

“This Disintegrating Force”: Reading Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* as a Narrative of Black Upward Mobility

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Abstract: In this essay, I argue that Theodore Dreiser’s 1900 novel *Sister Carrie* can be read as a narrative of African American migration to the Northern cities. *Sister Carrie* engages with social change at the turn of the century, of which the migration of African Americans and others to large urban centers was a significant part. The novel describes the social fall and ruin of the middle-class figure Hurstwood while it depicts Carrie as an ethnic Other becoming rich and famous. In numerous accounts of Carrie’s attitudes and behavior, there are striking similarities to stereotypes of African Americans, which were widely circulated through the era’s popular culture. Moreover, the way in which Carrie achieves fame as a Broadway actress echoes the success that a number of black performers were experiencing there for the first time. Through these resemblances, the turn-of-the-century reader could come to recognize an important subtext in *Sister Carrie*—the possibility of upward mobility for African Americans moving to places such as New York City or Chicago.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, there was a sense among many Americans that the United States was facing an ethnic crisis (Howard 86; Wonham 88). This was largely due to the mass arrival of Southern and Eastern European immigrants who were settling in America as well as to the so-called Negro problem that was starting to develop into a nationwide concern.¹ This essay

¹ The ‘Negro problem,’ the future of African Americans in a supposedly white society, was a pressing concern at the turn of the century. The Great Migration North had started in the 1890s (Sacks 9), and this was also the period in which the practice of lynching exploded across the South. On average, nearly 110 African Americans were lynched every year between 1889 and 1902 (Lemons 106). In 1901, W. E. B. Du Bois prophesied in *The New York Times* that the black migration to the North would continue, “and perhaps increase,” due to the persistent racial violence in the South (“Black North”). He made this remark in his page-filling editorial “The Black North,” which ran in six installments between November 17 and December 15, 1901. This

proposes that the title character of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) evokes certain African American stereotypes in such a way that her journey toward success could resonate with fears of black upward mobility that were prevalent at the time of the novel's publication.

The sense of crisis over the nation's 'ethnic stock' should be understood in the larger context of anxiety over America's rapid industrialization and urbanization as well as the white middle and upper classes' anxiety about the instability of their class position vis-à-vis 'new' Americans.² Dreiser's novel is famous for its portrayal of the effects of these societal changes.³ *Sister Carrie* also engages with the anxiety surrounding the issue of ethnicity in turn-of-the-century America, more than is at times acknowledged in literary criticism. The specific 'ethnic threat' that the novel addresses is not necessarily that of the European immigrant but bears more resemblance to the threat of black upward mobility newly relevant to the Northern cities.

Dreiser's novel depicts the displacement of the traditional white middle class by new ethnic groups through the socioeconomic rise of Carrie and the fall of Hurstwood. The ways in which Hurstwood is described when he is still affluent "add up to an early Dreiserian picture of solid middle class *homo americanus*" (Riggio 61). It is, therefore, significant that he ends up in the poorhouse as a ruined man.⁴ June Howard explains that Hurstwood's decline "proposes a frightening question to the reader: is anyone safe [from proletarianization]?" (101). This threat, which corresponds directly to "the historical moment of naturalism" (103), is given further substance by

series in itself illustrates the attention that was given to the 'Negro problem' in a city like New York.

- 2 The understanding that Americans had of this period as being "perilous" and full of threatening changes is well documented and historically significant (Howard ix, cf. also 75).
- 3 *Sister Carrie* chronicles the experiences of Carrie Meeber, a rural girl who moves to Chicago in search of the exciting city life. She holds various tough jobs there while living with her sister and brother-in-law. Soon she realizes the advantages of having male suitors, using her looks and charm to let them provide her with a more glamorous lifestyle, centered around clothing and leisure. The most important of these suitors is the prosperous George Hurstwood. He and Carrie run off to New York City together after Hurstwood has stolen money from his employer. There, Carrie becomes a successful—and famous—stage actress while Hurstwood loses all his money. He degenerates into a homeless beggar who ultimately ends his own life. Cf., e.g., Gelfant or Fisher for discussions of unstable class positions in *Sister Carrie* as well as Howard for the representation of this phenomenon in naturalism in general.
- 4 Christopher Gair in "Sister Carrie, Race, and the World's Columbian Exposition" (2004) argues that Hurstwood comes to resemble a black character as his degeneration unfolds (169). While I concur with his statement that the novel "depends upon a series of racial markers more complex than have previously been recognized" (174), I disagree with Gair's explanation of Carrie's journey toward fame as depending "upon the signs of her whiteness" (167). Still, together with De La Perriere's essay "*Sister Carrie*, Sisters in Sable Skin, and Gestures of Exclusion," Gair's article is one of the few studies on the topic of *Sister Carrie* and race.

