DREISER'S VICTORIAN VAMP

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Although the intrinsic merit of Theodore Dreiser's work is still under debate, Dreiser himself appears to have won a permanent place in our cultural history as a literary pioneer. Critics and scholars agree almost without dissent that Dreiser, rather than Crane or Norris, was chiefly responsible for establishing those attitudes--including the confrontation of the actual and the unpleasant, the candor and forthrightness, the refusal to be bound by the conventional, and the frankness in sexual matters--which have characterized and distinguished most of the best American fiction in this century. Even The Literary History of the American People (by Quinn, Ghodes, Murdock and Whicher), generally not sympathetic in its appraisal of realistic-naturalistic writing, offers this testimony to Dreiser's achievement: "If we can imagine an old-fashioned ladies' sewing-circle, decorously exchanging local gossip over cakes and tea, suddenly invaded by an iceman in his working clothes, who enters without embarrassment, plants himself massively in the middle of the sofa, and begins to regale the company with anecdotes of the gashouse district, we may form some notion of the effect produced by Dreiser's first novels." And when Sinclair Lewis, the first American to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, made his acceptance speech in Stockholm on December 12, 1930, he paid tribute to the leadership of the man who had been his closest competitor for the award: "Dreiser's great first novel, Sister Carrie, which he dared to publish thirty long years ago and which I read twenty-five years ago, came to housebound and airless America like a great free Western wind, and to our stuffy domesticity gave us the first fresh air since Mark Twain and Whitman." Since there is little doubt that Dreiser was the trailblazer for modernity and that Sister Carrie marked a radical departure from what had been written before it, we may well inquire why it now seems such an old-fashioned book, virtually a period piece from the age it helped destroy.

But in order to understand in what specific ways Sister Carrie marked both the apogee of Victorian prudery and, simultaneously, the beginning of the modern American novel, we must first briefly reconstruct the official nineteenth century attitude toward women and toward the sexual relationship between men and women.[1] William Dean Howells, in a book which is assuredly representative of the thought of its time, The Rise of Silas Lapham, expressed

this sentiment early in the novel: "And, after all, that's [goodness] about the best thing in a woman.... If my wife wasn't good enough to keep both of us straight, I don't know what would become of me." Most readers would have profoundly agreed with this utterance by the book's hero; indeed, Silas's good wife serves to quicken his conscience throughout most of the novel, and supplies much of the impetus for his moral regeneration. To turn to quite another source, and to focus more sharply on the sexual (which is what the word "moral" has mainly signified in our culture) ethic of the age, we find this statement in a highly reputable manual of sexual instruction which still, even though it was published in 1916, perfectly delineated the authorized Victorian attitude: "It may be added here, that an occasional girl goes wrong through temperamental shortcomings in herself. . . but the proportion of women who would willingly and deliberately sacrifice their virtue is vanishingly small as compared with the proportion of young men . . . . This is probably in part due to their training. . . . It is in part due to the instinctive and inherent purity of mind of the normal woman." Or, as Eric John Dingwall has put it in The American Woman: "Ladies merely submitted to the dictates of the curious system of propagation apparently approved by God, while only females were degraded enough to enjoy it."

As familiar as these principles are to us, and as much as they continue to plague us, we sometimes fail to recognize in them and in the entire Victorian attitude an interesting ambiguity. Actually, this attitude represented a drastic revision of a crucial concept which had long been promulgated by Christian tradition and which had thoroughly saturated Christian culture: the Pauline hostility toward women, and the conviction that woman's moral inferiority had been demonstrated for once and for all by Eve's sin. Although it is true that the concept of woman as a weak and carnal Eve was counterposed by the ideal of feminine purity and holiness, especially strong in the Virgin and Mother figures of the Middle Ages, society's distrust of the female remained active enough to keep her subjugated and under constant suspicion. But in its journey through time and across the sea to nineteenth-century America, a journey too long and tortuous to log here, the notion had not only softened; it had become veritably transformed. Woman was no longer inferior to man because of Eve's sin and betrayal of Adam. She had, somehow, become morally superior to man because of her visibly greater physical delicacy, her seemingly lesser animality, and her apparent freedom from most of his atavistic and bestial passions. It was perhaps a classic example of the American tendency to accept the surface appearance as the total reality. This transformation became institutionalized in the sexual practice we have named "the double standard of morality," the code which somehow anticipates male frailty and thus permits the man to sin because he is, after all, a man (and everyone knows what men are like), yet which permits no sin on the woman's part because she, as a woman, is too pure to sin (but if she does, by god, she'll pay for it). Accordingly, a woman's love and the state of marriage

