

# sister carrie dreiser's wasteland

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The emotional high point of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* occurs in a dozen or so remarkable paragraphs that come toward the middle of Chapter Fifteen. Hurstwood begins the sequence with a note to Carrie, urging her to meet him in Chicago's Jefferson Park. He next awaits her arrival in a garden-like setting that is charged with the densest kind of symbolic implication. All is cleanliness and seclusion within the park, so that the noises of the surrounding city are reduced to a faint and somehow melodious "hum." A policeman stands on guard, but he is a figure viewed in repose, "his arms folded, his club at rest in his belt." Overhead the sky of new summer frames children at play, the "shiny green" trees, the "hopping and twittering" of "busy sparrows." Presently Carrie appears, "rosy" and "clean" in demeanor, as vibrantly alive as the scene into which she walks. Although a long and rather pedestrian conversation ensues, Dreiser carefully prefaces the dialogue with an account of two significant gestures. First, Hurstwood takes out a "soft, scented silk handkerchief" and wipes the moisture "here and there" from Carrie's face. Afterward, the two exchange a long look, full of their delight in "being near one another."<sup>1</sup>

It is an emotional high point because suddenly the dreariness of life recedes from *Sister Carrie*, and we obtain a glimpse of possibility, an insight into what might conceivably be. For Carrie, this moment seems to climax a long upward journey that has lifted her beyond the living-death of Sven and Minnie Hanson, caused her to tire of her affair of convenience with Drouet, and poised her at last on the verge of true emotional fulfillment. The climax for Hurstwood is of a different sort, though it is made to seem no less decisive. He apparently has checked the long downward movement into emotional sterility which is the result of his loveless and spite-ridden life at home. The old look of "cold make-believe" (44) disappears from his eyes, to be replaced by an expression of genuine concern and tenderness. In short, Carrie and Hurstwood have achieved a rare distinction in a novel where other people are seen to live

together by necessity or as a matter of convenience. They are portrayed as lovers, responding in terms of a passion that (so far as we know) neither has ever experienced previously. And the details in the scene around them conspire to suggest the depths of feeling of which each is capable. The shimmering heat; the relaxed authority-figure; above all, the stress on light, growth and play: surely these attest to the moral rightness of the meeting in the park, even as they hint of a meaningful future which the encounter appears to promise.

Within a few pages, however, Dreiser uses structural parallels to indicate that the promise must be unrealized. Almost at once he has Hurstwood speculate about how best to possess Carrie, while concealing her from his family and business associates. Then, back in the apartment she occupies with Drouet, Carrie's speculations take a pointedly similar turn. Pondering Hurstwood from this perspective, she can view him only as a threat, an obstacle to her present comfort. "Stick to what you have," she concludes. "You do not know what will come. There are miserable things outside" (199). The effect of these musings is obviously to dissipate the mood in Jefferson Park, and to do so by undercutting (or exactly inverting) the shared look with which the park-scene had culminated. From having met in a symbolic caress, the lovers' eyes are now turned inward, in search of practical solutions, personal security, the cultivation of an enlightened self-interest. Each has quickly come to contemplate the self, with no regard for the other.

And of course this same self-scrutiny is to be the dominant pattern throughout the rest of the book. It is no accident that much later in New York, Carrie, after reading of her stage triumphs, will twice be described as "hugging herself with delight" (387, 397). Nor is there anything less than conscious artistry in the choice of a small, tightly locked and suffocating room as the place for Hurstwood's eventual suicide. Both details sum up the lives of two people who, even when they dwelt together with some show of intimacy, were always existing in utter isolation. By the narcissistic embrace, the retreat into dark and airless immolation, we are reminded of the vanities, the stirrings and cravings of ego, in a word the total self-absorption that divided the lovers in virtually the same moment when their love began, and had driven them completely apart long before there was any question of their formal separation. The details thus serve as a last mocking comment upon the illusion of unity—that semblance of mutually expressed affection—which had flickered briefly to life in the Chicago park so many months earlier.

Nevertheless, the scene in the park remains. If we forget that it happened, I believe the consequence is to simplify and distort the relationship between Carrie and Hurstwood. We run the risk of acting as if somehow there had been no relationship—as if the lovers had never cared in the first place, or were, at all events, too trivial or merely sluggish to have behaved differently in the face of caring. To keep the scene before us, on the other hand, is to catch from *Sister Carrie* the full poignance of an

opportunity that was miserably and needlessly lost. Viewed in the context of their one glorious and really rather breathtaking encounter, Carrie and Hurstwood emerge as essentially tragic figures, in the specifics of whose fall Dreiser sets forth nothing less than the general tragedy of modern life itself.

