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MOVEMENT IN DREISER'S SISTER CARRIE

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One of the central and most distinctive values in American culture is a desire for pure motion, movement for its own sake. A relatively new and chronically rootless society, America has always placed an unusually high premium on mobility rather than security and stability. It is not surprising, therefore, that American literature is densely populated with heroes and heroines who try "to find in motion what was lost in space"¹-- people on the move who are in quest of settings which are fluid enough to accommodate their passion for a radical independence and completely open possibilities. As Henry Nash Smith and others have cogently argued, Cooper's West, Melville's ocean, Twain's river and Whitman's open road are the mythic places Americans yearn for. John Steinbeck observed in his own travels at the end of his career that the quintessential American impulse is a reflexive wish simply to *move*:

I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over again in every part of the nation--a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from any Here. They spoke quietly of how they wanted to go somewhere, to move about, free and unanchored, *not toward something but away from something*. I saw this look and heard this yearning everywhere in every state I visited. Nearly every American hungers to move.² (Italics added)

Constance Rourke in *American Humor* similarly speaks of "that perpetual travel which often seemed the single enduring feature of the country."³ Indeed, one might validly distinguish American literature from the literature of other Western countries in terms of this quest for pure motion. Whereas,

for example, movement in the classic English novel is usually directed toward a definite place, a coherent set of tested values and a secure niche in a stable society, movement in the representative American novel is nearly always *undirected*, an open-ended process. Tom Jones, Joseph Andrews, Oliver Twist and even Robinson Crusoe see their journeys as a necessary evil, a way of working out their identities in a place-oriented society, but Jack Kerouac longs simply to be *on the road* itself, knowing full well that the place at its end will most probably be a disappointment. Odysseus moves consciously and instinctively homeward to a wife and a hierarchical society, but Rip Van Winkle ambles off to the woods so that he can avoid both. Don Quixote leaves his kingdom and Dulcinea always to return, but Huckleberry Finn lights out to the territories and never looks back. At the end of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlowe will settle for the illusion of civilization and will tell the lies necessary to maintain this illusion, but Natty Bumppo holds steadfastly to the integrity he feels is threatened by civilization and moves toward an ever-expanding wilderness.

Significantly too, the American version of *The Divine Comedy*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, never defines in any clear way the exact end of its quest. Unlike Dante, who can imagine, metaphorically at least, a clearly defined Heaven down to its minutest physical and spiritual details, Whitman is intent on giving up impressionistic images of constant motion--travelling an open road, wandering along an indefinite sea coast, searching for an infinite West. The journey he tramps is indeed "perpetual,"⁴ a process of becoming rather than a state of being.

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Sister Carrie epitomizes this American tradition, for it is in many ways a novel about the possibilities and limitations of motion. The novel's remarkable opening scene is a splendid illustration of this. Carrie Meeber, like Benjamin Franklin and a host of other American protagonists, easily separates herself from family, past and a fixed society and sets herself in motion, pursuing goals she can only vaguely sense. The train ride to Chicago "irretrievably" severs all her connections with "girlhood and home,"⁵ bringing her to a world of radically expanded possibilities. It is indeed revealing that the first human relationship she forms in this strange new world is with Drouet, a travelling salesman whose very life consists of constant movement. Like Mrs. Vance, who "can't" stay more than six months in one place" (502), Drouet is "a moth of the lamp" (71), a person who is incapable of living a genuinely settled life. This accounts in no small measure for

Carrie's favorable reaction to him. He is a perfect mirror image of her own restless tendencies.

Likewise, most of the other major scenes in the novel envision people in motion. Hurstwood proposed to Carrie while they are walking through Jefferson Park. She makes her most serious commitment to him as the two speed madly to Montreal. And the novel ends with a brilliant collage of motion scenes-- "gaunt men shuffling" (543) in front of a mission house as they await a handout, Drouet and an anonymous friend setting out for a night of pleasure in New York, Mrs. Hurstwood and her daughter on their way to a vacation in Rome and Carrie gently rocking as she tries to conceive of a new life for herself. It is no coincidence that Hurstwood commits suicide at the end of the novel only after he has exhausted the possibilities of these forms of movement. Returning to a flophouse after milling about the streets and falling several times in the snow, he pulls off his shoes and "lay down" (554), only to arise a few moments later to turn on the gas. The heavy snow which covers New York on the night of his death is a striking metaphor of the world which has defeated him, a world which denies him the secure foothold necessary for purposeful movement:

Hopelessly he turned back into Broadway again and slopped onward and away, begging, crying, losing track of his thoughts, one after another, as a mind decayed and disjointed is wont to do.

It was a truly wintry evening, a few days later, when his one distinct mental decision was reached. Already at four o'clock, the sombre hue of night was thickening the air. A heavy snow was falling--a fine picking, whipping snow, borne forward by a swift wind in long, thin lines. The streets were bedded with it--six inches of cold carpet, churned to a dirty brown by the crush of teams and the feet of men. (548)

One crucial index to Carrie's sensibility is her emotional response to motion. Movement at many key points in the novel intoxicates her because she senses it as a magical release from the limits of a prior mode of existence. She is easy prey for Drouet in the novel's opening scene partly because the exciting movement of the train has helped to dissolve the moral restraints of her earlier life. She is nearly hypnotized by the protean nature of Chicago because she feels that it is a dynamic world which is always offering fresh possibilities. As she walks to the theatre with Drouet, for example, she is greatly impressed with the lively spectacle of the city at night. The "sputtering" (87) arc lights, the strong winds and the constant jostle of people in the streets suggest

for her a marvellous world of constant novelty. The city's hypnotic influence" (89) is traceable in no small measure to "the swirl of life" (88) that it represents for her.