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the rise of the upstart Carrie. With the help of various cues, the text marks Hurstwood as a representative of the white middle class, while it constructs Carrie as an ethnic Other to the standard of Anglo-Saxon Americanness (Riggio 60-61). In “Theodore Dreiser: Hidden Ethnic,” Thomas P. Riggio argues that “just [...] below *Sister Carrie*’s narrative surface,” the text poses a challenge to a nativist audience that “was beginning to have serious misgivings about its collective identity and its ability to survive in a new America” (62). Such misgivings should be understood in the context of social Darwinist thought, which was influential in the United States at the time and which was often interpreted to mean that different ethnic groups were involved in an all-out struggle for domination of the social realm. *Sister Carrie*, in this sense, seems to confirm one of the middle class’s worst fears: its loss of cultural hegemony at the hands of previously far less powerful ethnic groups that are using the changes in American society to their advantage.

While I concur with Riggio’s point that “Dreiser goes out of his way to keep Carrie’s ethnicity hidden” (59), I would like to specify and complicate his findings. I argue that the novel does not simply present Carrie as being ethnically dissimilar to the average white middle-class American, as Riggio claims (60);⁵ rather, more than pointing to a sort of generic ethnic Other, descriptions of Carrie echo contemporary stereotypes of African Americans to a striking degree. In both her preferences and her behavior, Carrie can be said to correspond to popularly held ideas about ‘black temperament and character.’ This resemblance is found again in the ways in which she achieves her social success. Due to these similarities, turn-of-the-century Americans might have read in the novel the allusions that the story of Carrie—who is new to the city and couples morally reprehensible behavior with financial success—can be said to make to the arrival of blacks in the North, which was an important aspect of Americans’ concerns over a changing society in this period.

CARRIE AS AN ETHNIC OTHER

Advancing the claim made in Riggio’s essay, I will further analyze the text as to the manner in which Carrie is described as an ethnic Other. It is important to recognize that Carrie is characterized in contrast to the traditional American value system in the text. Representative of such values in the novel are Carrie’s sister Minnie and her

5 The idea that Carrie represents an ethnic Other to her readership is argued in a rather foreshortened manner in Riggio. The fact that at her job Carrie is mistaken for a “‘Maggie,’” an Irish factory girl, is the most convincing point he delivers in his short essay (60).

husband, Sven Hanson. The couple strives to live according to the protestant work ethic, a pivotal marker of American identity that focuses on “self-denial and productivity” (Mizruchi 652). This is illustrated by the fact that the Hansons’ only concern is with “the chances of work in Chicago” (Dreiser 12). As the narrator continues, “[Carrie] read from the manner of Hanson, in the subdued air of Minnie and indeed the whole atmosphere of the flat, a settled opposition to anything save a conservative round of toil” (14). Hanson, “American-born of a Swede father,” is a silent and cold man, which is symbolized by his job as a “cleaner of refrigerator cars at the stock yards” (12).⁶ Similarly, Minnie is described as “cold reality taking [Carrie] by the hand. No world of light and merriment. No round of amusement” (11). This is the “lean and narrow life” (13), the life of self-denial and toil, which Carrie quickly finds out she is not suited for and which she firmly rejects over the course of the novel.