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What he affirms during the episode in the park is the degree to which love can exalt human lives. No matter that Carrie and Hurstwood are petty, insignificant city-dwellers—a pair of anonymous faces, to whom under ordinary circumstances we would scarcely give a second glance. For this moment and in this place, they have become something quite extraordinary. As his imagery insists, Dreiser has conducted them to within a short step of completion, transfiguration, a very literal re-birth.

That they are unprepared to take the additional step is not due (as has been argued) to the basic coldness of their natures; actually the scene in the park would seem emphatically to contradict the idea that Dreiser wishes them to be understood as cold. Nor is the step left untaken because they are such dull and apathetic figures—so hopelessly lost in a world of chance, and yet so governed by the necessity of being lost—that they can gain no clear perception of their needs. Just the reverse is the case: if anything, each is too introspective, too inveterately conscious of re-shaping life to the service of some private end. The real source of their failure lies in the fact that with choices to make and the power to choose, the lovers leave the park behind them to enter upon a lifetime of choosing badly. And not only does the folly of their decisions give rise to the overt drama in *Sister Carrie*; it is likewise the subject of the continuous flow of commentary and interpretation which Dreiser attempts in the philosophical asides to the novel.

I have particularly in mind the long, clotted, somewhat awkwardly placed paragraph at the beginning of Chapter Eight, where the animal in the jungle is distinguished from the situation of “untutored man” in modern urban society. Between the tiger and his practice of the spontaneous life, Dreiser tell us, no obstacles stand guard. As a creature guided by instinct, the beast is perfectly aligned with the forces of nature, and hence perfectly free both to be and to express himself. Through the sweep and play of evolutionary processes, however, man has been elevated up out of the instinctive, to become the creature whose mentor increasingly is reason. And while the acquisition of reason is inevitable, and also a valuable part of human development (Dreiser, needless to say, is no spokesman for noble savagery), still the emergence of his rational faculties does pose a distinct threat to man. The danger is that, with the triumph of rationality, the old life-giving passions will have dried up, and (as the word “untutored” emphasizes) there will appear no other source of vitality to replace them. Unless reason and the instincts exist in counter-

poise, more will be lost to the gift of evolution than has been gained. Either evolved humanity must cease to feel deeply; or, continuing to feel at all, the human being will come to care only for the wrong things.

Though the passage occurs well before they meet, I find its generalizations clearly applicable to Carrie and Hurstwood. Indeed, I am tempted to suppose that it appears here in Chapter Eight as an anticipation and a definition of the two poles between which they will presently be moving.

In the park—significantly that portion of the metropolis closest to the freedom and flexibility of nature—Carrie and Hurstwood found it possible to be lovers. They had their moment of responding instinctively, of being warmly aligned to their surroundings as well as to one another. By contrast, their departure from the park does not simply restore them to the city, where a musical “hum” is once more transformed into the strident, distracting roar of urban existence. In a profoundly figurative sense, the way out of the park is, for them, a way back into commitments and values which no longer partake of the natural or the instinctive, because they are the fabrications solely of reason.

It is reason severed from feeling, reason in the form of prudence and calculation, that makes Hurstwood plot to have Carrie for his secret mistress—just as, in the form of greed, reason tempts him to take the small fortune from Fitzgerald and Moy before he takes Carrie; in the form of envy, it causes him to reject Carrie while he mourns the lost status and bygone luxuries of his Chicago years; and, as a corrosive (and quite pointless) sense of guilt, it turns him from Hurstwood to Wheeler, from dignity to dereliction, from a man passionately in love to a lethargic wastrel, and from the joy of being alive to his slow, hopeless preparation for suicide. And as Hurstwood withdraws from the reality of passion into a series of uncreative rationalizations, the career of Carrie takes its course along a parallel route. The girl who abounded in affection (who was, in Dreiser’s phrase, “indeed worth loving”) as she hurried to meet Hurstwood becomes in time the cautious Carrie, reflecting that love is hardly worth the risk of inconvenience; then the sychophantic Carrie, whose ideal is the barren elegance of Mrs. Vance; and finally, able to function only as a player on the stage, the Carrie stripped of *all* individuality: Miss Carrie Madenda, hugging her public image because she has nothing else left to arouse her affections (132). Together, Dreiser’s lovers have denied the instinctive life, in which, alone and uniquely, the expression of love remains a viable experience.

