Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900)

Study Questions

A. **Characters:** Dreiser fills Sister Carrie’s life with characters that emerged in the new urban world of consumption and desire created by modern capitalists in the early twentieth century. As a naturalist would describe the look and habits of a butterfly, Dreiser put these characters under his glass, noting in rich detail each one’s background, appearance, status, relationships, values, faults, inner anxieties and desires. In the tale of Carrie’s loss of innocence in the city, we see not only the hardships she sought to escape and the consequences of her unfolding desire, but her ability to survive in troubled circumstances. **Become one of Dreiser’s characters.** In a presentation to the class (prepare this in writing as well), tell us who, and what kind of person you are, what influences formed you initially and continue to shape and change you in the story, what entices and captivates you, what fateful choices you make, how you meet the consequences of your actions. What do you represent in this novel, and what was Dreiser attempting to say about the forces playing upon human nature through you.

1. Carrie Meeber (later Carrie Medenda)
2. Charles Drouet, the stylish, successful drummer
3. Carrie’s sister Minnie Hanson and husband Sven
4. the girls who worked with Carrie sewing uppers at Adams Shoe Co.
5. G. W. Hurstwood, manager of Fitzgerald and Moy saloon
6. Mrs. Julia Hurstwood
7. Daughter Jessica Hurstwood and Son George Hurstwood, Jr.
8. Carrie’s New York friend Mrs. Vance
9. Lola, Carrie’s actress friend
10. Ames, the idealist

B. **Events.** Dreiser’s novel moves inexorably through a sequence of events that shape and test his characters. What does he want us to “see” when he shows us:

1. Carrie meeting Drouet on the train from Columbus City to Chicago
2. Carrie living with Sister Minnie on Van Buren Street, searching for work in Chicago shops and factories and shopping with Drouet
3. Carrie’s “seduction” by Hurstwood, and Drouet’s discovery of her “infidelity”
4. Hurstwood’s family crisis—his selfish children and the endless carping and avaricious demands of his wife
5. Stealing from Fitzgerald & Moy and the flight to New York
6. Dinner at Sherry’s and Carrie’s meeting first with Bob Ames
7. Hurstwood’s loss of employment and long failure to get new work
8. Hurstwood beaten by strikers when he seeks work on the streetcars
9. Carrie’s amazing rise in the theater
10. Hurstwood’s suicide
C. Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Judging by Richard Lingemann’s introduction, does this novel have anything to do with Theodore Dreiser’s own life? Why would he refer to Carrie as “sister”? Why was this novel so shocking when it first appeared?

2. One of the most compelling female figures in all of American fiction, Carrie Meeber is more than the country girl who falls from virtue to vice in the city. She “sins” against convention and morality, yet succeeds in the exotic world of the Broadway stage? Do you see this complex character as a victim, or a hero? How do you account for her rise to financial independence and fame?

3. A skilled reporter who had known poverty, Dreiser wrote with authority about Hurstwood’s decline into homelessness, hunger, and despair. Why did this happen? What personal and “external” factors explain Hurstwood’s descent? Was he different from others seeking day labor and begging for food in the long depression of the 1890s? Do people become homeless today for the same reasons?

4. Every character in this novel—Carrie, Drouet, Hurstwood and his family, Mrs. Vance, Lola, and Ames—is intensely conscious of class. What were the subtle markers of class boundaries that they noted so keenly? Why did Carrie—and Dreiser as narrator—pay so much attention to how people dressed, where they lived, ate, and shopped? As Carrie rose from sweated labor to fortune and fame, how did she manage to transgress the boundaries of class? What were the markers that Hurstwood was crossing class boundaries on the way down? Did he sympathize with others in the same boat? How did he feel about the streetcar strikers and the Bowery bums he encountered at shelters and on the streets?

5. In this story, the crucial settings that measured the fitness of Carrie and her new friends are the elegant stores, the posh “resorts” (restaurants), and the fine opera houses and theatres that commodified entertainment in the consumer culture of the time. What sort of criticism of this culture did Bob Ames provide? Was Carrie able to respond to his suggestions? Did he lead her to a better life? Was she fulfilled?

6. How do you feel about Carrie’s pattern of abandoning those who had helped her—her family in Columbus city, her sister in Van Buren Street, the kindly salesman who had dressed and housed and schooled her, the once magnificent resort manager who had treated her courteously, refined her manners, and elevated her taste? Did she leave them all without a backward glance? Was she being disloyal? Do you condemn her?

7. Carrie’s story is part of a potent literary genre—on view as well in the classic saga of Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins. What is this fictional trope of the poor girl transformed by a male tutor all about? What can we take from this novel about gender roles at the turn of the century? How are manliness and femininity constructed here? Can we say that a modernization of gender was part of a larger process of economic and social modernization underway in the industrial era? For good or ill?