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Introduction

DONALD PIZER

SISTER CARRIE, like *Madame Bovary* and *The Waste Land*, is both a major work of art and an important landmark in the development of literary modernism. A distinctive characteristic of works of this kind is their centrality in efforts to define the nature of modern thought and expression. Almost always controversial and even held in contempt at their appearance, such works have continued to stimulate critical anxiety right up to the present. What is the new sensibility here expressed, it is asked, and how can our understanding of this sensibility aid our understanding of the intellectual and cultural space we continue to occupy? Unlike Flaubert's masterpiece of irony and Eliot's great symbolic poem, *Sister Carrie* also raises important questions about the very nature of significant art. How can a novel seemingly so unconsciously shaped and so inept in its devices and language hold generation after generation of sophisticated readers? It is at the complex intersection of these two lines of inquiry – *Sister Carrie* as a novel which achieves its penetrating insight into our lives almost in spite of itself – that much criticism of the work has both flourished and floundered.

Theodore Dreiser's life and career from his birth in 1870 to the appearance of *Sister Carrie* in 1900 are intimately related both to the depth and to the awkwardness of the novel.¹ Dreiser's father was a German Catholic immigrant, his mother of Pennsylvania Mennonite farm background, and the family large and poor. Other American writers had grown up in limited circumstances, but no major American author before Dreiser participated so fully in the new industrial and urban world of America in the late nineteenth century – a world in which hosts of immigrant poor struggled to

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gain a foothold in the vast sprawl of an emerging metropolis. This had not been the principal fact of the youth of William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, or Henry James, the major writers of the generation just prior to Dreiser's, nor was it that of Stephen Crane or Frank Norris, Dreiser's foremost contemporaries, even though they wrote about the new urban life of their time. It was Dreiser alone who had been hustled as a child from one small Indiana town to the next while his father struggled to make a living and who as an adolescent and again as a young man had been plunged into the hurly-burly of Chicago and had precariously held on there as dishwasher, stove cleaner, freight car tracer, warehouse clerk, and laundry truck driver until finally, in early 1892, he broke into newspaper work as a reporter for the *Chicago Globe*.

During the next eight years Dreiser, by dint of hard work and a tenacious will, carved out a career for himself in journalism. By early 1894 he was a successful reporter for the St. Louis *Republic* and was on the verge of marrying a local schoolteacher of good family. But, like Carrie herself, he restlessly wanted something vaguely "higher" or "better" than this fate and so pushed on until, after short stays in Toledo and Pittsburgh, he landed, in late 1894, in New York. There, after some struggle, and at a point much like the down-and-out stage of Hurstwood's New York career, he managed to push his way to the top of the highly competitive popular journalism world of the 1890s – first as editor of *Ev'ry Month*, a magazine devoted largely to the publication of sheet music, and then as a free-lance contributor to the many new ten-cent magazines which had sprung up in the 1890s. From late 1897 to late 1899, when he began *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser ground out over 100 articles on such subjects as "Haunts of Nathaniel Hawthorne," "The Chicago Drainage Canal," and "Women Who Have Won Distinction in Music," becoming a leader in the field.

So this was the Dreiser who in October 1899 sat down to write *Sister Carrie*. He had experienced – as he later recorded in his remarkable autobiographies *Dawn* (1931) and *Newspaper Days* (1922) – the rough edges of life as had few American authors. He had also known, in his own life and in those of his brothers and sisters, the core of hope and expectation – usually thwarted but occasionally fulfilled – seemingly inherent in the American expe-

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rience. As a writer, he had developed a journalistic facility, but since he had not yet attempted to write about life as he knew it, he had seldom expressed himself beyond the conventions of the newspaper report and the magazine article. (Almost all of Dreiser's creative work up to the summer before he began *Sister Carrie* had consisted of lachrymose magazine verse.) He came to the writing of *Sister Carrie*, in other words, intending to say something true and resonant about the new American experience he had encountered at first hand, but he also came with only a half-formed sense of how to do so. The novels of Balzac and Hardy, two of his early enthusiasms, had revealed to him that the modern novel could deal profoundly and movingly with the conditions of modern life by depicting the lives of common people. But aside from these rough guides he had to find his own way.