While riding on North Shore Drive with Mrs. Hale, Carrie's powerful imagination transforms the scene into a Dreiserian fairy land. The physical motion she experiences here is an appropriate analogue to her equally unsettled feelings:

She gazed and gazed, wondering, delighting, longing, and all the while the siren voice of the unrestful was whispering in her ear. (128)

The sequence ends later that night in Carrie's apartment, where she again conjures up the magic of Chicago while she hypnotically rocks and sings:

The glow of the palatial doors was still in her eye, the roll of the cushioned carriages still in her ears At her window, she thought it over, rocking to and fro, and gazing out across the lamp-lit park toward the lamp-lit houses on Warren and Ashland avenue. She was too wrought up to go down and eat, too pensive to do aught but rock and sing. (128)

This kind of motion releases "siren voices" which go to the core of her deepest longings. While she experiences such motion, it becomes nearly impossible for Carrie to respond to her world in any clear, rational way. It is significant, therefore, that Hurstwood usually works his romantic charms on her while the two are either walking or riding. While they are riding through Washington Boulevard, Carrie is unable to resist his declaration of love, partly because the slow, drifting movement of the elegant carriage helps to put her conscious mind to sleep. In a later scene which pictures them lazily walking through Jefferson Park, Dreiser consciously employs the nautical metaphor used throughout the novel to suggest a delicious mental drifting. While they walk, Carrie's psychological "flood-gates" (222) open and we observe her "illogically drifting and finding nothing at which to catch" (222). She fully accepts Hurstwood's bogus proposal on a totally irrational basis, knowing very little about him or the kind of future which is possible for them. She agrees to "come away" (223) with him without ever considering *where* they will go or *what* they will do! In an archetypally American way, Carrie naively assumes that travelling to another place will dissolve their pasts and solve their problems. The scene ends, ironically, with Carrie pictured as "tripping elatedly away" (225).

But by far the best example of the nearly mesmeric effects of motion on Carrie is her extraordinary flight to Montreal. Although it is difficult to account in rational terms for such a "strange pilgrimage" (292), Dreiser makes this pivotal scene altogether plausible in terms of his heroine's deepest subconscious impulses. For Carrie goes to Montreal and New York because her instincts, imagination and heart reflexively equate motion with possibility. At the very beginning of Chapter 29, appropriately entitled "The Solace of Travel: The Boats of the Sea," Dreiser editorially comments on these motives:

To the untravelled, territory other than their own familiar heath is invariably fascinating. Next to love, it is the one thing which solaces and delights. Things new are too important to be neglected, and mind, which is a mere reflection of sensory impressions, succumbs to the flood of objects. Thus lovers are forgotten, sorrows laid aside, death hidden from view. There is a world of accumulated feelings back of the trite expression--"I am going away."

As Carrie looked out upon the flying scenery she almost forgot that she had been tricked into this long journey against her will and that she was without the necessary apparel for travelling. She quite forgot Hurstwood's presence at times, and looked to homely farm-houses and cosey cottages with wondering eyes. It was an interesting world for her. Her life had just begun. She did not feel herself defeated at all. Neither was she blasted in hope. The great city held much. Possibly she would come out of bondage into freedom--who knows? (305)

As Dreiser makes abundantly clear here, her principal motive for going to Montreal is not her "love" for Hurstwood, although she still is very much attracted to him. It is extremely significant that Dreiser tells us that she quite forgets about Hurstwood at times during the journey, so enraptured does she become with a vision of her new life. Such a life is not tied to either a person or a particular place. The "great city" is any place of expanded possibility. Carrie's vision of her future centers instead around a process of liberation, a chance to start over and become anything she wants to be. It is the American quest for constant metamorphosis, unlimited personal development.

This is what the flight to Montreal suggests to her, and this explains why Carrie does not get off the train even after she discovers that she has been crudely tricked by Hurstwood. Although she consciously articulates a desire to leave the train, she fails to act on this understandable motive when

given the chance to do so. Instead, she soon becomes fascinated by the train's movement, associating it at one very revealing point with a haunting music:

The train was speeding with steady grace across the fields through patches of wood. The long whistles came with sad, musical effect as the lonely woodland crossings were approached.

Now the conductor entered the car and took up the one or two fares that had been added at Chicago. He approached Hurstwood, who handed out the tickets. Poised as she was to act, Carrie made no move. (297)

Carrie fails to act on her rational ideas because she has been overwhelmed by the train's motion and the blues-like music it creates. For music has often been associated in Carrie's mind with her deepest, most romantic longings. Her habit of singing while she rocks is used consistently as a kind of incantation which springs forth visions of possibility. The "sad musical effect" of the train whistle, therefore, stimulates Carrie's imagination on its most profound level, causing her to see her journey in strongly positive terms.

Curiously, one of Carrie's most anxious moments in the flight sequence occurs when the train actually stops. This allows her to act rationally, but it also points her backward to a past she has grown dissatisfied with. When the train resumes its "rapid motion" (301), Carrie is relieved because this allows her to act upon dreams which point her toward an open future. "As the train swept on frantically through the shadow to a newer world" (302), Carrie relaxes and feels strangely in control of her destiny.

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It is a commonplace of Dreiser criticism that *Sister Carrie* employs upward and downward movements as a basic structural principle. As Kenneth Lynn has observed:

The world that Dreiser portrays is a ceaseless flux, a fluid, wide-open universe in which people are constantly rising or falling . . . In such a world the only reality is movement, the only good is upward movement.⁶

Donald Pizer goes so far as to claim: "To describe *Sister Carrie* appears to be an exercise in stating the obvious: Carrie rises and Hurstwood falls."⁷ Although these critics are surely correct when they point out the prominence of such movement as a structural principle in this novel, they oversimplify matters by insisting that it is the *only* important

form of movement which gives the novel shape and meaning. For Dreiser was careful to use other forms of motion to enrich and complicate his narrative. He constructs the metaphor of motion so that its complex implications can be seen from a number of revealing angles. Contrasting upward and downward patterns as a major plot design, he also is very much interested in counterpointing centripetal and centrifugal motion as another major plot device. Furthermore, he assigns rocking movements two distinct and crucial meanings. The net effect of all this is to differentiate Carrie from all other characters in the novel. Ultimately, she is capable of "moving" in ways which enable her to attain a status which is denied Hurstwood, Drouet and Ames.