But could it have been otherwise? Trapped by the dualism in human nature (and, one might add, unable to linger indefinitely in the park, since by midnight the policeman will certainly have roused up to throw them out), are not the lovers more nearly unwitting victims of civilization and its discontents than they are perpetrators? In the passage from Chapter Eight, Dreiser—perhaps to a surprising degree—seems willing to bend his well-known determinism, in order to suggest the extent of their complicity.<sup>2</sup>

Partly, he acknowledges, the split between feeling and reason is less a fault in "untutored man" than it is the peculiar burden he bears: the mark of his place in a "middle stage" of evolution, where, no longer animal, he has not yet mastered the potentialities for being fully human either. Yet the withering of his emotional resources is not altogether due to an imposition from without. Eventually, Dreiser promises, the jangle of reason with instinct "shall have been adjusted"; the integrated human being will then point "steadfast and unwavering to the distinct pole of truth" (71). And if, in time, the imbalance is to be corrected, it follows that the perpetuation now of a shrunken and tragically divided self must result from some error—some fatal flaw of will or judgement—for which the self is responsible.

"'Tis a foine couple,'" reflects a passer-by in Jefferson Park, "'they must be rich'" (139). He is wrong, of course; at this point in the narrative the fine glow displayed by Carrie and Hurstwood has nothing to do with their financial status. Yet he is right as well, for the couple would agree with him that wealth is the necessary condition of happiness. Thus, moving from "park" to "city" (enacting an out-and-back journey of metaphorical dimensions), they do not so much lose their passions as allow passion to be diverted, misspent and hence corrupted into a kind of parody of its proper function. Their mistake consists of shifting desire away from one another and of attaching it exclusively to what Hurstwood will call "wealth, place, fame" (266) and, in a striking echo, Carrie refers to as "one whirl of pleasure and delight" (283). And the folly of their undertaking is soon mirrored in all the sad ironies to which it gives rise. Determined to have Carrie, but only if he can also (and first) secure his notion of the good life, Hurstwood must watch while both goals recede steadily before him down his long plunge toward the apathy of "'What's the use?'" He ends up remembering as something positively joyous the emotional vacuum he had endured with Mrs. Hurstwood and their children. By the same token, Carrie seeks from Hurstwood the avenues to wealth and power, and in the process of rising beyond his influence destroys both him and significant entitlements of her own. She ends up in the role of clothes-horse, with as little sense of personal identity as was possessed by the impoverished Hansons (or by Drouet, the aimless seducer), and as little as she herself had known when she lived in the household of either.

Like the chorus from Greek tragedy, the bystander in Jefferson Park could foretell, even as he misread the evidence. Unerringly he points ahead to "katastates" of discontent erupting through the bloodstream of one protagonist (297), to the formation of harsh little lines around the mouth of the other. But if these are the outcomes of a look that was shared one June afternoon in Chicago, it is not because the lookers were ever borne along helplessly in their pursuit of the American Dream of Success. Rather, Carrie and Hurstwood must be understood as willful violators of a "truth" which image and action had rendered quite "dis-

tinct" during the scene in the park. It is the truth that when feeling serves higher ends than a rational gratification of selfhood, and a passion for persons thus transcends an obsession with things, the human being can surmount both self and environment through the retrieving grace of love.

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"What shall I do now? What shall I do?"

. . . "What shall we do tomorrow?"

"What shall we ever do?"

And I Tiresias have foresuffered all . . .