This process had begun in the summer of 1899. Dreiser had again reached a plateau in his career and again, like the ever-rocking Carrie, had become restless. Recently married to Sara White (also called Sallie or Jug), the conventional-minded Missouri schoolteacher he had been engaged to for over four years, he was also at the height of his success as a popular journalist. From this resting place of stability and achievement Dreiser was pushed into the hazardous waters of fiction by his friend Arthur Henry. He had met Henry in the spring of 1894, when Henry – then an editor of the Toledo *Blade* – had employed him briefly during the time when Dreiser was gradually making his way toward New York. The two men immediately became friends. Although Henry was never to write anything of importance, and although his ideas never extended beyond the obvious, he shared with Dreiser at this point in Dreiser's career a romantic enthusiasm for the possibilities of life and, more specifically, for their own possibilities as writers. So when Henry turned up in New York in the summer of 1897, himself somewhat adrift, the two renewed their friendship, and Henry invited Dreiser to join him at his home on the Maumee River, near Toledo. But Dreiser, who at this point was just beginning his free-lance career after two years of editing *Ev'ry Month*, could not take up the invitation until the summer of 1899. Then, accompanied by Jug, he spent over two months on the Maumee with Henry and his wife.

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It was in this setting, and at this moment of equilibrium, that Dreiser, encouraged by Henry, made his first full-scale effort to write fiction. He had attempted a few imitative stories during his early days in New York, and he had written a number of minor semifictional sketches while editing *Ev'ry Month*. But now, at twenty-eight, he made a concerted effort for the first time. The four stories that he wrote that summer, all of which were published in 1901 and later collected in *Free and Other Stories* (1918), differ widely in subject matter and theme. But all contain themes which were to preoccupy Dreiser not only in his early novels but throughout his career. It was as though the act of turning to fiction had suddenly crystallized his essential response to life as his other authorial roles – reporter, editorial writer, poet, popular journalist – had not. Perhaps the most significant of these stories were “McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers” and “Nigger Jeff.” Both are personal allegories, in the same way that the careers of Carrie and Hurstwood represent some of Dreiser’s deepest feelings about himself. In both stories, a detached observer – McEwen watching groups of warring ants at his feet, the young newspaperman Davies sent to report a rape case and its aftermath – is plunged into the turmoil of powerful feelings and violent action that he has been observing and so acquires a recognition of the tragic center of life. This core of emotion and struggle, Dreiser appears to be saying, must be understood if life at its deepest level is to be understood, and it is the function of the writer to force the reader – as McEwen and Davies have been forced – into an acceptance of this truth. “I’ll get it all in,” Davies cries at the end of “Nigger Jeff,” after having seen and responded to the powerful feelings preceding and following Jeff’s lynching. And this no doubt was Dreiser’s own unvoiced declaration of intent as he began his career as an imaginative writer.

By the end of the summer Henry had a plan. He would move to New York, where he and Dreiser would continue to write for the popular magazines, but each would also attempt to write a novel. And so, back in New York in October 1899, Dreiser, as he later recalled, wrote the words “Sister Carrie” at the top of a leaf of the small yellow sheets he used for his writing at that time, and began. Many modern authors setting out to write a first novel have turned

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to exploitation of some aspect of their own early lives, both because this material is close at hand and because its truthfulness is seemingly authenticated by the writer's first-hand experience. Dreiser, as he began *Sister Carrie*, does not appear to reflect this truism, since the story he was to tell was that of his sister Emma. But by the time Dreiser completed *Sister Carrie*, both Carrie and Hurstwood had become so expressive of his own conception of himself, and especially of his hopes and fears, that their stories had indeed in essence become his own story.