The opening scene of the novel offers an interesting contrast between centripetal and centrifugal movements. As Carrie moves away from the village, the center of her previous life, she is drawn to another center, Chicago, which the chapter heading tells us is "The Magnet Attracting" (1). Chicago itself is perceived both centripetally and centrifugally. Not only does its commercial power attract people and businesses into itself, but it also expands wildly to bewilderingly empty suburbs:

Street-car lines had been extended far out into the open country in anticipation of rapid growth. The city had laid miles of streets and sewers through regions where, perhaps, one solitary house stood alone--a pioneer of the populous ways to be. There were regions open to the sweeping winds and rain, which were yet lighted throughout the night with long blinking lines of gas lamps, fluttering in the wind. Narrow board walks extended out, passing here a house and there a store, at far intervals eventually ending in the open prairie. (16-17)

Like many people in the novel, Chicago moves too quickly and uncritically to acquire any genuinely moral character. Incoherently drifting outward and brutally drawing people to its turbulent center, it becomes for Dreiser an image of vast, uncontrolled forces exerting themselves in a disturbingly inhuman way. It is more a bewildering *process* than a stabilizing place.⁸

Hurstwood's conduct in the novel can be seen as a series of mindless movements away from and toward centers. His family and job initially center his life, but these are revealed as mere outward contrivances having little or nothing to do with Hurstwood as a man. Likewise, his attraction to Carrie is grounded in blind impulse and, as his life is drawn towards her, his family and job automatically disintegrate for

him. His flights to Montreal and New York are also impelled by strong animal drives which he is powerless to either control or understand. It is noteworthy too that when he settles in New York he is disastrously shut out from the "walled city" (363). Cut off from any real center which might vivify and concentrate his life, he apathetically drifts from one experience to another. Ultimately, he is paralyzed, his powers of magnetic attraction completely neutralized:

All day and all day, here he sat, reading his papers. The world seemed to have no attraction. (392)

The most important use of movements toward and away from centers, however, is contained in the four vignettes placed at the end of the novel. Inverting the traditional form of the sentimental novel which neatly ties together the various strands of its stories, Dreiser creates an appropriately fragmented ending by keeping the lives of his major characters separate. Just as each of these people had earlier been drawn toward each other, creating circles of warmth and dependence, they now wander off in their own directions, never to see or influence each other again. The final effect of this remarkable series of scenes is to go to the very core of the novel's meaning--a revelation of a world which is always changing, falling apart and reconstituting itself in new ways.

Such a radically unstable world finally destroys Hurstwood because he is unable to find anything to center his life around. Drouet and Mrs. Hurstwood are doomed to lives which are completely lacking in continuity and depth. It is Carrie's triumph, however, to survive in such a protean world without doing violence to herself as a person. For as the life around her swirls in circles of amoral force, she can transcend this outward movement by an inward journey to the self. This centripetal motion, as opposed to mere climbing in a materialistic society, is what Dreiser finally endorses.

Drouet, who is ultimately described as "an old butterfly" (550), will never really achieve anything in life beyond his own comfort, and his best days are quickly passing. He is not exempt from the decay which has claimed Hurstwood. Mrs. Hurstwood and her daughter are likewise portrayed in motion which is outwardly glamorous but tinged with corruption and, quite possibly, failure. On a train speeding for a vacation in Rome, they lead uncentered lives devoid of real feeling and purpose. Jessica, who has recently entered into a loveless marriage and who is shown eyeing a banker's son, could very well repeat her father's mistakes. Although her lavish clothes now hide the fact, Mrs. Hurstwood is growing old and is just as cold and supercilious as her daughter.

But one of the most important contrasts worked out in the novel is the difference between the rocking motions associated with Carrie and those linked with Hurstwood. For the latter person, rocking becomes an obvious manifestation of his psychological inertia and final despair. No longer able to function in the brutally competitive environment of New York (he fails interestingly enough, in his attempt to be a streetcar conductor), he retreats into the rocking chair as an admission of his defeat. Warmed by the radiator and lulled into insensitivity by the hypnotic rocking motion, he can easily indulge in his illusions and create for himself a conveniently romanticized past. The newspapers keep him at a safe remove from actual experience--he vicariously enjoys the life they record without risking his own emotions. By the end of the novel, he is reduced to the state of a small child being rocked. Chewing his fingers as he moves back and forth, he gazes mindlessly down at a blank floor.

Carrie's rocking chair is quite another matter. Although Hurstwood's futile movements in the end reduce themselves to paralysis, Carrie is given a way out of this naturalistic trap. For Carrie's rocking is consistently endowed with creativity. Instead of curling up next to a warm radiator, she characteristically places the chair next to a window which provides her with a fresh vista. In chapter four, for instance, she rocks and looks out onto "the pleasantly lighted street" (32), as her intense imagination conjures up vivid prospects of her future. Her rocking is thus contrasted with the "humdrum mechanical movement" (40) of her sister's household. Whereas Minnie accepts a world of grinding poverty and unrewarding labor, Carrie's superior imagination can lift her well beyond this dreary treadmill.

Carrie's rocking is also an occasion for what little clear thinking she is able to do in the novel. In chapter 12 it steadies her mind as she begins to realistically assess Drouet's limitations. She can also evaluate Hurstwood more clearly as she rocks in chapter 32: "She was rocking and beginning to see" (359).

It is notable too that Carrie is often presented as singing while she rocks--a marked contrast to Hurstwood pursuing the sterile newspapers which deaden his mind. The final image we have of Carrie, therefore, is rich and evocative. Singing and dreaming as she rocks, she is perhaps on the verge of a kind of motion which nobody else in the novel is capable of--a creative and vital centripetal journey into the self.

In the final analysis, Carrie is disillusioned with the nervous, amoral culture which she has moved through and

mastered, and she is shown as struggling for something more humane and satisfying:

In her rocking chair she sat, when not otherwise engaged --singing and dreaming.

Thus in life there is ever the emotional and intellectual nature--the mind that reasons and the mind that feels. Of one come the men of action--generals and statesmen; of the other, the poets and dreamers--artists all.