were something of salvation for the man; it was what she offered in return for her subsistence. For the male it was the willing surrender to respectability and goodness--as in theHowells speech--and the acknowledgement of his wife's moral superiority. By this method, whatever the actualities of woman's nature, was the once weak and fleshly Eve transformed into an angel of ice. The system was so beautifully ambiguous it could even be used to buttress all the arguments for not granting women the right to vote and the right to work, rights which they had begun to demand. After all, were they not delicate creatures who, for their own and society's good, had to be protected against debauchery by the coarsening experiences of politics and business? The orthodoxies of the age are manifest in this ringing declaration, which appeared in J. Richardson Parke's massive Human Sexuality, published in 1906: "If a woman's desires, aims, ambitions be abnormal, unseemly, or unwomanly; if they tend toward public speech-making, preaching, politics--pursuits primitively and naturally masculine--instead of the home, maternity, and the part which by her grace, beauty, and attractiveness, nature evidently intended her to play in society, she must be regarded as a sexual pervert, a monstrosity, and utterly unfitted for the serious duties of wifehood and motherhood."

At this point it must be asked how these cultural facts apply to Dreiser's pivotal novel, Sister Carrie.

What has been portrayed in that book is an essentially Victorian heroine who comes very close to the stereotyped heroine of popular melodrama, but who is at the same time the first truly modern heroine in American fiction because her behavior operates within the sphere of naturalistic and iconoclastic pragmatism rather than Victorian moral dogmatism. As Claude Simpson, Kenneth Lynn and others have noted, this was the moral frankness which constituted the book's radicalism and which charted the path for the modern American novel. Grant Knight has aptly summed up the novel's narrative: "It introduced a pretty woman who twice stooped to folly and did so almost casually and without punishment, a salesman who entered almost as casually into a liaison and also went unpunished, a stronger man who went down to beggary and death, and a part of the American scene appallingly imbued with materialism and impoverished in culture." Not only does sin go unpunished in Sister Carrie, it usually goes unrecognized as sin. Such was Mrs. Doubleday's realization when she demanded that her husband suppress the book that his firm had already printed, and such was the weight of Dreiser's influence on the fiction to follow. He had written the first American novel without moral bias, and for that deed he paid heavily, thrown by the book's withdrawal and by its scant critical notice into a depression so deep that his career as a novelist was nearly ended before it had fairly begun. We may see just how modern Sister Carrie was, in this sense, by recalling that its nearest relation was Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, and by momentarily comparing both the depiction and fate of the two heroines. Her virtue

lost, Crane's character can suffer only disintegration and death, a fate expected and approved by the book's audience. How different is Dreiser's Carrie, who prospers in her appearance and her fortunes, finally achieving stardom on the Broadway stage.

Without this perspective the modern reader of Sister Carrie must suffer some puzzlement, for when we turn to the novel itself we are instantly aware that in the area where we expect it to be most bold, it is most reticent, and, indeed, acquiescent to the Victorian demand that the bedroom must not be opened onto the public square. Even in his description of the female form, the item which Dreiser never fails to give graphic treatment in his later novels, there are no details. We know only that Carrie is neat and attractive. Her sexual allure is completely that of the archetypal Victorian heroine, comprised of innocence, purity and helplessness. Although from the instant Carrie and the drummer Drouet meet on the train it is obvious something will happen between them, we are told only that there is magnetic energy in their gaze. (This is Dreiser's substitution for erotic appeal.) The same gaze recurs several weeks later in the restaurant, after Drouet has accidentally encountered and picked up the by-now destitute and defeated Carrie and given her money--a portentous sign to the Victorian reader--and predicts the seduction to follow.

Dreiser's handling of the seduction itself is the model of propriety and makes use of a number of the standard genteel cliches. As Drouet stands with Carrie at the door of her flat, having clothed her, wined and dined her, the scene shifts abruptly to Carrie's sister, who dreams, in this order, of Carrie's descent into a coal mine pit, of Carrie perched on a promontory of land, sinking, and at last of Carrie falling over the edge of a rock. In his later books, Dreiser would resort to Freudian terms to describe such matters, but here he creates a transparent allegory in popular idiom of the stages of Carrie's sexual and moral surrender. She has now become a "fallen" woman in images which would have seemed both familiar and appropriate to the nineteenth-century reader.

