

## THE IMAGE OF AMERICAN CITIES IN “SISTER CARRIE” BY THEODOR DREISER

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### ABSTRACT

Considered one of the most important urban novels in American literature, Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* tells the story of Caroline Meeber, a young country girl who moves to the big city and begins pursuing her American dream. Dreiser’s sister Emma provides the plot content for the novel, and her protagonist Carrie experienced exactly the same fate as Meeber. This fact may have also played an important role in the choice of the book’s title. In addition to themes such as rejection and struggles with poverty, the city as a familiar setting is another very central and interesting theme in Dreiser’s novel that deserves a closer look. Because realism in American literature seeks to represent reality faithfully, literature from this period reflects her urban realities in nineteenth-century America and the impact of urban life on Americans. In this article, I would like to explore how the city is portrayed in Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. This includes things like the qualities Dreiser brings to the cities of Chicago and New York, and how the cities influence Carrie’s personality.

**Key words:** *Sister Carrie*, dream city, personality, urban life, American literature.

### Literature review

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 theatres, 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) Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* is an important text in any discussion that concerns itself with the American city. As critic 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] Tobias Gasterier mentioned in his article that The physical presence of the city has always exercised a powerful hold on the American imagination; this influence was especially great from the first decades of the 19th century, thus Dreiser's lifetime, onward (cf. Pickering 1977: 1). In general, a negative representation of the city is given by the American authors; the view on the city and on city life is according to Pickering quite ambivalent and questioning and even takes hostile traits. The writers have looked on the city from diverse perspectives with the aim to find their own way to recreate, explore and understand the phenomenon of the American city. They all focus on different aspects of city life and experience, dealing for example with the influence of the city on its inhabitants' development. However, there are certain basic themes, moods, situations, types and motifs which can be discovered by all authors. Besides they have a common understanding of how crucial and often definitive the city can influence and shape the life of those living in it. [5]

### **The city of Chicago**

Sister Carrie features two different urban settings. At the beginning of the plot the reader is introduced to the city of Chicago in year 1889 and 1890. In 1889, Chicago was a city of over 500,000 people with the ambition, the daring, and the activity of a metropolis of a million. Its many and growing commercial opportunities gave it widespread fame, and it was drawing to itself, from all quarters, the hopeful and the hapless. Great industries were moving in, and the huge railroad corporations had seized upon vast tracts of land for transfer and shipping purposes. Street-car lines had been extended far out into the open country in anticipation of rapid growth. The city had laid miles and miles of streets and sewers through regions where, perhaps, one solitary house stood out alone a pioneer of the populous ways to be. Narrow board walks extended out, passing here a house, and there a store at far intervals, and there was the vast wholesales and shopping district, to which the uninformed seeker for work usually drifted. Individual firms of any pretension occupied individual buildings, and the presence of ample ground made this possible. The large plates of window glass now so common, were them rapidly coming into use, and gave to the ground floor offices a distinguished and prosperous look. Polished brass or nickel signs at the square stone entrances announced the firm and the nature of the business in rather neat and reserved terms.[2] Later on, the storyline proceeds in New York from 1890 to 1897. Both locations had been the largest cities of the United States at that particular time. When speaking of city in American literature, Sister Carrie is important to deal with because

Theodore Dreiser depicts real American cities. Through the consciousness and the eyes of Carrie Meeber the reader sees the real city as she imagines it to be. In the novel Carrie always draws her own picture of Chicago, the imaginary city, which is only an illusion of the real Chicago of the 19th century. Dreiser's novel features the characteristics of early urban American literature, where a person from the countryside comes to a city. The social and economic conditions within the city start to change the protagonist, who then faces unfulfilled dreams and expectations at the end of the plot.

### **Dream city**

The reader observes Carrie's transformation from a helpless and naive country girl to a strong and avaricious woman throughout the entire plot. Carrie soon realizes how much she wants money and luxury. As she ambles through the streets of Chicago, she longs bitterly to be like the women she sees in the city's shopping malls and department stores, which begins to mould her affluent mindset. Since she needs to look like the leisure class women Carrie sees on the streets in order to be on par with them, she must dress appropriately. She must also adopt their way of life and visit locations that reflect this particular status.

Dreiser portrays New York City as a place of opportunity. Sister Carrie dreams of making it big in the world, and she feels that she can't do that while living in the small midwestern town in which she was born. The opportunities for financial and social advancement attract Sister Carrie to New York. Dreiser writes about the New York theater and socialite scene. These aspects of the city appeal to Sister Carrie. However, Dreiser also shows readers the grittier side of NYC. One character becomes homeless, and joins the ranks of NY criminals. Betrayal, jealousy and bad intentions run through many of Sister Carrie's relationships. New York City is presented as a place of great opportunity but also one of great risk. Many characters become successful in the city. Others descend into madness or poverty.[7].

The most important details in this novel are that in New York, celebrities were numerous and the sea was full of whales. This created an atmosphere which reacted badly upon the small, and that the atmosphere of the high and mighty is like a chemical reagent that can affect and discolour the views, aims, and desire of the mind. A day of this atmosphere is like opium to the untried mind, and if gratified, it can set up a craving for dreams and death, until death and dissolution dissolve their power and restore us to nature's heart.[3]

Hurstwood's fate was foreshadowed in New York by contrasting that city with Chicago. New York was much larger, with many more avenues of commerce and trade, "The sea was already full of whales, a common fish must need disappear wholly from

view-remain unseen. In other words, Hurstwood was nothing” (1967, p.26). Intimidated by the gigantic city, Hurstwood lacked the youthful energy needed to do business there: “it was an awesome place to him, for here gathered all that he most responded on this earth—wealth, place, and fame.” (1967, p.27) So in New York, Hurstwood’s new business arrangement encountered many drawbacks and he became more and more preoccupied by his business and grew introspective and secretive, to the extent that his relationship with 121 Copyright Carrie changed as Carrie became more intoxicated with New York and dissatisfied with being a housewife, as the Hurstwood’s business picked up to the point that nets 150 dollars a month and he became more preoccupied with his business, he began to take Carrie for granted “Carrie begins to feel... in various sensory ways” (1967, p.35)

While in New York, Carrie had nowhere but go up, because she never ceased trying to find jobs for better life even though she encountered many difficulties and painful struggles. Hurstwood had nowhere but go down, because a middle-aged man in a state of depression and without skills had no chance of finding work in New York when 80,000 people were unemployed. [8]

### CONCLUSION

The pursuit of the ideal is never as satisfying for the American dreamer of real cities as the dream itself. Carrie moves from one real American city to another in her quest for fame and fortune—and the happiness she believes these will bring. She transforms these urban spaces into imaginary cities where success, no matter how grandly realized, will always pale in comparison to the idyllic visions fostered by her imagination. Dreiser concludes his novel on a cautionary note: the American dream in the real American city is not what it appears to be. Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart! Onward onward, it saith, and where beauty leads, there it follows. Whether it be the tinkle of a lone sheep bell o’er some quiet landscape, or the glimmer of beauty in sylvan places, or the show of soul in some passing eye, the heart knows and makes answer, following. It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise. 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 ( page 465).

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