As harps in the wind, the latter respond to every breath of fancy, voicing in their moods all the ebb and flow of the ideal. (555)

It is this longing for the ideal that lifts Carrie above all the other characters in the novel. Ames, probably a weakling himself, has at least stimulated Carrie's mind and aesthetic sense to the point where she is capable of genuine inward development. In a world of garish appearances and aimless drifting, Dreiser suggests, Carrie may have found an adequate foundation for human living.

It is therefore of paramount importance that by the end of the novel Carrie has abandoned her faith in outward, spatial movement. She refuses the offer to go on the road as a travelling performer, preferring instead the introspective world of her apartment. One must realize, however, that Dreiser presents all this simply as a possibility. It remains to be seen whether Carrie can in fact act upon this new set of longings. Although she is blessed with a superior imagination that develops greatly in the course of the novel, one still does not know whether this will be her salvation or her undoing. Ames has indeed "pointed out a farther step" (557), but he is not a very impressive embodiment of these ideals himself. Surely, he is another person Carrie will inevitably outgrow. And we also have evidence in the novel that the ideal can delude as well as ennoble. The "big motherly woman" (540) who feeds Bowery derelicts does neither herself nor her clients any real favors by her misconceived generosity. The same can be said of the bizarre captain who arranges for the beds his gathered wanderers will sleep in. As much as Dreiser admires the motives of these two humanitarians, he is forced to admit that the net result of their efforts is negligible. They do little more than forestall the inevitable.

One is never fully convinced either of Carrie's skills as an artist. The roles allotted her as an actress steadily improve, but she still has not demonstrated an ability to transcend the melodrama and low comedy that has made her popular. Then too, it is doubtful whether the aesthetically

limited American stage of the 1890's could provide her with the kind of serious work Ames prescribes.

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Dreiser's use of the metaphor of motion, therefore, distinguishes the quality of his naturalism from that practiced by Stephen Crane and Frank Norris. Novels such as *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets* and *McTeague* take an almost perverse pleasure in reducing character movement to inertia and stasis, but Dreiser may finally give his heroine the possibility of humanly meaningful movement. Maggie Johnson's various squirmings inevitably result in her depressing plunge into a filthy river, and McTeague's escape is predictably futile. But Carrie may have succeeded in transcending the outward movement which the naturalistic character is usually chained to. Accordingly, she may provide us with convincing proof that human beings may ascend as well as descend the evolutionary ladder. Her "innate refinement" (107) might ultimately have found new and creative channels for development in the pursuit of the ideal and the cultivation of the inner life. Dreiser, after collapsing the American myth of spatial movement in classic naturalistic fashion, suggests that this myth may acquire new vitality if translated into psychological and aesthetic terms.

¹Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New York: 1945), p. 115.

²John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley* (New York: 1961), p. 10. Robert Elias made a similar point about Dreiser's early life when he observed: "From almost the day of his baptism he was part of a family that was on the move . . . At no time had he been able to strike roots anywhere: at no time could home remain comfortably associated with one house or city." (*Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* [New York: 1949], pp. 6-7.) Many other biographers have commented that Dreiser's adult life, especially the period preceding and postdating *Sister Carrie*, was remarkable for its restlessness. Between 1894 and 1903 he lived in a bewildering number of places and assumed a great many roles. Perhaps the most dramatic example of Dreiser's propensity for motion was his attempt to overcome a bout of depression with a three-hundred mile walk through Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania. (See Moer's *Two Dreisers* [New York: 1969], p. 174.)

Characters in Dreiser's other major novels are inclined to a similar wanderlust. Clyde Griffiths is an incurable

drifter who characteristically tries to "solve" problems by running away from them. Frank Cowperwood is also a creature of motion who is temperamentally incapable of accepting any settled mode of existence. He enjoys New York and Chicago because they are turbulent centers of change and open possibility.

³Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (Garden City, New York: 1931), p. 96.

⁴Gay Wilson Allen, ed., *Leaves of Grass* (New York: 1960), p. 120.

⁵Louis Auchincloss, ed., *Sister Carrie* (Columbus, Ohio: 1969), p. 1. All subsequent references to the text will be to this edition and page numbers will be in parentheses after the quotation.

⁶Kenneth S. Lynn, "*Sister Carrie: An Introduction*" (New York: 1957), p. xv.

⁷Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser: A Critical Study* (Minneapolis: 1976), pp. 81-82.

⁸In this way, Dreiser's Chicago is remarkably like the New York which Jean Paul Sartre describes in "New York, the Colonial City." Unlike the European city which is safely anchored in time and space, New York is indeed "a city in motion" (*Literary and Philosophical Essays* [New York: 1955], p. 120.), a fascinating but bewildering process which offers people expanded opportunities while at the same time stripping away their established identities. Although Sartre is in many ways attracted by New York, he concludes that it is "the world's harshest city" (*Literary and Philosophical Essays*, p. 123).

John Dos Passos, Henry James, Carl Sandburg and many other American writers who have treated the American city share this perception of the city as an open-ended process. Like Dreiser, they are fundamentally ambivalent about this, excited about the opportunities created by the process but also fearful of its radical instability.

A MEASURE OF SISTER CARRIE'S GROWTH

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Although the heroine of *Sister Carrie* is transformed in the course of the novel from a simple country girl into a celebrated Broadway starlet, critics have often differed as to whether she matures in the process. A few years ago, for example, a running debate on the subject was carried on by two scholars in a leading academic journal. Hugh Witemeyer argued that despite Carrie's experience, she remains to the end essentially "pre-pubescent." But Rupin Desai responded by asserting that Carrie successfully undertakes a "journey from innocence to wisdom."¹ Similar disagreements about the extent of Carrie's growth have repeatedly appeared in Dreiser criticism, usually centering on the extent to which she is able to conquer her self-absorbed desire for worldly things. Jack Salzman, for example, has complained of Carrie's "obsessive self-involvement" which renders her incapable of "sympathy and understanding" throughout the novel. But Leslie Fiedler has written that Dreiser ultimately contrives to convert Carrie into "a kind of an unchurched nun, celibate, lonely, and dedicated to charity."² The latest assessment of whether or not Carrie grows appears in an extended analysis of the genesis and realization of her character by Donald Pizer, who seems to want it both ways. Pizer credits Dreiser with a "dramatic portrayal of a spiritual rise in Carrie" which changes her into a "noble-minded though unhappy actress;" but, believing that her moral awakening must ultimately be judged in relation to her artistic sensibility, he finds that nowhere in the novel has Dreiser presented an "acceptable 'objective correlative' of Carrie's depth and growth as an artist."³