Even as Drouet and Carrie live in sin, there is no description of any physical contact between them. Drouet neither kisses nor fondles her, except to touch her once on the waist--to test the fit of a dress. For Carrie, the yielding to Drouet comes not from passion but from need, and as the expression of gratitude for his money and help; still, we cannot blame him too bitterly as a foul seducer. Have we not been told that although one of his main pursuits is the pursuit of women, Drouet is fundamentally kind-hearted? And have we not been repeatedly assured that Carrie is protected by a brute instinct for survival, an instinct for her own safety? In other words, Dreiser attempts to persuade the reader that Carrie's seduction will do her no harm; therefore, in his own but partially successful pragmatic terms, Carrie's seduction is not evil. Nor does Carrie herself accept her situation as a kept woman without qualms. Her conscience, product of a religious home, continues to trouble

her. Thus we see, as Claude Simpson has perceptively remarked, that Dreiser had not yet divorced himself from the Christian morality he affected to renounce. This underlying confusion and illogic is perhaps the source for the peculiar nostalgia and bittersweetness which are almost as characteristic of the novel as its naturalistic bluntness.

In any case, Carrie thrives. She fills out in form. She becomes more aware. She learn delicacy and grace. What better evidence that the wages of sin are not death? The scene has also been prepared for the second seduction, for by the time Hurstwood meets Carrie, she has become both attractive and chic. A man of his experience, manager of a fashionable cafe, would not have been smitten by the raw country girl who had come to Chicago only a few months earlier.

In Hurstwood's brief courtship of Carrie there is much more emotion on the part of both, including Dreiser's description of a kiss and Carrie's response to it--the erotic high point of the novel--although even in this scene she does no more than return the embrace and lay her head on his shoulder. But as if to compensate for his boldness, Dreiser now portrays Carrie as grown much more scrupulous in her deportment. Despite her loss of virtue to Drouet, she will permit Hurstwood no liberties before marriage. and when she learns Hurstwood is married, she is so shocked that she breaks off their courtship. We observe the same reticence and the same defence of Carrie's honor elsewhere in the book. Contrary to the opinion of an earlier commentator, Carrie is anything but casual in the bestowal of her affection.

In both instances where Carrie yields to the men, Dreiser includes an emphatic statement about her helplessness, her need to surrender to the male's ardor for her own protection against a cruel world. By so doing he has, I think, attempted to excuse Carrie in the eyes of the contemporary reader by again associating her with the pathetic heroine of sentimental melodrama whose virtue is the price she must pay either for her life or the mortgage. However, in this case Dreiser permits no heroic intervention by Gallant Ned, nor does he characterize the seducers as Villains. They are merely doing what comes naturally. In other words, Dreiser combines his own naturalistic convictions with the one extenuating or modifying circumstance permitted by the age: Carrie must become indecent in order to live decently. The fault has consequently been shifted away from the female to the male. as the reader would expect, for in the first instance Drouet had persuaded a worn and discouraged Carrie, and in the second Hurstwood had first duped the confused girl into running away with him and then promised her what she most longed for--legal wifehood. Carrie's blind insistence that Hurstwood marry her, despite her knowledge that he is already married, offers further evidence of Dreiser's strenuous attempts to make his heroine conform to Victorian taboos. Ultimately, of course, Dreiser places the blame for Carrie's fall upon his favorite whipping boy, the social order which allows such grim conditions to exist that survival, not moral precept or decency, becomes the

test of truth. So successful was Dreiser's modesty in the rendition of the novel's illicit sexuality, and so noble his social indignation, that it led one critic, writing in the North American Review, to overlook completely the book's underlying anarchy. He saw Sister Carrie as a timely warning to the errant: "The conditions under which she comes to live are not justified, nor excused, by any acceptable code. But they are not uncommon, and Mr. Dreiser handles them with such delicacy of treatment and in such a clean largeness of mental attitude, that they simply enforce an impressive moral lesson."

