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REAL AND IMAGINARY CITIES IN DREISER'S *SISTER CARRIE*

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Richard Hofstadter once wrote that «The United States was born in the country and has moved to the city»(*The Age of Reform*, 23). What he meant, I think, is that America has clung to rural values—the Agrarian myth—in spite of the fact that it has been developing, from the very beginning, into a commercial society. Thomas Jefferson idealized the simple virtues of the yeoman at a time when «[t]he farmer himself, in most cases, was in fact inspired to make money»(Hofstadter, 23). For Hofstadter, «the agrarian myth represents a kind of homage that Americans have paid to the fancied innocence of their origins»(24). In America there has always been a confusion of the real and the ideal.

By the end of the nineteenth century in the United States the Industrial Revolution held sway; and American cities such as New York and Chicago were symbols of possibility for a rural population of American dreamers in pursuit of happiness—a pursuit that so often came to be identified with wealth and status, material success, yet which often ended in failure.

By the turn of the century America's cities had been growing rapidly, and not without problems:

> One of the keys to the American mind at the end of the old century and the beginning of the new was that American cities were filling up in very considerable part with small-town or rural people. The whole cast of American thinking in this period was deeply affected by the experience of the rural mind confronted with the phenomena of urban life, its crowding, poverty, crime, corruption; impersonality, and ethnic chaos. . . the city seemed not merely a new social form or way of life but a strange threat to civilization itself. (Hofstadter,176)

Yet despite the harsh realities of city life; despite the venomous rhetoric of the Populists and the journalism of the muckrakers, who warned of corrupt robber barons and Wall Street conspiring with international bankers; the city was the place to go. The immense growth of America's cities offered new opportunities for Americans in search of better things. With its trappings of wealth and status, it became a symbol of possibility in the American imagination.

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is an important text in any discussion that concerns itself with the American city. As Donald Pizer notes, «no major American author before Dreiser participated so fully in the new industrial and urban world of America in the late nineteenth century»(1). In *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser depicts real American cities, specifically Chicago and New York, in all their grandeur and squalor. Through the consciousness of Carrie Meeber, Dreiser's heroine, we glimpse the city as she imagines it could be for her—a place where happiness could be found amid the wealth and status. Though the novel belongs to the school of American Realism, Dreiser, «more radically than anyone of his generation . . . exposed as 'unrealistic' the moral vision that continued to be enacted in so many other realist novels. . .»(Mitchell, xi). In its skillful observation of life, along with an absence of ethical plot complication (Walcutt, 191), *Sister Carrie* is also considered to be an example of American Naturalism. Its essence, however, is its blending of the real and the imaginary.

The main characters—Drouet, Hurstwood, and Carrie—are assumed to be fictional creations, the product of the writer's imagination. Yet it is taken as a given today that much of the plot was influenced by the scandalous affairs of Dreiser's sister Emma, who lived with a Chicago architect before eloping with L.A. Hopkins, a trusted employee of an affluent Chicago saloon, who, like Hurstwood, had stolen money from the firm where he worked. Dreiser, weighing the possibilities of what could happen to his sister, fails to impose a verdict of guilty on Carrie. *Sister Carrie* is not a merely realistic account of his sister's illicit doings. Rather, it is a text that debunks the idealistic tenets of the myth of the American dream that most often held sway in the early twentieth-century American imagination. Donald Pizer contends that Dreiser «refined» the characters of Carrie and Hurstwood in order to «express an 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»(6). And the rise of the American city—in reality and in the American imagination—has surely been the place where we pursue the American dream of material success.