I believe that Dreiser never presented such an "objective correlative" because he was unable to find one. The key figure in any assessment of change in Carrie is Bob Ames, the young inventor-guru who appears in two chapters late in the novel to lecture her on the need to chasten her personal desires. Carrie's interaction with Ames and her response to his ideas should provide the logical basis for answering the question as to whether or not Carrie matures. But what Dreiser meant to make of this interaction and response is unclear because of his inconsistent characterizations of both Ames and Carrie. In this essay, then, I will examine Carrie's relationship with

Ames and his influence on her.

I

Just before her stage career is launched in New York, Carrie meets the Vances, a rich couple who sponsor her socially at just the moment when her longing is sharpest for material success. Her friendship with the Vances allows Carrie for the first time to step within the magic circle of New York's luxurious restaurants and glittering theaters. At a pre-theater dinner party at Sherry's restaurant, the Vances introduce Carrie to Bob Ames, an inventor who works for an Indianapolis electrical company. As his characters sit down to dine, Dreiser interrupts the narrative to counsel the reader that Sherry's represents the epitome of decadence vis a vis the American rich, being an institution given over to "that exhibition of showy, wasteful, and unwholesome gastronomy as practiced by wealthy Americans, which is the wonder and astonishment of true culture and dignity the world over" (SC p. 353).⁴ Ames's primary function in this scene is to corroborate and amplify Dreiser's judgment and to begin to show Carrie that her dreams of luxury and pleasure are misguided. Carrie is enthralled by the glamour of the restaurant, but Ames tells her that he would not care to be rich enough to spend his money in such a vulgar manner. This remark overawes Carrie, for whom such pleasures represent the essence of the good life. With characteristic exaggeration, she begins to think of this "stalwart figure" in connection with "the sorrows and sacrifices" she had seen portrayed on the stage. The alert reader may be less impressed when he notes that Carrie's new idol is "well-dressed" and that his repugnance for Sherry's does not noticeably spoil his meal.

During the dinner conversation, Ames disparages a book which Carrie had enjoyed and an author whom the Vances admire by simply declaring that neither amounts to much. He also quickens Carrie's longing to pursue a stage career by praising those who take the acting profession seriously. He is firmly established as a "scholar" in Carrie's view by these judgments and Dreiser seems as impressed by Ames as his heroine is, since he interrupts the narrative to assure the reader that Carrie's instant esteem for this "genius" shows her "saving grace," the ability to understand "that people could be wiser" (SC p. 356). For further proof of Ames's mental magnetism, Dreiser has Carrie gape continually at the inventor's forehead, which is bathed in a red glow. After parting with this fascinating mind, Carrie returns to her apartment to muse in her rocking chair, an activity which marks every turning point in her life. This first scene theoretically establishes the inventor as chief spokesman for Dreiser and as

an incisive critic of the American success formula (his name itself may be a play on "aims"). And Dreiser invites the reader to believe that Ames's wisdom significantly affects Carrie, writing that now, in spite of a "fog of longing and conflicting desires, she was beginning to see" (SC p. 359). Between their first meeting and their next many months later, the "call of the ideal" which Ames has awakened is occasionally in Carrie's thoughts.

When they meet again in the next-to-last chapter of the novel, Ames arrests Carrie's attention with his unexpected indifference to the theatrical notoriety she has achieved since they last talked. Instead of offering her praise for her accomplishments, he scolds her for wasting time on insufficiently serious plays. But an analysis of this scene reveals that far from being "impossibly perfect," as Ellen Moers describes him, Ames gives advice so contradictory and hazy that he is able to contribute little to Carrie's growth, or at least Dreiser fails to make his contribution manifest.⁵ For example, he locates the source of Carrie's talent in her face, which is "representative of all desire" and a "natural expression of the world's longing," like a "pathetic song or any picture which moves you deeply." But he also warns that her gift can be squandered if she lives only to satisfy herself: "The look will leave your eyes. Your mouth will change. Your power to act will disappear. You may think they won't, but they will. Nature takes care of that" (SC pp. 537, 538). In short, after locating Carrie's acting talent in her longing facial expression, Ames tells her to lessen her longing or run the risk of losing her talent. At another point, Ames cautions against dreaming of far-off things. Life is "full of desirable situations, but, unfortunately, we can occupy but one at a time," he tells her. A moment earlier, however, he had not only failed to recognize an opportunity to call attention to Carrie's nebulous dreaming, he had in fact joined her in an extravagant emotional response to a piece of sentimental music played by a group at the Vances's apartment. Both the inventor and the actress are transfixed by the music, "touched by the same feeling, only hers reached her through the heart." (Presumably, Ames had been reached through the forehead.) Carrie's response is totally in character: "'I don't know what it is about music,' she started to say, moved by the inexplicable longings which surged within her; 'but it always makes me feel as if I wanted something - I - '" (SC p. 535). Moreover, in response to Carrie's appeals for guidance, Ames adds to the confusion with a vague exhortation to "change," though he specifies no course of action beyond moving from light to serious drama. Although Ames's conception of the solemn duty of the stage personality to the world causes Carrie to feel "slightly guilty of neglect," the inventor's praise of her

talent "unlocked the door to a new desire" (SC pp. 536, 538). This new desire, stimulated by flattery, is not likely to reduce her self-absorption. Understandably, Ames's influence produces no immediate change in Carrie. For a time, at least, she will continue to live for herself: "Still, she did nothing - grieving. It was a long way to this better thing - or seemed so - and comfort was about her; hence the inactivity and the longing" (SC p. 538). These lines close the scene and end the relationship between Ames and Carrie.

