *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

---. “‘True Art Speaks Plainly’: Theodore Dreiser and the Late Nineteenth-Century American Debate over Realism and Naturalism.” *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1996, pp. 76–89. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=1996068069&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Seltzer, Leon F. “*Sister Carrie* and the Hidden Longing for Love: Sublimation or Subterfuge.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1976, pp. 192-209. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/440684>.

Swanberg, W. A. *Dreiser*. New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965.

Zender, Karl F. “Walking Away from the Impossible Thing: Identity and Denial in *Sister Carrie*.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1998, pp. 63–76. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=1998054347&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.