Dreiser questions notions of morality, industry, perseverance or hard work, gives us the dream—and its failure; indeed, it is Hurstwood who embodies any Horatio Alger ethic of success:

> He had risen by perseverance and industry, through long hours of service, from the position of barkeeper in a commonplace saloon to his present altitude. (46)

Yet it is Hurstwood who fails, falling headlong into destitution, illness, and finally, suicide. As Charles Child Walcutt notes, «Hurstwood's degeneration is a remarkable representation of the meaningless, almost unmotivated sort of tragedy that art had, until then, conspired to ignore»(188). For Richard Lehan, «the city itself is so much larger than the individual that the human scale is lost—as well as the values that go with the human scale...» (69). Lehan notes the lack of a «moral center» in *Sister Carrie*:

> What we get is human experience as an amoral process; characters move around like driftwood caught in the ocean's tide, never able to contextualize their place in the process, always being spoken through by a larger self, which is the voice of the city itself, and by the desire its materiality produces. (67)

Dreiser's realistic account of success and failure in the big city—«The vagaries of fortune are indeed curious»(412)—aroused the indignation of an American public (or its literary critics, at least) weaned upon the mythic «rags to riches» success stories of such American icons as Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln—not to mention the Alger boys; weaned upon the ideal of virtue being rewarded. But in *Sister Carrie* the real city subverts such ideals.

Dreiser's imaginary cities are tempered by realism. He had his sister's story in mind, but, more importantly, he had seen the reality of America's cities through journalistic eyes, which enabled him to describe a detailed, realistic setting for the sad story of his «waif amid forces.» As Willard Thorp has noted,

> No American novelist had so faithfully and minutely rendered life in our sprawling cities-the streets, mean and fashionable, the saloons and restaurants and hotels, the department stores (newly arrived on the scene), the theaters, the apartment houses with elevators and doormen and dumbwaiters. Here was our first full-scale city novel, so accurate in its details that the much vexed Mr. Doubleday [Dreiser's unenthusiastic publisher] at the last moment before publication persuaded Dreiser to mask the names of a few actual persons and places of business lest there be libel suits. (Afterward to *Sister Carrie,* 472)

Though Dreiser may have changed a few names to please his publisher, whose wife objected to the «immoral» content of the novel, the cities of Chicago and New York depicted in *Sister Carrie* are as real as any cities which have been the subject of American writers:

> Throughout, Dreiser is careful to depict characters moving about in a realm of real hotels, restaurants, bars, and railroad stations existing in Chicago and New York during the 1880s and 1890s. He offers, as well, a chronicle of the fashionable plays, sentimental novels, dress styles, consumer prices, popular

> music, and current slang that anyone in the period would have taken for granted. (Mitchell, xvi)

As a journalist Dreiser learned to distinguish between the real and the ideal:

> As Theodore Dreiser, then a young reporter, recalled, they became alert to hypocrisy, perhaps a little cynical themselves, but fundamentally enlightened about the immense gaps between the lofty ideals and public professions of the editorial page and the dirty realities of the business office and the newsroom.» (Hofstadter, 191)

Dreiser's vision of urban U.S.A.—his real city—fires the imagination of a young provincial girl from Columbia City, Wisconsin:

> The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye....A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives, appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms. Without a counselor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! (*Sister Carrie* 8)

Carrie comes to the city with the naive hope of finding better things than could be had outside the city walls; like many other Americans were doing, she leaves the rolling, green fields of the republic in search of an imaginary city:

> To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untraveled the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing. Particularly if it be evening—that mystic period between the glare and gloom of the world when life is changing from one sphere or condition to another. Ah, the promise of the night. What does it not hold for the weary! What old illusion of hope is not here forever repeated! (13)

This evocation of the night, and the wonder it can bestow upon the city, resonates with Hawthorne's appraisal of the moon shining through his window as he contemplates the real and imaginary city of Salem in *The Custom-House*:

> all these details, so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect....Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. (CH, 28)

In *Sister Carrie* the actual and the imaginary meet when Carrie arrives in Chicago: «Amid all the maze, uproar, and novelty she felt cold reality taking her by the hand»(15). She comes to Chicago looking for work; she will reside with her sister, paying board in an austere flat until she can find some menial employment. But she sees that «[h]er sister carried with her most of the grimness of shift and toil»(15). In a state of poverty, Carrie finds thankless work as a factory girl; in the harsh reality of her situation, she can only imagine the wonders she might find in the bright lights and opulence of Chicago:

> The entire metropolitan center possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep....It was all wonderful, all vast, all far removed, and she sank in spirit inwardly and fluttered feebly at the heart... (20-21)

The imaginary Chicago of her dreams only exacerbates Carrie's disenchantment with the arduousness of her toil at the factory and the frugal nature of her accommodation at her sister's flat. Her meager existence is at odds with the beauty and wealth of Chicago that stirs her imagination:

> Carrie...had the blood of youth and some imagination....She could think of things she would like to do, of clothes she would like to wear, and of places she would like to visit....The life of the streets continued for a long time to interest Carrie. She never wearied of wondering where the people in the cars were going or what their enjoyments were. Her imagination trod a very narrow round, always winding up at points which concerned money, looks, clothes, or enjoyment. (52-53)

For a country girl with vague dreams of a better life in the big city, the drudgery of factory life is demeaning and dispiriting. Carrie's imagination is the major cause of her disillusion:

> The machine girls [where she worked] impressed her even less favorably [than the foreman]. They seemed satisfied with their lot, and were in a sense «common.» Carrie had more imagination than they. (54)

Carrie's imagination—fed upon American ideals—is the cause of her discontent with bare subsistence. Initiated into the more affluent ways of the city through her involvement with Drouet, whose money and fine appearance are in stark contrast to the reality of Carrie's lower class existence at her sister's flat, Carrie gains entrance to the type of life she had earlier been able only to imagine:

> Here was the great, mysterious city which was still a magnet for her. What she had seen only suggested its possibilities. (66)

Carrie is one of American literature's foremost dreamers: «She had vain imaginings about place and power, about far-off lands and magnificent people....She was...the victim of the city's hypnotic influence»(78-9). With Drouet supporting her, Carrie's imaginary city seems to be within her grasp:

> She imagined that across these richly carved entrance ways, where the globed and crystalled lamps shone upon paneled doors set with stained and designed panes of glass, was neither care nor unsatisfied desire. She was perfectly certain that here was happiness. (113)

Through Drouet Carrie is introduced to the world of the theater—an imaginary world that caters to the real—and even manages to get a part as an actress in a small production. «When Drouet was gone, she sat down in her rocking chair by the window to think about it. As usual, imagination exaggerated the possibilities for her»(151). Carrie does not succeed, in Chicago, in becoming a famous actress; she leaves Drouet for the charming Hurstwood, only to discover that Hurstwood has deceived her by concealing from her the fact that he is a married man. Hurstwood then steals a large sum of money from his employers and, desperate both to flee Chicago and to have Carrie, deceives her into absconding with him, in what turns out to be more an abduction than an elopement. Circumstances force Hurstwood to return the bulk of the money he has stolen and, after a brief retreat into Canada, the pair descend upon New York, which becomes, for Carrie, another imaginary city which she dreams of conquering.

Fleeing Chicago in disgrace, Hurstwood loses his secure position, and Carrie, at least for the moment, her dream of the good life. Like her first arrival in Chicago, Carrie's arrival in New York makes her aware of her insignificance amid the bustle of America's greatest city. Once again, she is a «waif amid forces.» And, once again, the allure of the city captivates the imagination of the country girl. She is befriended by a neighbor, Mrs. Vance, who is obviously of a higher social class than Carrie. She shows Carrie the high side of New York society, which serves to reawaken in Carrie the longings which she had entertained in Chicago:

> With a start she awoke to find that she was in fashion's crowd, on parade in a show place-and such a show place! Jeweler's windows gleamed along the path with remarkable frequency. Florist shops, furriers, haberdashers, confectioners-all followed in rapid succession. (289)

Dreiser depicts New York City's allure of materialism, the products of the city, readily available for those with the money to afford them. For Carrie, such riches can only be possessed in her imagination. She becomes painfully aware of the city's class distinctions:

> The street was full of coaches. Pompous doormen in immense coats, shiny brass belts and buttons, waited in front of expensive salesrooms. Coachmen in tan boots, white tights, and blue jackets waited obsequiously for the mistresses of carriages who were shopping inside. The whole street bore the flavor of riches and show, and Carrie felt that she was not of it. (289)

In New York city Carrie is made aware—more than ever—of her inferior social status. Her feeling of inequality causes shame; she thinks that the riches of the city can bring happiness:

> She could not, for the life of her, assume the attitude and smartness of Mrs. Vance, who, in her beauty, was all assurance. She could only imagine that it must be evident to many that she was the less handsomely dressed of the two. It cut her to the quick, and she resolved that she would not come here again until she looked better. At the same time she longed to feel the delight of parading here as an equal. Ah, then she would be happy! (289)

Carrie, beguiled by the splendor of New York city, is again entranced by the «imaginary world» of the stage. At the theater she is able to dream about the life which has thus far eluded her grasp. Indeed, it is the theater which has a profound effect upon her mind:

> Almost invariably she would carry the vivid imaginations away with her and brood over them the next day alone. She lived as much in these things as in the realities which made up her daily life. (290)

The world of the theater—a real place of imagination—and the opulent side of the city which she glimpses through her friendship with Mrs. Vance force Carrie to contemplate her disillusion with the mundane reality of her own situation: «It ached her to know that she was not one of them-that, alas, she had dreamed a dream and it had not come true»(291). Carrie's imaginary world is at odds with the austerity of her existence with Hurstwood, who struggles to make ends meet in New York. It is Carrie's penchant for imagination which, together with Hurstwood's gradually declining economic situation, leads to trouble between the ill-fated pair:

> When Hurstwood came, Carrie was moody. She was sitting, rocking and thinking, and did not care to have her enticing imaginations broken in upon; so she said little or nothing. (292)

When Hurstwood loses his investment in the New York city saloon where he has been working, the specter of poverty looms upon Carrie's horizon. She is aware of the

contrast between her life in Chicago and her increasingly dingy existence with Hurstwood in New York:

> The glamor of the high life of the city had, in the few experiences afforded her by the former, seized her completely. She had been taught how to dress and where to go without having ample means to do either. Now, these things—ever-present realities as they were—filled her eyes and mind. The more circumscribed became her state, the more entrancing seemed this other. And now poverty threatened to seize her entirely and to remove this other world far upward like a heaven to which any Lazarus might extend, appealingly, his hands. (313)

Hurstwood falls into the wretched abyss of homeless-ness, despairingly declares «What's the use», then turns on the gas in a seedy room in downtown New York. For him, the stark reality of his destitution is something he could never have imagined. Carrie rises to stardom, by chance, the fates seemingly dealing kindly with her: «The showy world in which her interest lay completely absorbed her»(406). But the money and status, the fine clothes and food, the carriages and hotel suites, do not bring happiness to Carrie. The realization of her dreams has not eclipsed the perpetual yearning that stalks the imagination of the American dreamer. She has attained that which she had craved, but in her loneliness she still dreams of something more. Carrie's pursuit of the imaginary, her romance of the beautiful, has not led to the happiness that she imagined would be hers when she first traversed the dark rolling fields of the republic in search of something she thought the bright lights of the city might bestow:

> ...she saw the city offering more of loveliness than she had ever known, and instinctively, by force of her moods alone, clung to it. In fine raiment and elegant surroundings, men seemed to be contented. Hence, she drew near these things. Chicago, New York; Drouet, Hurstwood; the world of fashion and the world of stage-these were but incidents. Not them, but that which they represented, she longed for. (463)

For the American dreamer of real cities, the attainment of the ideal is never as satisfying as the dream which spurs its pursuit. In her struggle for fame and fortune—and the happiness she believes will come from these—Carrie moves from one real American city to another. She transforms these urban places into imaginary cities where success—however grandly realized—will inevitably pale in comparison with the idyllic conceptions fostered by her imagination. Dreiser ends his novel on a cautionary note: the American dream is not what it appears to be in the real American city:

Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel. (465)

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