Further support for the contention that Ames's analytical and counselling skills do not measure up to Dreiser's claims for them may be found in the holograph of *Sister Carrie*. The second scene involving the actress and inventor is much longer here than in the published version.⁶ Ames informs Carrie about Hardy and Balzac, whom she had read at his suggestion. When Carrie reacts with sadness to the failure of Lucien de Rubempré in *The Great Man From the Provinces*, Ames defines true success for her. He interprets the failure of Balzac's hero as merely the result of the deprivation of wealth, position, and romantic love which would have been truly tragic only if de Rubempré had realized that the pursuit of these things had deflected him from the authentic human goal of knowledge. He tells her that when a person "doesn't make knowledge his object, he's very likely to fail" (MS p. 31). But how Carrie's theatrical talent is related to the acquisition of knowledge is not explained. Furthermore, Ames criticizes Balzac for "making too much" of wealth and material possessions, three lines after he urges her to read all of the French writer's works for the "good" they will do her (MS p. 31). Again, the inventor finds Carrie's melancholia unbecoming a person so young, thus linking happiness to youth and failing to explain the necessity of youth for the accumulation of knowledge or the renunciation of worldly values.

Ames's prescription for salvation in the closing section of the holograph scene is typical of his advice. He seems to exhort Carrie to take some altruistic action: "'If you want to do most, do good. Serve the many. Be kind and humanitarian. Then you can't help but be great'" (MS p. 44). In addition to being so general that it nearly evaporates, the call to humanitarianism is incongruously linked to personal greatness. Ames likens Carrie's talent to the gifts of "great musicians, great painters, great families, great writers and great actors," surely a provocative compliment to a girl with Carrie's dreams of personal glory (MS p. 40). Again, when she expresses some humility in relation to her stage success, Ames assures her that it is deserved because no one "gets up" without having something which the world needs in a "high place." But Carrie considers "the solution being

offered her," namely "goodness - labor for others" to be "absolutely true" (MS pp. 45, 46). She admires Ames's freedom from pretensions in clothing (although his dress suit and gleaming white shirt front had earlier in the scene arrested her attention) and the absence of any craving for applause (although, in the holograph, he has become famous for his inventions). Equally disconcerting is Ames's final estimate of Carrie. He finds "something exceedingly human and unaffected about this woman - something which craved neither money nor praise" (although the novel is about her endless dreaming of both). Conveniently, Carrie will not be forced to give up her career, since the only concrete advice which Ames proffers is to seek out more dramatic roles. Little wonder that by the end of the evening with Ames, all her nature is "stirred to unrest" and she is once again "the old mournful Carrie, the desireful Carrie - unsatisfied" (MS p. 48). Thanks to Dreiser's faulty focus and his mismating of ideas within Ames, the inventor's confusing counsel can do little to assuage the infinite, indeterminate longing which has characterized the heroine from the opening pages of the novel.

Dreiser himself probably had misgivings about Ames's character which he apparently developed not only from his own ideas but from the unassimilated ideas of several others as well.⁷ The numerous excisions from the holograph version may represent an eleventh-hour decision to shroud Ames in mystery because Dreiser was uneasy about the conflicts he might well have sensed in the material and the implications of these conflicts for the resolution of the novel. For whatever reason, Dreiser later resolved to strengthen Ames's role in a revision of the novel which was never undertaken.⁸ Doubtlessly, the novel would have benefited from a studied reassessment of the inventor's ideas. Ames has supposedly helped Carrie to see, but to see what? She does not need a stimulant to her sentiment, but a reasonable course of action. Many critics explain Ames's muddled message as a part of Dreiser's purposeful use of the inventor as an unsound guide for Carrie, more sophisticated but only slightly less deficient than Drouet and Hurstwood. But there seems little reason for doubting Dreiser's wish to portray Ames as a trustworthy philosopher. His own descriptions of the inventor's insight in the holograph as well as the novel are uniformly complimentary. Moreover, Dreiser's explanation in the last lines of the book that Ames had merely pointed out a "farther step" rather than offering the ultimate solution for Carrie seems clearly to have been arrived at after the fact, since it is not in the conclusion originally planned.⁹

I want to turn now to the final chapter, especially the famous rocking chair scene which ends the published novel,

since it dramatizes Carrie's final development and shows that Ames's attempts at changing her have merely stimulated the incompatible impulses which had been latent within her all along.

II

When Carrie admits to Ames that she is not content despite her conspicuous success, the inventor seems to indicate that fulfillment has eluded her because her life has been spent getting for herself rather than giving of herself. But Ames's attempt at convincing Carrie to reject her "guiding characteristic" of self-interest produces little tangible result. Despite her enthusiastic acceptance of his ideas, there is little indication that Carrie will ever be able to formulate a notably selfless course of action.

In a significant mini-scene in her room at the Waldorf just before the close of the novel, Carrie's compassion is triggered by her reading of *Père Goriot* at Ames's suggestion, and she upbraids her friend Lola for thinking only of sleigh riding on a bitter winter night when the poor must be suffering most acutely. Dreiser tells the reader that Carrie has caught the "full sympathetic significance" of Balzac. But he suggests no appropriate action for his heroine, nor does he imply that she owes any specific debt to the less fortunate beyond romantic identification. Her concern over hiring a carriage for the evening causes the immediate dismissal of the poor from her mind (SC p. 548, 549). Dreiser's tone in this vignette does little to help the reader decide what he is to make of Carrie's compassion.

