

Dreiser and Sister Carrie's Kingdom of Greatness

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[I]n life, after all, we are most wholly controlled by desire. The things that appeal to desire are not always visible objects. . . . Desire is the variable wind which blows now zephyrlike, now shrill, filling our sails for some far-off port, flapping them idly upon the high seas in sunny weather, scudding us now here, now there, before its terrific breath, speeding us anon to accomplishment; as often rending our sails and leaving us battered and dismantled, a picturesque wreck in some forgotten harbor.(1)

It is by now well established that desire constitutes the real subject of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, and indeed of his other major novels. In an article entitled "Desire as Hero," Randolph Bourne concludes: "The insistent theme of Mr. Dreiser's work is desire, perennial, unquenchable. . . . His hero is really not Sister Carrie, or the Titan or the Genius, but that desire within us that pounds in manifold guise against the iron walls of experience." (2) Irving Howe, in "Dreiser: The Springs of Desire," observes that the central characters in the early novels are "harried by a desire for personal affirmation, a desire they can neither articulate nor suppress." (3) Donald Pizer is more specific about what Sister Carrie wants: "Of the major forces in her life, it is primarily her desire for objects that furnish a sense of physical and mental well-being—for fine clothing and furniture and attractive apartments and satisfactory food—which determines much of her life." (4) Walter Benn Michaels, for his part, notes that in Dreiser's novel "What you are is what you want, in other words, what you aren't." (5) Finally, a comprehensive study of Dreiser's work begins the section on *Sister Carrie* thus: "Desire is the protagonist of *Sister Carrie*. The principal supporting players include a young small-town girl drawn by undefined dreams to the great city and the men she meets during her search for fulfillment." (6)

These various readings underline the importance of desire in Dreiser's work, particularly in *Sister Carrie*, where desire is perceived as an unfathomable and irrepressible force. The characters seem so helpless that desire, according to Lawrence Hussman Jr., has become the novel's new protagonist. This subordination of character to desire is also what Richard Poirier suggests when, describing what he thinks characterizes most American novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he points out that "their vision often moves panoramically across the massed phenomena of social and economic structures, and it is only within these that they can see the hero at all."[\(7\)](#)

While the centrality of desire to Dreiser's thought is undeniable, I want to suggest that the phenomenon of desire in *Sister Carrie* is not as unfathomable as it seems, not some mysterious and overpowering force that hurls Carrie toward the objects she desires. Within the "massed phenomena of social and economic structures," we can clearly perceive the prominent place occupied by the human mediator. *Sister Carrie*, along with a host of other characters in the novel, dramatizes René Girard's mimetic theory. According to Girard, "The standard view [of imitation], derived from Plato's *mimesis* via Aristotle's *Poetics*, has always excluded one essential human behavior from the types subject to imitation—namely, desire and, more fundamentally still, "appropriation" ("*To Double Business Bound*" central to vii). Central to Girard's thought is the theory of "mimetic desire," developed in his first book *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961) and elaborated in his later works: a character desires an object, not for itself, but for the value *assigned* to it by the desire of another. Don Quixote, for instance, believes that true chivalric existence can be experienced only through a careful imitation of Amadis of Gaul, who seems to him to personify ideal knightly behavior. Don Quixote's desires are thus "mediated": the subject pursues objects determined by the mediator of desire. In this respect, the directions taken and influences exerted by snobbery, vanity, jealousy, envy, rivalry, resentment, hatred, renunciation, and sacrifice form the center of Girard's critical thinking. "This triangle of subject, objects and mediator," Bruce Bassoff notes, "is similar to Thorstein Veblen's model of 'conspicuous consumption,' where 'keeping up with the Joneses' means desiring what they possess regardless of the real value of the object."[\(8\)](#) For Girard, however, it is not merely a question of desiring what the Joneses possess, but of desiring what they themselves appear to be; Girard calls this desire "metaphysical" because it is aimed at the mediator's being. Veblen describes the phenomenon only in its economic manifestations, but through an extensive analysis of major works by Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky, Girard unravels the complicated strategies of mimetic desire, explores the depths and ways in which it operates, and provides numerous examples of its powerful effects on human relationships.[\(8a\)](#)

Despite its title, *Sister Carrie* is not a study of a family; indeed, the story opens as

Carrie Meeber is leaving home to seek her fortune in Chicago, thus severing “the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home” (3). In the absence of any subsequent references to Carrie’s past, it seems doubtful that one can speak of her ever having been rooted. While the freedom and mobility enable Carrie to create her self, they also render her susceptible to the influences that life in Chicago and New York will bring:

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The city has its cunning wiles. . . . There are large forces which allure, with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. . . . Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman. . . . Without a counselor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! (4)