—*The Waste Land*

Detached, and yet infinitely pitying—competent to overhear and reproduce all that happens, but powerless to prevent any of it—the narrative voice in *Sister Carrie* is not wholly unlike Tiresias's. Its brooding resonance derives less from a naturalistic documentation of life than from the analysis it presents of those forces—historical, social, personal—which negate the possibility of becoming truly alive. And in taking for his subject the medley of the living-dead (note how the zombies are marshaled into one great, clacking processional during the last two chapters of the novel), Dreiser anticipated in 1900 the wasteland-theme of modern literature. He might have had his own views about how to care, and about what was valuable enough to warrant being cared for. But by showing the tragic consequences of a failure to care deeply and humanly, he joined such other mourners at the graveside of human passion as Eliot, Fitzgerald, Cummings and Dos Passos, Conrad, James Baldwin and D. H. Lawrence.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps, in fact, his vision of the wasteland will bear particular comparison to Lawrence's. To say this is not meant to discount the immense difference between them in matters of language, tone or psychological subtlety. But it is to suggest that below the level of sophistication there are resemblances of outlook which should not go unnoticed. Dreiser and Lawrence were linked, it seems to me, by a fierce conviction that the warm heart is the last remaining value of mankind—and that unless the heart is asserted in love, we face certain engulfment by everything mechanical and demoralizing in our experience. Consequently, it may not be amiss to find in the central symbol of *Sister Carrie* a development of essentially the same meaning that was later to be established through a remarkable metaphor of Lawrence's.

In the story ironically entitled "Rocking Horse Winner" Lawrence locates an object that perfectly expresses his sense of the destructive busyness of modern life, and of the kinship among boredom, obsession and frustration in a modern world whose incessant clamor is for "more money! Oh-h-h, there must be more money." It is the symbol of the rocking horse, moving and moving, yet rooted to a single spot, so that it

never really moves at all. And what, except to create a comparably moribund (and more than slightly desperate) atmosphere, is the purpose of the rocking that goes on in *Sister Carrie*? We have misinterpreted if we take Dreiser's rocking chair to be a place of either real energy or real repose. As one and another of his characters turn to rocking (and, in particular, as first Carrie and then Hurstwood seek refuge in the rocking chair), it is always to rock within the confines of the same dismal pattern. The character has withdrawn from graspable human relationships and entered a dream-world, where the fantasies are not so much ephemeral as unworthy, and hence turn bitter and dissatisfying in the moment of their attainment.

Like the rocking horse, then, the rocking chair gives off only an illusion of movement. Actually it is a stationary object, denying the growth or moral progression of the self, as it imposes its rigidity and stasis upon those who would occupy it. To settle for the rhythms of the chair is to be fatally cut off from the natural, life-sustaining rhythms of the scene in the park; it is to have substituted for the promptings of the warm heart-in-love the artifices of reason: the values of convenience and propriety, the delight in mere show, the descent into mere selfishness. And the legacy of such a choice seems terribly confirmed in our last glimpse of Carrie. Rocking alone, she has gained neither peace nor fruition, for these possibilities lie somewhere behind her. Her destiny is to have got nowhere, as "in your rocking chair by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel" (454).<sup>4</sup>

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### footnotes

1. The passage is a splendid example of Dreiser's craftsmanship—the "finesse" that Ellen Moers describes in *The Two Dreisers*, or the appropriateness of manner to matter that Alexander Kern had earlier analyzed in "Dreiser's Difficult Beauty," *Western Review*, XVI (Winter, 1952), 129-136.

References are to the Rinehart Edition of *Sister Carrie*, ed. Kenneth S. Lynn (New York, 1966), 134-135. Hereafter page numbers will be incorporated into the text.

2. Or perhaps it is not so surprising. For all his indebtedness to the deterministic philosophies, Dreiser, the creative writer, was not nearly the necessitarian—the narrowly "naturalistic" creator of characters and episodes—he is sometimes made out to be. From the standpoint of his moral imagination, there had to be an element of freedom, as Elsie Vivas sees, when he observes that "there is more to Dreiser's concrete dramatic picture of men and society than he finds room for in his mechanistic philosophy." See "Dreiser, An Inconsistent Mechanist," *International Journal of Ethics*, XLVIII (July, 1938), 498-508.

3. Another way of putting the case, however, is to say that as late as 1900, he has worked up into narrative many of the issues (and even his own version of certain of the solutions) from the first and second chapters of *Walden*. The themes of both *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* make it easy for me to understand why, having moved from Spencer to Marx to Quakerism, Dreiser emerged in the later 1930's as a disciple of Thoreau, the most important philosopher "from Democritus to Einstein." He introduced and edited *The Living Thoughts of Thoreau* in 1939, and there is a good general account of what he found to admire in *Walden* in John J. McAleer's *Theodore Dreiser, An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York, 1968), 56-66.

4. My interpretation of the ending of the book has been anticipated, though with a key difference, in W. A. Freeman's "The Motif of Circularity in *Sister Carrie*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, VII (Winter, 1962), 384-392. Nothing happens, says Mr. Freeman—to which of course I would want to add: True, but something could, and should, have.