A few pages later, the final scene of the novel is enacted. Unfulfilled despite her own dramatic charisma, gowns, carriages, influential friends, substantial income, applause and publicity, Carrie rocks and thinks about the direction of her life. Although she perceives vaguely that worldly success cannot fulfill her, Carrie has not been provided with a clear course of action. An isolated line informs the reader that when she walks on Broadway her purse will be "open to those whose need is greatest." There is no indication, however, that Carrie plans to abstain from refilling her purse back at the Waldorf. Nor does it seem likely that she will distribute her belongings among the destitute, reject her society friends, become a urban missionary like those described elsewhere in the novel, or accomplish anything notably spiritual. Since her charitable impulse manifests itself on Broadway and not the Bowery, we must conclude that Carrie's "open purse" results more from synthetic sentiment than from genuine sympathy. Moreover, only three sentences after we are told of her bur-

geoning benevolence, we learn that she will always remain unaware of Hurstwood's death and that, thus, "all that was of interest" in him had passed. To so blithely ignore the plight of the man who has supported her for three years in New York and whose dire predicament has been made manifest to her when he begs for a handout is surely not the response to be expected of an "unchurched nun."

In the final moments of the novel, Carrie lapses into a torpor of undifferentiated emotion, dreaming of a happiness she "may never feel," longing simultaneously for that "peace and beauty which glimmered afar off" and "that radiance of delight that tints the distant hilltops of the world" (SC pp. 556, 557). These would seem to represent diametrically opposed impulses. Surely the one thing that Carrie might have been expected to learn from her experience is that there can be no peace for her so long as she must pursue her personal delight.¹⁰ At the end of the novel Carrie is a drifting dreamer whose impulses are incompatible, and significantly, they are the same impulses she had exhibited very early in the novel, long before she had met Ames. When she is still living with Drouet, two extended, contiguous paragraphs ascribe to Carrie the same seemingly irreconcilable pulls which war within her at the end of the novel. One paragraph describes her acquisitive side. She craves wealth, pleasure and position so intensely that always "the kaleidoscope of human affairs threw a new lustre upon something, and therewith it became for her the desired--the all." But the next paragraph indicates that spiritually she was "rich in feeling," often experiencing "an uncritical upwelling of grief for the weak and the helpless" and actual pain at the sight of the poor. These pulls toward acquisitiveness and sympathy would seem to account for much of the confusion about Carrie which the close reader experiences throughout the novel. On the second page, for example, we are told that her "guiding characteristic" of self-interest is "high but not strong." After Drouet has rescued her from her menial labor at the shoe factory, Carrie's "sympathies were ever with that underworld of toil from which she had so recently sprung" (SC pp. 159, 160). But when she had been among the toilers, she had rejected them as low and vulgar, undeserving of her friendship despite their kindnesses to her. Despite her supposedly rich sympathy for the poor, she considers the Hansons, her struggling sister and brother-in-law, only when they can be used. She holds back money from Hurstwood, resents spending her own on him until he is destitute and then with trembling lip gives him nine dollars.

When Ames supposes that Carrie has a nature which is susceptible to spiritual enrichment, however, he is not altogether deceived. She is unable to accept her success without think-

ing of the less fortunate. But her commitment to self-interest is nearly total, for she lacks a suitable channel for her less selfish impulses. Ames urges a lessening of self-absorption, but without suggesting an outlet for her better self beyond more serious performances on the stage. Such performances would merely duplicate in the audience her own vicarious identification with those who suffer, neither fulfilling the sympathizer nor helping the recipient of the sympathy. And it is not as if the novel lacked examples of genuine generosity such as the "captain" who cajoles passersby for money to buy sleeping quarters for derelicts, the Sisters of Mercy who run soup kitchens and the baker who donates bread to the needy.

Pizer sees Carrie finally as a vehicle for Dreiser's depiction of "the very confusion at the center of life itself" which Pizer defines as "the amoral need most individuals have to fulfill themselves in a world controlled by moral assumptions, and the pathetically superficial but moving instances of man's pursuit of beauty."¹¹ But if Pizer is right, the evidence indicates that Dreiser decided after the fact of his own failure to let his readers construe the meaning of Carrie's experience for themselves. Moreover, Pizer's explanation, which credits Dreiser with more control over his material than one can reasonably assume, does not account for Ames's prescription of humanitarianism and Carrie's admittedly lukewarm conversion to it. The evidence indicates instead that Dreiser was unable, though not unwilling, to demonstrate Carrie's growth.

Dreiser's dilemma in *Sister Carrie* was personal as well as artistic. Like most modern novelists, he used introspection as an indispensable tool for fictional motivation. Not only Carrie's unclear purpose but also Ames's inability to chart a clear course for her results from Dreiser's own uncertainty as to whether giving or taking was the most promising path to fulfillment. Both characters finally coalesce in a point of view coequal to Dreiser's when he began the novel. In an autobiographical portrait of his youth paralleling the two paragraphs describing the conflicting sides of Carrie's temperament, Dreiser once described himself as a "poetic melancholiac, crossed with a vivid materialistic lust of life." His burning "desire for material and social supremacy" was balanced by an "intense sympathy for the woes of others," his eyes brimming with tears and his throat "parched and painful" over scenes of poverty.¹² His ambition was quickened by humble beginnings. The very commodities which Carrie values until the end of the novel Dreiser longed for himself, and long after he completed *Sister Carrie*, even though he recognized, like Ames, that they did not satisfy. On the other hand, his inherited status as

an outsider developed in him an acute feeling for the poor. Through the interaction of Ames and Carrie, Dreiser explores these rival claims for allegiance in order to construe his own, as well as Carrie's experience. Certainly his continued examination of the alternatives of self-sacrifice and self-seeking in his later novels (for example, the self-immolation of Jennie and the ruthlessness of Cowperwood) tends to substantiate this.