As the narrator suggests, Carrie, “possessed of a mind rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis” (4), needs a model to guide her through the seemingly bewildering wonders of Chicago. The first words whispered literally in Carrie’s ear as her train is approaching Chicago come from a flashy salesman, who quickly finds out that she is on her first visit to the city. The initial meeting captures Charles Drouet’s habit of asserting his importance through boasting: “‘You want to see Lincoln Park,’ he said, ‘and Michigan Avenue. They are putting up great buildings there. It’s a second New York, great. So much to see’” (7). Drouet wishes to impress on Carrie his association with the ‘great’ world of the city and to intimate that he regularly partakes of the pleasures of Chicago—a city, he suggests, busy imitating New York. The glamorous account makes the attractions seem desirable; as the narrator observes, “There was a little ache in her fancy of all [Drouet] described. Her insignificance in the presence of so much magnificence faintly affected her” (7). The seeds of desire are so firmly planted in her imagination that Carrie grows suddenly conscious of her appearance: “Her own plain blue dress with its black cotton tape trimmings realized itself to her imagination as shabby” (7). Carrie’s new perception springs from dissatisfaction: in contrast to Drouet’s showiness, the simplicity of her apparel is amplified into shabbiness; the jump from “plain” to “shabby” charts Carrie’s sudden movement toward self-consciousness; as Girard points out, “it is the mediator who makes the imagination fertile.”(9)

At this point, Carrie does not yet realize that Drouet is a *poseur*, one whose “dress or manners are such as to impress strongly the fancy, or elicit the admiration of susceptible young women” (5). Just as Carrie will try to measure up to his standards of dress by imitating his presumed elegance, Drouet himself behaves so as to

conform to the expectations of young women like Carrie; both are thus caught in the process of mutual mediation. Before they enter Chicago, Drouet has one more card to play:

He reached down in his hip pocket and took out a fat purse. It was filled with slips of paper, some mileage books, a roll of green-backs and so on. It impressed her deeply. Such a purse had never been carried by any man who had ever been attentive to her before. Indeed a man who traveled, who was brisk and experienced and of the world, had never come within such close range before. The purse, the shiny tan shoes, the smart new suit and the *air* with which he did things built up for her a dim world of fortune around him of which he was the centre. (8-9)

Although Drouet's appeal is simple, even crude—the purse looks 'fat,' the 'roll of green-backs' is visible, the new suit is 'smart,' and the tan shoes are 'shiny'—this first meeting ends in his favour because he knows how to arouse Carrie's interest; as the narrator, who is perfectly aware of the workings of mimetic desire, notes, "She could not realize that she was drifting, until [Drouet] secured her address. Now she felt that she had yielded something—he, that he had gained a victory. . . . Already he took control in directing the conversation" (9). Although the association cannot be considered a master-slave relationship, Carrie has lost what Girard calls the "struggle of consciousness" when she has succumbed to Drouet's strategies, to what the narrator calls the "cunning wiles" of the city, the "wholly superhuman" and the "large forces which allure" the unsophisticated mind. Thus, when Drouet takes his leave, Carrie "felt something lost to her. . . . When he disappeared she felt his absence thoroughly. With her sister she was much alone" (12). The void left by the mediator's departure can hardly be filled by "dull and commonplace" (13) Minnie.

From now on, Carrie will rely on Drouet's standards to judge people and places. His approval or disapproval will determine what she thinks, even what she does. When she reaches Minnie's flat, "Something about the place irritated her, she did not know what" (13), a reaction that the narrator attributes to Carrie's "sixth sense" and to her vague sense of harmony: "Too ignorant to understand anything about the theory of harmony, Carrie yet felt the lack of it" (13). Obviously, Carrie's reaction stems from her encounter with Drouet: she is ashamed to let Drouet see where she resides. Although she has already given him Minnie's address, she suddenly thinks, "he could not come here. . . . My sister's place is so small" (14).[\(10\)](#) This feeling of shame, indicative of mediated desire, informs Carrie's job-seeking experience in Chicago as well, since she is more concerned with her public

image than with finding a job; with her eyes on the mediators, she loses sight of what she is after: "As she contemplated the wide windows and imposing signs, she became conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was—a wage-seeker" (18). In the world of internal mediation in which virtually anyone can become someone's mediator, Carrie has made the 'mistake' of openly revealing her desires, of showing others that she needs a job. Thus, "To avoid conspicuity and a certain indefinable shame she felt at being caught spying about for some place where she might apply for a position, she quickened her steps and assumed an air of indifference supposedly common to one upon an errand" (18). The quick steps and the air of indifference (itself imitated) cannot hide Carrie's preoccupation, and, under the circumstances, her conduct becomes unprofitable, for "she passed many manufacturing and wholesale houses without once glancing in" (18). Looking for a job has turned into a flight from the mediators, and the object of desire itself has been pushed aside.

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Because Carrie is under the sway of mimetic desire, she considers herself insignificant whenever she encounters people who seem to her to be superior models, comparing herself to them and repeatedly concluding that they enjoy a self-sufficiency of which she remains deprived. When her job-hunting adventures take her into a fashionable store, "she noticed, with a touch at the heart, the fine ladies who elbowed and ignored her, brushing past in utter disregard of her presence, themselves eagerly enlisted in the materials which the store contained" (23). The experience heightens Carrie's self-awareness, particularly her sense of her insignificance. Irving Howe's notion that the characters in Dreiser's novels suffer from a "desire for personal affirmation" describes Carrie's situation well but overlooks the role of human mediation, the mechanism apparent in the women's haughtiness and in Carrie's envy. For Carrie, personal affirmation can be attained only when she is no longer treated as if she did not exist. Her desire is for recognition, and not, as Donald Pizer argues, merely for clothes and material comfort. In this respect, the episode with the shop girls in the same store is telling:

Carrie was not familiar with the appearance of her more fortunate sisters of the city. Neither had she before known the nature and appearance of the shop girls, with whom she now compared poorly. They were pretty in the main, some even handsome, with a certain independence and toss of indifference which added . . . a certain piquancy. . . . [W]herever she encountered the eye of one, it was only to recognize in it a keen analysis of her own position—her individual shortcomings of dress and that shadow of *manner* which she thought must hang about her and make clear to all

who and what she was. A flame of envy lighted in her heart. (23)

To be conscious of one's appearance is to be in the grip of mediated desire, to engage in constant mental comparisons between oneself and others. Unlike the 'fine' ladies and the shop girls, Carrie feels that she lacks 'being' and that her identity seems transparent. At the source of Carrie's subjectivity, we see the human mediators' significance. Her flame of envy is understandable: she wants to acquire what makes those girls superior: independence, indifference, and piquancy. Carrie's low self-image colours even her understanding of other people's behaviour. When Drouet, who had promised to call on her, has apparently forgotten to keep his word, she jumps to the conclusion that "Drouet was not coming and somehow she felt a little resentful, a little as if she had been forsaken—was not good enough" (52); Drouet's neglect reinforces Carrie's low opinion of herself. But her reading of Drouet's action is absurd when we recall that she had earlier written to him expressly asking him not to call at Minnie's small flat.

At other times, however, Carrie's mere connection to Drouet makes her feel superior to other women and also to their men. At the shoe factory where she eventually gets her first job, Carrie has to work alongside girls who "had young men of the kind whom she, since her experience with Drouet, felt above. . . . She [also] came to thoroughly dislike the light-headed young fellows of the shop" (56) "who beside Drouet seemed uncouth and ridiculous" (40). Once Drouet has pointed out what seems desirable, Carrie will settle for nothing less.

But what is the nature of the superiority Carrie persists in attributing to Drouet? Is he as "great" and self-sufficient as she believes him to be? Here is why Drouet spends his free evenings at a famous Chicago restaurant:

Rector's, with its reputation as a resort for actors and professional men, seemed to him the proper place for a successful man to go. He loved fine clothes, good eating, and particularly the company and acquaintanceship of successful men. (42)

There is no doubt as to what attracts Drouet to Rector's: like Carrie, like all the characters who have helped to give Rector's its reputation, Drouet loves the company of the successful and haunts the restaurant because his mediators' prestige seems imparted to the place. The only difference between Carrie and Drouet is that she thinks he is successful, but as she gains experience, the difference between them dissolves, and with it goes her desire for his company.

That Drouet craves the atmosphere of places like Rector's to feel himself alive is made clear in several other episodes. When he dines out, "it was a source of keen satisfaction to him to know that Joseph Jefferson was wont to come to this same place at some time or another, or that Henry E. Dixey, quite a well-known performer of the day, was there only a few tables off" (42). Drouet is a *vaniteux*, one who, according to Girard, "will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires." (11) Drouet's satisfaction derives not from the quality of the food but from his conviction that his temporal or spatial proximity to his mediators bestows upon him some of their prestige. Because his desire is so mediated, some of Drouet's actions become comic: at Rector's, he would sometimes overhear someone mention the presence of some popular figure, and "When these things would fall upon Drouet's ears, he would straighten himself a little more stiffly and eat with solid comfort. If he had any vanity, this augmented it, and if he had any ambition, this stirred it" (42). The mechanical reaction to the mediators' presence recalls Carrie's quick steps when she realized other people were watching her as she was looking for a job. The passage also shows how the narrator can sometimes intuitively comprehend and unambiguously portray the laws governing mimetic desire: Drouet, the subject of desire, appears as a puppet whose actions are precipitated by the mediators' presence. In a perfect spirit of emulation, Drouet "would be able to flash a roll of greenbacks too someday. As it was, he could eat where *they* did" (42). Drouet also frequents Hannah and Hogg's, "a gorgeous saloon from a Chicago standpoint" (42). The reasons for the place's popularity with Drouet point once again to the mediators' role: "The fact that here men gather, here chatter, here love to pass and rub elbows, must be explained upon some grounds. It must be that a strange bundle of passions and vague desires gives rise to such a curious social institution or it would not be" (47). The saloon owes its existence to a human environment made up of what the narrator loosely designates as "a bundle of passions and vague desires," but Drouet's example indicates that desire for social recognition represents an essential element in the creation of Hannah and Hogg's. The motive for the gathering and the rubbing of elbows is to impress others and to prove oneself worthy of their attention.

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What has been said about Drouet applies equally to the other people drawn to the saloon:

The many friends [Drouet] met here dropped in because they craved, without perhaps consciously analyzing it, the company, the glow, the atmosphere, which they found. . . . The worst effect such a thing could

have would be perhaps to stir up in the material-minded an ambition to arrange their lives upon a similarly splendid basis. In the last analysis, that would scarcely be called the fault of the decorations, but rather of the innate trend of the mind. That such a scene might stir the less expensively dressed to emulate the more expensively dressed could scarcely be laid at the door of anything save the false ambition of the minds of those so affected. (47)

The narrator's view of emulation seems ambivalent in this passage, for though he describes the tendency to imitate others as an inborn quality of the human mind, he also suggests that emulation remains the false ambition of a particular mind, the kind permanently affected by desire.