Dreiser suggests repeatedly that Carrie's seduction is not accomplished wholly by masculine lust and her own weakness. It is made amply clear that her seducer is also modern life, as symbolized in the big city, with its glamour and appeal.[2] From the beginning of the novel Dreiser tells us, in a voice laden with the countryman's ambivalent fascination with Metropolis and fear of it, that a young girl who goes to the city is in grave danger. "The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye. Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman," Dreiser writes. What happens to Carrie in Chicago could well have been predicted by any Victorian and many moderns; it is what happens to every innocent rural lass when she leaves home. The city was evil and only heaven could protect the working girl. Or, in larger terms, Sister Carrie could be seen as another version of one of our most compelling and pervasive literary themes, the destruction of innocence, in which youth encounters the world and is either disillusioned, depraved, damaged or destroyed by it. Considering the possibilities, Carrie is lucky to escape only with the loss of her virtue.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the novel, at least in regard to its sexuality, is Dreiser's failure to demonstrate the operation and efficacy of those forces whose existence and power he asserts. Throughout Sister Carrie Dreiser comments on the power of romance, love, jealousy and passion, and he hints at but does not depict the sex act. Yet although he obviously believes in the "majesty of passion" as a determinant in man's fate (e.g., in An American Tragedy he calls the sexual urges "rearranging chemisms" fundamental to all human behavior), he offers no extended, frank or convincing description of their influence. Drouet and Hurstwood are moved by overriding sexual passion only at crucial moments, especially Hurstwood, who musters enough potency to persuade a reluctant Carrie to go with him and, in Montreal, to become "his." However, while Dreiser is daring enough to depict Hurstwood's passion for Carrie as so great that it torments him and leads to a series of events which eventually produce his destruction, he also creates a situation in which both of the men who possess this desirable woman are afterwards able to resist her appeal. In fact, there is absolutely no evidence that she has any appeal, once conquered.

Now, while there is some justification for the lack of detail in the portrayal of the characters' sexual relationships, the absence of any

suggestion of the results of such relationships--that is, Carrie's failure to hold her men once she has them--poses a question to which there are several answers.

We may find one answer in Dreiser's other books. Inevitably, once a man and woman have met and the sexual "chemism" has expressed itself in an initial mating, Dreiser begins to substitute other factors (such as class status and money) in the place of the erotic in his descriptions of a romance or marriage. Consequently, in Dreiser's fictional world sex is never as strong after fulfillment as before. We see this in the behavior of Eugene Witla, in Frank Cowperwood, in Clyde Griffiths and perhaps in Dreiser himself, who avowed and practiced a belief in sexual "varietism." To Dreiser's males the possessing is all. The mating once accomplished, man's sexual urge and the woman possessed seem relatively unimportant, to become important again only in some new conquest. It is a basic paradox in Dreiser that while he did more than any other American novelist of his generation to make sexual frankness possible, he probably did not succeed in convincing his readers of the power of sex. (That feat remained to be accomplished chiefly by such successors of Dreiser as Anderson and Hemingway.) The fault may lie in Dreiser's conception of sexuality, which was quantitative rather than qualitative. Each affair is as important as every other; each takes root instantly, grows at once, withers overnight; all are but slight variations of the same plant.

To return to Sister Carrie, it is perhaps necessitated by the special demands of the heroine's character delineation that Carrie be passive, both to reinforce Dreiser's conception of her moral blamelessness and to strengthen the reader's conviction that she has "class." She can sleep with two men but she must not enjoy it. If she were to take pleasure from sex and become adept and eager in its practice, she would lose that aura of innocence which she possesses in raw form from the beginning, which grows enough to captivate Hurstwood, and which later flames into the wistful beauty responsible for her Broadway stardom. Here Dreiser is also apparently working from the Victorian credo that only bad, low and evil women could find sex pleasurable. From this viewpoint, Carrie's short stay in the factory sweatshop has the aesthetic function of demonstrating her innate superiority to the other girls, who, in their bold manners, coarse speech and familiar ways with men, scream to us that they are crude creatures who know what sex is and like it. This is part of the fact which Carrie recognizes, and it is partly in revulsion at such a fate that she turns to Drouet. Indeed, in Dreiser's canon the proof and summation of a girl's lowness is her easy way with men. We find the same situation elsewhere in his books, notably in his portrayal of the unabashedly carnal, full-bosomed and thick-ankled working girls of the collar factory in An American Tragedy. The use of these stereotypes is a curious symptom of Dreiser's unresolved feelings toward his own class origin, an irresolution we must set beside Dreiser's own overt sympathies for the proletariat and his eventual identification with it.

The only passion or urge which Dreiser does grant Carrie is the urge, as much sublime as sensual, for nice things. Early in the narrative he sets forth Carrie's chief motivation: "She realized in a dim way how much the city held--wealth, fashion, ease--every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart." This synthesis of aestheticism and materialism--the yearning for beauty, and the expression of the yearning largely in terms of elegant clothes, sumptuous houses and rich food--is integral to the novel as well as to Dreiser's total conception of character and weltanschauung. In Dreiser's men the yearning declares itself not solely but forcefully in the sexual: in their feeling for women. In Carrie, as in most of Dreiser's other feminine creations, the yearning is what she has in place of the sexual. This, too, would have conveyed the ring of truth to the nineteenth-century reader. Everyone knew that if women, those noble creatures, had a weakness (albeit one which might work to the advantage of a would be seducer), it was her fondness for the pretty and the decorative.