Emma Wilhelmina, the second of Dreiser's five sisters, was eight years older than Theodore. Like all the Dreiser children (Dreiser also had four brothers), at least as Dreiser remembered them, she had resented the restrictions of small town life and of her father's strict religious moralism and had rebelled. Rebellion in her case took the form of leaving home for Chicago, where in early 1886, after some years of living with an architect, she had established a relationship with L. A. Hopkins. Hopkins worked for Chapin and Gore, a firm which owned a number of prominent Chicago saloons; he also had a wife and children. The affair between Emma and Hopkins moved in the direction of domestic farce when Mrs. Hopkins hired a detective to follow her husband. One night, when Hopkins's location had been determined, she and a policeman confronted Emma and Hopkins in bed. ("My God! ma, is that you?" one newspaper report had Hopkins exclaiming.)² In response, Hopkins engineered an escape – after taking some \$3,500 from his employer's safe, he and Emma (with Emma a willing participant) fled by train for Canada en route to New York. Motivated either by close pursuit or cold feet, Hopkins returned almost all the money while he and Emma were still in Montreal, at which point they were permitted to continue to New York without further police action. By the time Dreiser arrived in New York in late 1894, Hopkins and Emma were in poor circumstances. Hopkins appeared to be permanently out of work, and Emma was unhappily running a seedy rooming house. Several months later Dreiser played a major role in a ruse which permitted Emma to leave Hopkins, who then disappeared from view. Emma herself was later to marry and become a stout working-class housewife.

Dreiser's impulse, in turning to Emma and Hopkins's Chicago

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experiences as the basis for the first half of *Sister Carrie*, was not merely to tell a piquant and “true” story but also to use the story to express a more abstract truth – one concerning the nature of life in a great American city in which individuals of varying makeups have their natures clarified and their fates shaped by the raw forces of life. To this end, Dreiser “refined” the characters and experiences of Emma and Hopkins in his portrayal of Carrie and Hurstwood in order to have them serve as more expressive vehicles for his theme. Carrie is made more sensitive and emotional and Hurstwood more socially prominent. In addition, the clear-cut sexual and larcenous nature of the departure of Emma and Hopkins from Chicago is made more complex and ambiguous. Dreiser in these very significant changes was not motivated principally by a desire to remove the gross elements from a true story to make it more palatable to a late Victorian audience. As becomes clear in his depiction of Carrie and Hurstwood’s New York experiences, he rather sensed from the beginning in Emma and Hopkins the configuration of inner strength disguised by outer weakness and of outer prominence disguising inner weakness which were the essential truths of their natures, once the “forces of life” present in a large city revealed these truths. For the Chicago portion of the novel, therefore, it was necessary to render Carrie more appealing and Hurstwood more successful than had been true of Emma and Hopkins. And for the New York portion it was necessary to discard entirely the later experiences of Emma and Hopkins because these did not fulfill the expectations about the fates of Carrie and Hurstwood which Dreiser had laid out in the Chicago portion. For the second half of the novel, Dreiser therefore drew upon the deepest strains in his own nature to complete the expression of the themes he saw inherent in his reshaped version of the lives of Emma and Hopkins. Carrie is no longer merely country innocence adrift but an aspiring creative sensibility seeking fulfillment in the artistic marketplace of the metropolis (as was Dreiser); and Hurstwood becomes (as Dreiser had feared he himself might become) a figure broken by the anonymous hostility of the city as he seeks to make his way in a new and more difficult world.