Indeed, Drouet's mind is forever at work. When he takes Carrie out to dinner, he "selected a table close by the window. . . . He loved the changing panorama of the street—to see and be seen as he dined" (58). Mixed with Drouet's love of the varied street spectacle is his desire to be noticed, to draw attention to himself; and Drouet is more than just gregarious: the preceding example indicates how his self-esteem increases when he knows that other people, Carrie included, associate him with the city's fashionable places.

Drouet's power over Carrie depends on his ability to make her feel the elegance of his manners and the superiority of his taste; unable to perceive his limitations, Carrie leads a major part of her life in Chicago according to his expectations. One of the most telling examples of this influence occurs in chapter eleven, as Carrie and Drouet, who are now living together, are taking a walk:

Drouet had a habit . . . of looking after stylishly dressed or pretty women on the street and remarking upon them. . . . He saw how they set their little feet, how they carried their chins, with what grace and sinuosity they swayed their bodies. . . . He loved the thing that women love in themselves, grace. At this, their own shrine, he knelt with them, an ardent devotee.

"Did you see that woman who went by just now?" he said to Carrie, on the very first day they took a walk together.

It was a very average type of woman they had encountered, young, pretty, very satisfactorily dressed so far as appearances went, though not in style. Drouet had never seen the perfectly groomed ladies of the New York social set, or he would have been conscious of her defects.

“Fine stepper, wasn’t she?”

Carrie looked again and observed the grace commended.

“Yes, she is,” she returned cheerfully, a little suggestion of possible defect in herself awakening in her mind. If that was so fine she must look at it more closely. Instinctively she felt a desire to imitate it. . . .

When one of her mind sees many things emphasized and re-emphasized and admired, she gathers the logic of it and applies accordingly. Drouet was not shrewd enough to see that this was not tactful. He could not see that it would be better to make her feel that she was competing with herself, not with others better than herself. (99-100)

The “fine stepper” incident represents one of the clearest illustrations of Girard’s concept of mimetic desire. Carrie, who suddenly finds the other woman’s style desirable because Drouet has commended it, yearns to appropriate the sort of admiration the “fine stepper” enjoys in the eyes of men like Drouet. But Carrie’s struggle is not with the other woman, but with the mediator, who unwittingly suggests her shortcomings by praising other women in her presence. Instead of “whisper[ing] cautious interpretations” (4), the self-appointed counselor incites her to more emulation.

In addition to being a bad counselor, Drouet is unable to restrain his admiration for women; he reveals his desires too much, a habit indicative of a crude and tactless nature. Since Drouet cares to judge and be judged by appearances, his understanding of “grace” and “style” remains shallow.

This superficiality makes it hard for Carrie to engage his attention for very long, because “Drouet was a man whom it was impossible to bind to any one object for long. He had but one idol—the perfect woman” (105). Eager to meet Drouet’s standards of what constitutes the desirable, Carrie frequently finds herself copying whatever Drouet recommends. The “fine stepper” is not an isolated episode; chapter eleven provides an equally telling instance:

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What Drouet said about the girl’s grace . . . caused Carrie to perceive the nature and value of those little modish ways which women adopt when they would presume to be something. She looked in her mirror and pursed up her lips, accompanying it with a little toss of the head as she had seen

the railroad treasurer's daughter do. She caught up her skirts with an easy swing, for had not Drouet remarked that in her and several others, and Carrie was naturally imitative. She began to get the hang of those little things which the pretty woman who has vanity invariably adopts. . . . She used her feet less heavily, a thing that was brought about by her attempting to imitate the treasurer's daughter. (104)

Richard Poirier's argument that Dreiser "derive[s] his creative energy from a kind of fascinated surrender to the mysterious forces that in the city destroy freedom and even any consciousness of its loss" (12) misses the novel's power to depict the complex dynamics of imitation; the narrator clearly identifies mimesis as a decisive force in the heroine's life. The examples of the "fine stepper" and the treasurer's daughter indicate that in *Sister Carrie* desire is not as mysterious as some critics think.

Drouet's influence over Carrie leads her into a world of artifice in which her gestures are conscious imitations of one person or another. However, she soon begins to see his limitations, particularly the crudity of his desires. Even if Drouet had earlier impressed her with his apparent sophistication and his knowledge of the world, the narrator has stressed that "In reality Carrie had more imagination than [Drouet] did, more taste" (69). Drouet's temporary power can be traced to Carrie's inexperience:

In a dim way she was beginning to see where he lacked. If it had not been for this, if she had not been able to measure and judge him in a way, she would have been worse off than she was. She would have adored him. She would have been utterly wretched in her fear of not gaining his affection, of losing his interest, of being swept away and left without an anchorage. (92-93)

Carrie is experiencing what Girard describes as "metaphysical disappointment," (13) common among the subjects of mimetic desire. Her familiarity with Drouet gradually helps to diminish his qualities. When she was subject to his mediation, Carrie was unable to see things clearly, but the relationship between subject and mediator changes when the former's admiration for the latter begins to wane. The narrator even suggests that mimetic desire would have enslaved Carrie, and that Drouet would have become her idol, a prediction that confirms Girard's observation that "This movement [of mimetic desire] toward slavery is one of the basic principles of novelistic structure." (14)

The arrival of a superior mediator contributes significantly to the change in Carrie's

attitude: "When Hurstwood called she met a man who was more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways" (93). Hurstwood emerges as Drouet's opposite: far from wounding Carrie's sensibilities or suggesting her limitations, Hurstwood makes her feel special, convincing Carrie of his difference from Drouet:

He was never dull for a minute and seemed to make her clever. At least she brightened under his influence until all her best side was exhibited. She felt she was cleverer with him than with others. At least he seemed to find so much in her to applaud. There was not the slightest touch of patronage. Drouet was full of it. (117)

Even without the repetition of the verb "seemed," we know that Hurstwood is too attentive to Drouet's mistress, a fact neither she nor Drouet suspects. Hurstwood's strategy to gain her is part of the "cunning wiles" of the city: he knows both how to excite Carrie's interest and how to flatter her self-importance. But first, the manager's desire has some obstacles to overcome. For one thing, Drouet now becomes Hurstwood's rival; in fact, in the overall structure of the novel, the interaction between the two men is dominated by their rivalry over the heroine. For Hurstwood, Carrie is even more desirable because she belongs to another: "He envied the drummer his conquest as he had never envied any man in all the course of his experience" (122). The intense envy reflects not only the strength of his desire but also his awareness of his rival and his determination to triumph over him. Hurstwood finally persuades Drouet to bring Carrie to a show:

[A]s he looked at the well-dressed, jolly salesman whom he so much liked, the cold gleam of the rival glowed in his eye. He began to size up Drouet from the standpoints of wit and fascination. He began to look to see where he was weak. . . . Drouet felt nothing. . . . while his friend examined him with the eye of a hawk. (108)

Hurstwood's mediated desire makes him unscrupulous, and the animal imagery used to depict him reflects the extent to which his desires have mastered him. As Girard's writes, "The secret of success, in business as well as in love, is dissimulation. One must hide the desire one feels and pretend a desire one does not feel." (15) Hurstwood will win Carrie because he, unlike Drouet, is careful not to reveal his desires too quickly. At the show to which he has invited Drouet and Carrie, he feigns indifference; when Drouet steps outside to get the evening's program, Hurstwood and Carrie are alone:

Several times their eyes accidentally met and then there poured into hers such a flood of feeling as she had never before experienced. She could not for the moment explain it, for in the next glance or the next move of the hand there was seeming indifference mingled only with the kindest attention. (110)

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Hurstwood arouses Carrie's interest because his assumed indifference perplexes her, seeing it as a sign of his superiority and an indication that perhaps she does not matter to him. When Drouet comes back:

[He] was almost dull in comparison. Hurstwood entertained them both and now it was driven into Carrie's mind that here was the superior man. She instinctively felt that he was stronger and higher and yet withal so simple. . . . Drouet was only a kindly soul but otherwise defective. (110)

One model supplants another: when she first met Drouet, Carrie found her own sister dull; now, Drouet himself appears dull. Carrie's new perception is "driven" into her mind, mediated through what she takes to be Hurstwood's superiority.

Far from being superior, Hurstwood is himself a victim of mimetic desire. Like Drouet, the manager worries about the kind of impression he makes on people; but unlike Drouet, Hurstwood's tactics are subtle. The narrator describes him as "shrewd and clever in many little things and capable of creating a good impression" (43). His attributes are socially oriented, calculated to elicit a particular response among his acquaintances; in other words, Hurstwood can be seen as one of the novel's many actors, and only in this light can the conduct of "this starched and conventional poser among men" (105), be fully understood:

If Hurstwood had one leaning, it was toward notabilities. He considered that, if anywhere, he belonged among them. . . . In situations like the present—where he could shine as a gentleman and be received without equivocation as a friend and equal among men of known ability, he was most delighted. It was on such occasions, if ever, that he would 'take something.' When the social flavour was strong enough, he would even unbend to the extent of drinking glass for glass with his associates, punctiliously observing his turn to pay as if he were an outsider like the others. (266)

The unspoken but mild rivalry pervading the circle brings out the members' mediated actions: no one lets himself be outdone in the ability to drink or to spend money. For Hurstwood, to be a celebrity, to be in the public eye and enjoy the admiration and envy of many, seems the ultimate form of recognition. As the narrator states, "individuals love more to bask in the sunshine of popularity than they do to improve in some obscure intellectual shade. Merit is no object, conspicuity all. No one realized this better than Hurstwood" (173). The cultivation of the mind, conspicuously lacking in the lives of the novel's characters, remains an imagined possibility to be partially realized in Robert Ames (I shall have more to say about him later). For every other character, social conspicuousness seems to be the pinnacle of greatness, something that Hurstwood achieves on the night of Carrie's first stage experience:

The little theatre resounded to a babble of successful voices. . . all largely because of this man's bidding. . . he was a member of an eminent group—a rounded company of five or more, whose stout figures, large white bosoms and shining pins bespoke the character of their success. . . . He was evidently a light among them, reflecting in his personality the ambitions of those who greeted him. He was acknowledged, fawned upon, in a way lionized. Through it all one could see the standing of the man. It was greatness in a way, small as it was. (180)

In an atmosphere of glamour and finery, Hurstwood's desires seem fully gratified: he is the centre of attention and king of the occasion; he becomes everybody's mediator, symbolizing the ambitions of many people present. Even the narrator's qualification of Hurstwood's greatness ("small as it was") does not detract from his approval of this kind of public eminence.