Phillip Gerber has asserted that the players in *Sister Carrie* "derive largely from Dreiser himself, each depicting a separate facet of the writer's own nature."¹³ But rather than depicting separate facets of Dreiser, Carrie and Ames are each split by warring sides. This is why the long debate as to whether or not Carrie grows has so often resulted in a hung jury. Dreiser was not capable in *Sister Carrie* of separating the two sides of his own nature into distinct fictional characters whose interaction could effect a cohesive intellectual statement. Fitzgerald handled a nearly identical problem much more coherently in *The Great Gatsby* through the interaction of Gatsby and Nick Carraway. But we should not underestimate the formidable task which Dreiser set for himself a quarter century before Fitzgerald, no less than the exploration of the way to secular salvation in a modern world without moral signposts. The exploration led him into a labyrinth from which he had not emerged even by the end of *An American Tragedy*, with its tortured uncertainty about Clyde's guilt. In the 1930s and 40s he neglected art (the only alternative Ames could recommend to Carrie) and immersed himself in a number of social causes. The moral fruit of those years is to be found in his posthumously published novel, *The Bulwark*. Solon Barnes's prodigal daughter Etta gives up her pursuit of art and ministers to her dying father, thereby expressing Dreiser's last testament. Whereas Ames had been able to recommend only vague abstractions against the power of selfish desires which, even when accomplished, left one unfulfilled, Etta discovers the cure for restless dissatisfaction in love and service to others. In such dedicated action, Etta finds "nothing fitful or changing or disappointing - nothing that glowed one minute and was gone the next."¹⁴ Had Carrie, like Etta, discovered that the joy of giving could be greater than the pleasure afforded by the kaleidoscope of earthly delights, she might have secured a larger measure of that growth for which she longs.

¹Hugh Witemeyer, "Gaslight and Magic Lamp in *Sister Carrie*," *PMLA*, March, 1971, p. 240. Rupin Desai, "Delusion and Reality in *Sister Carrie*," *PMLA*, March, 1972, p. 310.

Hugh Wittemeyer, "Sister Carrie: Plus ça change...", *PMLA*, May, 1972, p. 514.

²Jack Salzman, Introduction to *Sister Carrie*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), pp. XVII - XVIII. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, (New York: Criterion, 1960), p. 244.

³Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), pp. 55, 66, 69.

⁴The following abbreviations have been used for repeated references: SC - *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Doubleday, 1900). MS - Chapter XLIX Holograph of *Sister Carrie* (Manuscript Division, New York Public Library).

⁵Ellen Moers, *Two Dreisers*, (New York: Viking, 1969), p. 158.

⁶There are, in fact, three extant versions of *Sister Carrie*: the holograph, a typescript and the published text. The first scene between Ames and Carrie in the holograph, the typescript and the novel are virtually identical. The second scene, which closes Chapter XLIX in the holograph, runs to slightly less than three thousand words. It was cut in half by the excisions made by Dreiser, his newspaper colleague Arthur Henry (and perhaps Dreiser's wife Sarah), before the typescript was produced. The two-week interval which breaks up the dialogue in the published version seems to have been added to compensate for the telescoping of the material. The passage in which Carrie and Ames respond to the sentimental music does not appear in the holograph.

⁷I believe one of the causes of Ames's contradictory ideas to be Dreiser's use of at least four sources for his character. From his mother he took the humanitarianism. From his brother, Paul Dresser, he took the passion for sentimental music. From his own response to his reading, he took the literary pronouncements. From Thomas Edison, whom he interviewed for *Success* magazine just before starting the novel, he appropriated most of the other ideas. For a fuller discussion of the sources of Ames's character, see my note "Thomas Edison and *Sister Carrie*," *American Literary Realism*, Spring, 1975, pp. 155-158.

⁸Dreiser had contracted with J. F. Taylor and Company for the publication of *Jennie Gerhardt*, and the firm had also bought the plates and unsold copies of *Sister Carrie* with a view to reissuing the novel. On November 22nd, 1901, Taylor

sent to Dreiser through a third party some proposals for improving both books, including the idea of amplifying the Ames material. Dreiser responded on November 25th that the Ames suggestion had considerable merit, but that he was at the moment too absorbed in the writing of *Jennie Gerhardt* to act on it. (Robert H. Elias, *The Letters of Theodore Dreiser*, Philadelphia, 1959, I, pp. 67-68). Dreiser never acted on his apparent resolve to expand Ames's role, although his intention became known in wider circles. The writer of the "Chronicle and Comment" column in the March, 1902, *Bookman*, commenting on Dreiser's desire to rewrite the closing chapters of the novel, approved the planned amplification of the role of Ames. Pointing out that Drouet and Hurstwood are closely bound up with Carrie, he contrasts them to Ames, who crosses the heroine's path "in an abortive manner, which leaves the impression of artistic incompleteness and faulty observation."

⁹The holograph ends with the death of Hurstwood, after which Dreiser had written, "The End" and "Thursday March 29-1900-2:53 p.m." Three separate versions of the rocking chair coda which closes the published novel are appended to the holograph. The published coda is a compromise between the three versions, one of which is in Dreiser's hand and suggests that Ames had "pointed out a farther step." One alternate version was written by Arthur Henry and the other by Dreiser's wife Sarah.

¹⁰Interestingly, in Dreiser's version of the coda, the line which refers to Carrie's continued pursuit of "that radiance of delight..." is written simply "that radiance..." He apparently accepted Henry's or Sarah's addition of the word "delight" for the compromise version, thus intensifying the confusion about Carrie's state of mind.

¹¹Pizer, p. 72.

¹²Theodore Dreiser, *A Book About Myself*, (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), pp. 106, 107.

¹³Philip Gerber, *Theodore Dreiser*, (New York: Twain, 1964), p. 68.

¹⁴Theodore Dreiser, *The Bulwark*, (New York: Doubleday, 1946), p. 331.

DREISER NEWS & NOTES

John McAleer, a contributing editor to the *Dreiser Newsletter*, has collaborated with Billy Dickson, former Walpole Correctional Institution inmate, on a Korean War novel, *Unit Pride*. Based on Dickson's military experiences, *Unit Pride* has been accepted by Doubleday for February publication. MGM has taken a movie option. The two met in 1965 when Dickson read McAleer's review of a Dreiser study and wrote to ask some questions about the Gillette-Brown case. . . . An unexpurgated, uncensored edition of *Sister Carrie* is scheduled for Spring 1981 publication by the University of Pennsylvania Press. Edited by John C. Berkey, Alice M. Winters, James L. West III and Neda Westlake, the text is based on the original manuscript and typescript and includes a historical and textual commentary. This edition, with a preface by Alfred Kazin, will also be published by Penguin Books in April. The Penguin edition will not include the textual apparatus.