The story of Emma and Hopkins, in short, was transformed by Dreiser into a full-scale fictional exploration of his lifelong preoc-

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cupation with the nature of desire, as that aspect of experience is expressed in its varying forms in varying temperaments and as it is shaped in its expression by the distinctive character of American life. In particular, for *Sister Carrie* the late nineteenth-century cultural myths of the seduction of the young girl in the city and of the prosperous origins of the Bowery bum were molded by Dreiser into a complex mix of acceptance and parody of popular belief – one of the principal characteristics of all his fiction from *Sister Carrie* to *An American Tragedy*. For the New York portion of the novel, Dreiser also relied heavily on objective correlatives of desire fulfilled or thwarted that he knew at first hand – the Broadway world of the musical comedy, which he had frequently reported for *Ev'ry Month*, and his own “hard times” trying to break into New York newspaper work during the winter of 1894–95. But in the end, of course, it was Dreiser’s identification not only with the externals of the story – with Carrie hunting for a job in Chicago, as Dreiser had done, or with Hurstwood in New York anxiously counting his money, as Dreiser had done – but also with its underlying configuration of hope and fear which is the source of the enduring power of the work.

With Arthur Henry on hand offering encouragement and with Jug reading and correcting portions of the manuscript as Dreiser completed them, *Sister Carrie* went steadily forward. There were of course points at which Dreiser had difficulty – when Hurstwood and Carrie first meet, and when Hurstwood steals the money – and he also had to interrupt his writing to prepare the popular articles that kept the pot boiling. But on the whole he wrote rapidly during the three six-week periods he devoted wholly to the novel and finished a first draft on March 29, 1900. This version of *Sister Carrie* concludes with Hurstwood’s suicide and with a strong suggestion in the penultimate chapter that Carrie and Ames are to become romantically involved. In an interview conducted in 1907, Dreiser recalled that he sensed soon after completing this version of the novel that the “book was not done. The narrative, I felt, was finished, but not completed. . . . The story had to stop, and yet I wanted in the final picture to suggest the continuation of Carrie’s fate along the lines of established truths.”³ These truths, it was now clear to him – though they had perhaps been suggested ini-

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tially by Henry and Jug – required that Ames not be considered a “matrimonial possibility”⁴ and that the novel end with a summary comment on Carrie. He therefore extensively rewrote the last encounter between Ames and Carrie and expanded an existing brief passage on Carrie beginning “Oh blind strivings of the human heart” into a full-blown epilogue on her nature and fate. Although some recent commentators have favored the abrupt starkness of Dreiser’s original ending, and although the sentimental and clichéd diction of Dreiser’s apostrophe to Carrie has had few admirers, Dreiser’s revision of the conclusion can be defended on several grounds. His removal of an intimation that Carrie and Ames would find happiness together was necessary given his emphasis throughout the novel upon the fact that Carrie’s relationships with men eventually become encumbrances hindering her further search for fulfillment. And Dreiser also appears to have felt strongly that his role as prophet,⁵ as interpreter of the larger significance of the life he had portrayed, required him, as a kind of aesthetic necessity to the overall tone and shape of the novel, to offer a last reading of Carrie’s essential character and destiny. Indeed, he was to conclude all his major novels with a similar kind of epilogue.

Even before Dreiser finished the first draft of *Sister Carrie*, the novel was being typed. What happened after the typescript was completed in mid or late April 1900 is at the center of a major difference of opinion among Dreiser scholars. In all of Dreiser’s own accounts – including his specific recollection of the chronology to his first biographer Dorothy Dudley⁶ – he and Henry realized, once the book was fully typed, that it was too long. (In its later cut form, *Sister Carrie* was a book of 557 pages in the Doubleday, Page first edition. In its uncut typescript form, it was approximately 36,000 words longer, or about 680 printed pages, which would have made it exceptionally long by the standards of the day, especially for a first novel by an unknown author.) This desire to shorten the novel also introduced the possibility of improving it. Like most novice writers of fiction, Dreiser had overextended a number of incidents and authorial explanations early in the novel in an effort to establish fully his characters and their situation. In addition, he now realized that some Chicago incidents and passages which derived from Emma and Hopkins’s lives and which therefore sug-

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gested a coarse element in Hurstwood and Carrie's experiences were inappropriate in light of his later depiction of Hurstwood's tragic fall and Carrie's growth in sensibility. These various motives led Dreiser and Henry to concentrate on shortening the Chicago portion of the novel. Henry played an initial and important role in this effort by reading through the typescript and suggesting passages for omission. Dreiser then accepted or rejected these suggestions. After the novel was cut, it was submitted for publication to Harper and Brothers, which rejected it.