It may also be true that Dreiser's refusal to give Carrie passion stemmed from inability rather than unwillingness. Leslie Fiedler has put it this way in Love and Death in the American Novel: "He could never portray, for all his own later hectic career as a lover, any woman except the traditional seduced working girl of sentimental melodrama.... The deceived woman, the seduced virgin are for Dreiser the images through which he understands America and himself..." While Fiedler's statement will not endure too close a scrutiny, it is correct as it applies to Sister Carrie. We could further speculate that in this portrayal of Carrie, indeed in the very phrases used to describe her, "a half-equipped little knight," "a pilgrim," in the very characternym "Sister," Dreiser's intention is both to underscore Carrie's blamelessness and to soften and expiate the character of his own foolish sister, whose deeds had furnished the rough outline for the novel's plot. She had been living with an architect in Chicago, then met, become enamoured of and run away with a clerk at Chapin and Gore, only to discover that he had taken thirty-five hundred dollars of his employers' money with him. Although he returned most of the money and no charges were pressed, the whole affair became a noisy scandal. Eventually, the couple came to New York and operated a disreputable boarding house, later taking in another of Dreiser's sisters who had been made pregnant and then deserted by a rich man's son (a situation which in turn suggested the basis for Dreiser's second novel, Jennie Gerhardt).

Whatever the reasons for Carrie's depiction, they produce a heroine of curious flatness whose lack of dimension impresses most modern readers as the novel's greatest weakness. The flatness is also responsible for one of the larger holes in the book's fabric of realism. The author has given us the story of a beautiful and desirable woman surrendering to two attractive men, but has said nothing about the aftermath of the surrender or about its puissance in the lives of those involved. Had Dreiser given Carrie passion,

womanly passion, or at least told us why she lacked it, she would have assumed that depth and force as a character she now wants. As is, she is flat, or as Mathiessen has correctly noted, "She is never a woman in love." Consequently and inevitably the focus of the novel shifts to Hurstwood. There is no better evidence of Dreiser's commitment to some of the very taboos he shattered. He either could not, or dared not, portray his heroine with the same earthy lusts as the male. Women could fall, but they could not feel.

In short, we find that in Sister Carrie, the novel which began the literary revolution against prudery in America, Dreiser has created a Victorian Vamp: a woman who is precisely that mixture of strengths and weaknesses which the nineteenth century conceived her to be, but who is at the same time in her unrequited sexual sins the first modern heroine. Eve-like, she yields to the flesh, but in the strongest Victorian tradition she does so only out of the confusion and need engendered by woman's innate helplessness and man's predatory lustfulness. In accord with the highest fashion of the time she has no animality, no passion, no sexuality of her own. Her beauty attracts men, yes, but she is not responsible. Again, despite her fall, she is better than the men she lives with, and, in fact, better than anyone else in the novel except the shadowy Ames. The men and only the men have bestial urgings, and there is not the slightest hint that Carrie, even when possessed, abandons herself to them or responds in kind. Insofar as it is possible for Dreiser to make it so, Carrie sins chastely. Further, Carrie grows in refinement, in grace, in knowledge; she alone is capable of growth, while Drouet and Hurstwood her seducers, can only mark time or retrogress. The only male in the novel who shares Carrie's quest for betterment and beauty is Ames, who even in name is more symbolical than real. Finally, Carrie triumphs on the stage by becoming the image, the personification, of the Victorial ideal of womanhood; lovely, poised, demure, with a suggestion of refinement and a touch of pathos. She is, in retrospect, perhaps the first of the American love goddesses, those fabulous and yet ultimately familiar and wistful creatures who continue to fascinate us with their ambivalent sophistication and naivete, simultaneously the embodiment of sexuality and innocence: at once the woman and the child, the wife and the daughter, the mistress and the sister.

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Footnotes:

[1] William Wasserstrom has given this general subject its most stimulating treatment to date in his Heiress of All the Ages: Sex and Sentiment in the Genteel Tradition (Minneapolis, 1959). While I am familiar with Mr. Wasserstrom's book, I have not consciously borrowed from it in this paper.

[2] Blanche Gelfant has also noted Dreiser's use of the city as antagonist in her The American City Novel (Norman, Oklahoma, 1954).