Carrie's stage experience proves significant for another reason. Her public acclaim, though mild, increases her desirability in Hurstwood's eyes, so much so that he proposes that they live together in another part of Chicago. But Carrie, who is living with Drouet and who does not know that Hurstwood is married, will agree only if the manager is ready to marry her and move with her to another city, a condition that redoubles Hurstwood's desire: "She was something to struggle for, and that was everything. How different from the women who yielded willingly" (149). The more insurmountable the obstacle, the more intense Hurstwood's feelings, and the more desperate he is to sacrifice everything for her. [\(16\)](#)

Drouet's desire for Carrie rekindles too when he becomes aware of the manager's desire. When Hurstwood pays him a visit, "Drouet felt really closer to him than ever before. It gave him more respect for Carrie. Her appearance came into a new light,

under Hurstwood's appreciation" (94-95). To understand Drouet's new perception, we need to remember that, before meeting Carrie, Drouet had often thought of Hurstwood as a model, one whose attention he sought whenever he went to Rector's: when the manager had "been pointed out as a very successful and well-known man about town, Drouet immediately conceived a notion of him as being someone worth knowing and was glad not only to meet him but to visit the Adams Street bar thereafter whenever he wanted a drink or a cigar" (43). The manager's appreciation of Carrie amounts to an approving nod from the model.

But, following Carrie's stage triumph, the triangular relationship assumes a new shape. Toward the end of the performance,

The two men . . . scarcely heard the few remaining words with which the scene concluded. They only saw their idol, moving about with appealing grace, continuing a power which to them was a revelation. Hurstwood resolved a thousand things—Drouet as well. (192-93)

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The applause intensifies the two men's love for Carrie: Hurstwood decides that "He would act at once. . . . The Drummer would not have her" (193). So when he sees Drouet approaching Carrie, "Jealousy leaped alight in his bosom . . . he hated him as an intruder. . . . grudging Drouet every moment of his presence" (186). The audience's admiration has a similar effect on Drouet, pushing him to act at once: "He was resolving that he would be to Carrie what he had never been before. He would marry her, by George. She was worth it" (192). In short, Hurstwood and Drouet desire Carrie not for herself but for the recognition given her by the public at large. Although his own feelings toward Carrie intensify because another man finds her desirable, Drouet is initially unable to sense the change in her perception of him, now that her stage successes are bringing her more and more public recognition. However, with the apparent self-assurance Carrie derives from all the applause, she begins to feel no longer bound by Drouet's standards: "She was realizing now what it was to be petted. For once she was the admired, the sought-for" (193).

The most desirable state the characters can imagine and the ultimate symbol of their social ambitions is what the novel calls "the kingdom of greatness," where the "great money kings" (304) rule as the ultimate mediators of desire. Because wealth is viewed as intrinsically honourable and as conferring prestige and superiority on its owners, it mediates between ordinary individuals and the desired ideal of behaviour, a process often referred simply to as the "social atmosphere" of the city:

The great create an atmosphere which reacts badly upon the small. This atmosphere is easily and quickly felt. Walk among the magnificent residences, the splendid equipages, the gilded shops, restaurants, resorts of all kinds. Scent the flowers, the silks, the wines; drink of the laughter springing from the soul of the luxurious content, of the glances which gleam like light from defiant spears; feel the quality of smiles which cut like glistening swords and of strides born of place and power, and you shall know of what is the atmosphere of the high and the mighty. Little need to argue that of such is not the kingdom of greatness, but so long as the world is attracted by this and the human heart views this as the one desirable value which it must attain, as long, to that heart, will this remain the realm of greatness. So long, also, will the atmosphere of this realm work its desperate results in the soul of man. It is like a chemical reagent. One day of it, like one drop of the other, will so affect and discolor the views, the aims, the desires of the mind, that it will thereafter remain forever dyed. (305)

Dreiser's narrator is fascinated by the atmosphere surrounding the wealthy, and the elaborate descriptions make the kingdom of greatness appear as the object to end all desires, its inhabitants having nothing else left to desire. Their power is so formidable that mere glances and smiles are as effective as deadly weapons. However, to talk about the aggressive and belligerent nature of those smiles and glances is to suggest a deficiency in "the soul of the luxurious content." The narrator also describes the atmosphere as compelling, even contagious, part of the "large forces which allure" and contribute to the undoing of the unsophisticated mind. As Walter Benn Michaels notes:

We are . . . so accustomed to identifying capitalism with some form of rugged individualism that it is extraordinarily difficult for us to see . . . what *Sister Carrie* exemplified—that the capitalism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries acted more to subvert the ideology of the autonomous self than to enforce it.[\(17\)](#)

The description of the kingdom of greatness suggests that the gradual disintegration of the self is based on the mimetic principle. Richard Poirier is right when he observes that Dreiser's creative energy derives from "a kind of fascinated surrender to the mysterious forces of the city," for we get the impression that Dreiser's narrator surrenders to the luring powers of the kingdom of greatness—only death, as he admits, can deliver one from such a grip. It is as if Dreiser's paradoxical thinking cannot imagine an alternative to the sway of desire, a failure

that might help explain why many readers find unconvincing the portrayal of Ames, whose function is supposedly to criticize the ethos of material success.