A different interpretation both of the chronology and of the motives behind the cutting of *Sister Carrie* is offered by the editors of the recent Pennsylvania Edition. In this account of the pre-publication history of the novel, Dreiser submitted *Sister Carrie* to Harper and Brothers *before* he and Henry cut the novel.⁷ When Harpers rejected the book because Dreiser had not been sufficiently "delicate" in depicting the "illicit relations of the heroine" and because the novel would not hold the interest of "the feminine readers who control the destiny of so many novels,"⁸ Dreiser was persuaded by Henry to revise *Sister Carrie* to make it more consistent with popular taste. Thus, the editors of the Pennsylvania Edition argue, Dreiser in effect served as his own censor to the extent that his cutting weakened the sexual honesty and philosophical depth of the novel. In response to this interpretation, the Pennsylvania Edition prints as the authoritative text of *Sister Carrie* the holograph manuscript before Dreiser revised its ending and before he and Henry cut the novel.

This is a plausible and appealing argument, but as this author and several other reviewers of the Pennsylvania Edition have noted, it has several major flaws.⁹ First, there is no external evidence to support a belief that *Sister Carrie* was cut in response to its rejection by Harpers. Second, if it was Dreiser and Henry's intent to make the novel more acceptable to a feminine audience, they failed miserably. It was after all Mrs. Doubleday, in a legend which probably has an element of truth to it, who demanded that her husband seek to suppress the novel despite his firm's acceptance of it. And a repeated note in reviews of the 1900 edition was that the novel was "unpleasant" – a code term intended to put the delicate prospective reader on her guard. Third, is it possible to reject an

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author's own revisions on the grounds that he made them poorly? It is the author's book in the end, and except when there is clear evidence of coercion – as there is not in this instance – his motives for revision must be treated with the same respect as those which led him to write the book in the first place. Otherwise, common sense tells us, we as editors will be attempting to substitute our own critical judgment for the author's creative imagination, which expresses itself as much in revision as in original composition. And finally, it has not been demonstrated that the Pennsylvania Edition of *Sister Carrie* is a better book than the Doubleday, Page version. It is longer and more detailed and more explicit, but these qualities, as commentators have also pointed out, do not necessarily make a better novel.

Harpers, in its letter of rejection, had commented somewhat disparagingly on the "realism" of *Sister Carrie*. It was perhaps with this characterization in mind that Dreiser then submitted the novel to Doubleday, Page and Company, a new firm that had been formed earlier in 1900 after the dissolution of Doubleday and McClure. In that reorganization, Frank Norris, whose novel *McTeague* had been published by Doubleday and McClure in 1899, went with Frank Doubleday and was serving as a part-time manuscript reader while still pursuing a career as a novelist. *McTeague*, much of which depicts the decline of a San Francisco dentist and his wife into poverty, violence, and sexual degradation, was "realism" with a vengeance. Norris was assigned to read *Sister Carrie*, and he liked it very much. He wrote Dreiser in late May that "the book pleased me as well as any novel I have ever read" and that he would enthusiastically recommend its publication.¹⁰ Doubleday himself was out of the country, and in his absence Walter H. Page, the firm's junior partner, met with Dreiser in early June and informed him of the novel's acceptance. Elated, Dreiser left for Missouri with his wife to visit her family, and he and Henry quickly spread the news that Doubleday, Page was to publish the novel.

It is at this point that the story of the publication of *Sister Carrie* becomes part of twentieth-century American cultural mythology. As Dreiser later recounted the tale again and again,¹¹ Doubleday, on his return from Europe in mid-July, took the typescript of the novel home to read. There, Mrs. Doubleday, a woman active in