In New York, Carrie makes the acquaintance of Mrs. Vance, “a typical New Yorker in many things,” the narrator says, “some of which were dressiness, jollity, love of metropolitan life, crowds, theatres” (320). But Mrs. Vance’s first invitation to Carrie proves unsettling: “She . . . saw that she was not well-dressed—not really as well-dressed as Mrs. Vance. . . . She felt that her life was becoming stale. . . . The old helpful, urging melancholy was restored. The desirous Carrie was whispered to concerning her possibilities” (321), and when the two women go for a walk, Carrie feels once again the sense of her own insignificance because “this woman pained her by contrast. Carrie felt that anyone looking at the two would pick Mrs. Vance for her raiment alone” (322). The new friend is both a model and a rival, but Mrs. Vance herself is in the grip of mimetic desire:

[The parade] was a familiar thing to Mrs. Vance, who not only knew of it as an entity, but had often been in it, going purposely to see and be seen, to create a stir with her beauty and dispel any tendency to fall short in dressiness by contrasting herself with the beauty and fashion of the town. (323)

8

Mrs. Vance lives for the sake of the institutionalized showy parade. Like Carrie, Drouet, and Hurstwood, she often betrays her mimetic conduct in the presence of her mediators; during their excursion down Broadway, Carrie “noticed of a sudden that Mrs. Vance’s manner had rather stiffened under the gaze of handsome men and elegantly dressed ladies” (323). Still, Carrie remains envious of her friend’s self-assurance: “The whole street bore the flavor of riches and show and Carrie felt that she was not of it. . . . It cut her to the quick, and she resolved that she would not come here again until she looked better” (324). Carrie feels excluded from the apparent bliss enjoyed by her friend; acquiring Mrs. Vance’s assurance will presumably give her a place in the street parade. But “Broadway taught her a sharper lesson. . . . It clinched her convictions concerning her state. She had not lived, could not lay claim to having lived, until something of this had come into her life. . . . That night the pretty little flat seemed a commonplace thing” (325-26); as the narrator puts it, “The great awakening blow had been delivered” (327). I emphasize the role of Mrs. Vance in Carrie’s life because such an influence, ignored in most readings of the novel, is part of the city’s atmosphere, part of the human interaction that shapes character. When she cannot keep up with her friend’s standards, Carrie prefers not to see Mrs. Vance any longer.

This sense of her insignificance is brought home to her again when all she, a popular Chicago actress, can get is the role of chorus girl in New York: “she had her first sight of those high and mighty—the leading ladies and gentlemen. . . . She saw that they were privileged and deferred to. She was nothing—absolutely nothing at all” (391).⁽¹⁸⁾ But through diligent imitation of the more successful actors and a careful heeding of the critics’ comments, Carrie eventually enters the “walled city” (449):

Gradually the deference and congratulations gave her a mental appreciation of her state. She was no longer ordered but requested, and that politely. The other members of the cast looked at her enviously. (449)

Even though Carrie has become one of the “high and mighty” she once envied, her perception of her own success is still determined by the public regard for her. As if to expose the fluctuating dynamics of desire and to explain the nature of Carrie’s rise, Dreiser reintroduces Mrs. Vance, who now comes to pay homage to a rising star: “‘But aren’t you a success. Dear, oh! All the papers talking about you. . . . I was almost afraid to come back here this afternoon’” (454). Mrs. Vance’s fear might perhaps sound comic, but it reflects the change through which Carrie now becomes Mrs. Vance’s mediator of desire.

Because Carrie has become a model for the public at large, the manager of a New York hotel even offers her a suite in his establishment at a special rate because “‘Every hotel depends upon the repute of its patrons. A well-known actress like yourself . . . draws attention to the hotel, and, although you may not believe it, patrons. Now we must have repute. It is what we live on. The common run of individuals will go where celebrities are’” (451). The implications of Mr. Withers’ theory can be understood when we recall Drouet’s inclination to go to Rector’s because some celebrity was dining a few tables off, Hurstwood’s leaning toward notabilities, Mrs. Hurstwood and her daughter’s frantic pursuit of Chicago Society, and Carrie’s desire to feel equal to the better-dressed women of Chicago and New York. Just as Hannah and Hogg’s in Chicago exists because of “a strange bundle of passions and vague desires,” the Wellington in New York relies for its success on the mimetic principle.

Carrie Meeber of Columbia City has finally entered New York’s “kingdom of greatness” as “the doors of fine places seemed to open quite without the asking. These palatial chambers—how marvellously they came to her. The elegant apartments of Mrs. Vance in the Chelsea—these were hers. Men sent flowers, love notes, offers of fortune” (456). But now that his heroine has attained what she has

often desired, Dreiser is confronted with resolving the problem of desire. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard argues that a great novel is fundamentally an extended theory of human interaction that reveals a pattern of mediated desire and that concludes with its characters undergoing a radical transformation for the better when they finally grasp the contagious and self-destructive power of mimesis.

The closest Dreiser comes to solving this structural and thematic problem and to offering an alternative to the “kingdom of greatness” is in his introduction of Ames(19) at the height of Carrie’s material success in the last pages of the book. He is described as “an original thinker” who is “wholly free of affectation” (329), and Carrie is attracted to him because “he liked better books than she read, better people than she associated with. His ideal burned in her heart” (405). His presence helps her see that “Flattery in its most palpable form had lost its force with her. It required superiority—kindly superiority, to move her” (432). If Carrie’s view of experience begins to change, it is because she has at last met what the narrator earlier said she needed most: a good counselor. Challenging Carrie’s notion that success in love and fortune is everything, Ames argues that ““if a man doesn’t make knowledge his object, he’s likely to fail”” (482).

Experience has taught Ames a great deal about the relationship between happiness and desire:

“When I was quite young I felt as if I were ill-used because other boys were dressed better than I was, were more sprightly with the girls than I, and I grieved and grieved, but now I’m over that. I have found out that everyone is more or less dissatisfied. No one has exactly what his heart wishes.” (482-83)

Ames accepts desire as part of the human condition; however, he also realizes that desire needs limits, because, as he tells Carrie, ““the world is full of desirable situations”” (482). Therefore, the only way out of the labyrinth of desire is to accept that ““happiness is within yourself wholly if you will only believe it”” (482).

9

But although we are told that, when Ames is gone, his ideal remains with Carrie, especially his suggestion that “riches were not everything” (346), our last glimpse of Carrie undermines any expectations that she has fully grasped the import of his words:

In her comfortable chambers at the Waldorf, Carrie was reading, at this time, "Père Goriot," which Ames had recommended to her. It was so strong, and Ames's mere recommendation had so aroused her interest, that she caught nearly the full sympathetic significance of it. For the first time it was being borne in upon her how silly and worthless had been her earlier reading, as a whole. (495)

The predictable irony in Carrie's willingness to sympathize with suffering in books while she remains unaware that Hurstwood is dying not very far from her comfortable hotel chambers seems at odds with the implications of Ames's advice. Therefore, if the conclusion of the novel does not constitute a fresh beginning, if we are not left with a novelistic truth, it is because Dreiser's heroine has not triumphed over mediated desire; she has not achieved the clarity of vision necessary to contradict the ideas and transcend the obsessions that have driven and shaped her actions throughout the story.

But Sister Carrie's failure to acquire this new vision springs from Dreiser's paradoxical thinking about desire. While he is willing to expose Drouet's crudity and vanity, to reveal Hurstwood as a "conventional poser among men" (105), to trace Carrie's determination to emulate and triumph over her rivals, and to write that "individuals love more to bask in the sunshine of popularity than they do to improve in some obscure intellectual shade" (173), Dreiser's narrator comes across as a supermediator who looks down on all these little characters playing their little games of desire. (20) He seems more sophisticated in the ways of the world than they are. Still, the narrator himself is not above the games of desire, often implying that he has better taste and more style than his characters: he knows, for instance, the difference between "a very average type of woman, not stylish" [desired by Drouet] and "the perfectly groomed ladies of the New York social set" (99-100). And although he characterizes the "large forces" and the "cunning wiles" of the city as full of "falsehoods" (4) and although he describes emulation as "the false ambition of the minds of those so affected" (47) by desire, the narrator cannot transcend the pull of the "kingdom of greatness" because, as he says, "It is like a chemical reagent. One day of it, like one drop of the other, will so affect and discolor the views, the aims, the desires of the mind, that it will thereafter remain forever dyed" (305). In spite of Dreiser's pronounced concern with desire (there are at least 80 occurrences of the term in the novel), his narrator's ambivalent views support Rolf Lundén's central claim that "Theodore Dreiser was inconsistent, often paradoxical, in his outlook on life" (11).

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Notes

1. Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1981) 97.

Subsequent references are to this edition. [\(back\)](#)

2. Randolph Bourne, "Desire as Hero," in *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981): 243-46. [\(back\)](#)
3. Irving Howe, *Decline of the New* (New York: Harcourt, 1970) 140. [\(back\)](#)
4. Donald Pizer, "Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism," *Sister Carrie*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Norton, 1970) 572. [\(back\)](#)
5. Walter Benn Michaels, "Sister Carrie's Popular Economy," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1980): 382. [\(back\)](#)
6. Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr., *Dreiser and His Fiction: A Twentieth-Century Quest*(Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1983) 18. [\(back\)](#)
7. Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere* (London: Oxford UP, 1966) 213. [\(back\)](#)
8. Bassoff 126. [\(back\)](#)
- 8a. This brief summary of Girard's insights is drawn from my article "Desire, Emulation, and Envy in *The Portrait of a Lady*" published in *Contagion* (2001). [\(back\)](#)
9. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1965) 87. [\(back\)](#)
10. Carrie experiences a similar feeling of shame when she avoids seeing Mrs. Vance, her wealthy New York neighbour, rather than give her the address of the apartment she shares with Hurstwood. [\(back\)](#)
11. Girard 7. [\(back\)](#)
12. Poirier 5. [\(back\)](#)
13. Girard 88. [\(back\)](#)
14. Girard 170. [\(back\)](#)
15. Girard 107. [\(back\)](#)
16. A few pages earlier, we have another example of how obstacles fuel desire: when Drouet is away, the manager takes Carrie out for dinner, but, as "She kept him at a distance . . . his interest was heightened. Now that the game was only to be won by artifice, it seemed more and more entrancing. Her beauty was

heightened for him by her aloofness" (133). [\(back\)](#)

17. Michaels 388. [\(back\)](#)

18. Carrie's feeling that she amounts to nothing echoes Hurstwood's own when he arrives in New York:

Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York. . . . In other words, Hurstwood was nothing. (304-05) [\(back\)](#)

19. For a comprehensive study, see David T. Humphries, "'The Shock of Sympathy': Bob Ames's Reading and Re-reading of Sister Carrie" (2001). [\(back\)](#)

20. My thanks to Eric Gans for this idea. [\(back\)](#)