Susan Mizruchi explains that “the work ethic persisted as a significant register of Americanization” at the turn of the century (652-53). Carrie’s dismissal of this work ethic—she rather has suitors provide for her, and she obviously does not feel much for self-denial either—can be said to illustrate that unlike her sister, she is not willing to ‘Americanize.’ The otherness of Carrie manifests itself here as a clear deviation from the white norm. Dreiser’s narrator also states that “[i]t must not be thought that anyone could have mistaken [Carrie] for a nervous, sensitive, high-strung nature [...]. Such certainly she was not” (22). This nervousness, or neurasthenia, was thought to be a ‘civilized’ and ‘white’ infliction (Nisetich 15).⁷ The fact that Carrie “certainly” cannot be mistaken for anyone with such symptoms thus puts a limit on the extent to which she can embody a white subject position. Early on in the novel, she is rather presented as belonging to the apparently ‘lower’ stages of human development: Carrie is “unintellectual,” and she has a strong “instinct of self-protection” (Dreiser 64). The narrator links Carrie’s instinct to the fact that “[n]ature has taught the beasts of the field to fly when some unheralded danger threatens,” and such rudimentary dispositions are apparently still present in Carrie as well (64).

6 Hippolyte Taine, a late-nineteenth-century social Darwinist, believed that “the Saxons in England were ‘cool-blooded’ and ‘of a cold temperament’ [...] [because] following the Norman invasion [...] Norman blood had mingled with Saxon blood” (qtd. in Gossett 199-200). Hanson, though of Swedish descent, might be said to approximate the imaginative ‘Anglo-Saxon,’ who was thought of as the dominant and properly ‘white’ American ‘ethnic stock’ at the time (Nisetich 2).

7 Neurasthenia was seen as a sign of the cultural weakness of ‘overdevelopment.’ Along with “falling birth rates in Anglo-Saxon families,” it contributed to rising fears of so-called race suicide at the turn of the century (Nisetich 15).

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“SHE’D SHAKE HIM MIGHTY SOON”: CARRIE AND ‘BLACK’ BEHAVIOR

Stereotypical ideas about blacks were widespread and continually reinforced at the time of the novel’s publication. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explains that, in the late nineteenth century, “[t]he extent to which black people were stereotyped in the visual arts is remarkable” (149). He states that, “[b]y 1900, [...] it would have been possible for a middle-class white American to see Sambo images from toaster and teapot covers on his breakfast table, to advertisements in magazines, to popular postcards in drug stores. Everywhere he or she saw a black image, that image would be negative” (150). Because of this omnipresence, the ability of turn-of-the-century readers of *Sister Carrie* to identify such stereotypes—even where they were not expected—should not be underestimated.

Looking at Carrie’s correspondence to black stereotypes, it is necessary to take into account her pleasure-seeking behavior: Carrie’s most noticeable character traits are her ‘spendthrift’ habits and her continuous search for enjoyment. Although she initially has a small income, she likes to spend it “with a swift and graceful hand” (Dreiser 29). Dreiser writes that Carrie’s “craving for pleasure was so strong that it was the one stay of her nature” (which, again, indicates her distance from the Anglo-Saxon ideal of self-restraint) (32). When we add Carrie’s conspicuous love of clothes, which are a “vast persuasion” for her (98), she indeed starts to resemble the black dandy stereotype as it was presented in coon songs and vaudeville performances of the period.⁸ The black dandy had originated as a stage caricature and was known for “sporting his flashy attire and projecting a slick, urbane persona” (Dormon 451). James Dormon explains that “[t]here is, of course, nothing resembling thrift or frugality in lifestyle” in these representations (457). The title of one such coon song from 1899 reads: “When a Nigger Makes a Hundred, Ninety-Nine Goes on His Back”—in other words, nearly all his money is spent on clothing (cf. Dormon 457). Carrie’s strong craving for pleasure over everything else and her habit of spending her money on clothes make it clear that she lives by such principles as well.

8 Coon songs ‘humorously’ depicted diverse aspects of African American life. Whereas any serious engagement with African American life was on the whole avoided in ‘respectable’ genres such as realist and naturalist fiction, there was an abundance of images deriding black Americans to be found in the era’s popular culture, which served to ridicule the possibility of black social achievement. The omnipresence of the black figure in popular culture was a phenomenon that “manifested a sociopsychological response to the need for addressing the ‘race question’ so central and so troubling to the times” (Dormon 464). The coon song craze of the 1890s is a good example of the obsession with blacks in popular culture: Literally millions of copies of coon song sheet music were sold in the late 1890s (453).

An additional trope of coon songs is the young lady who looks for men to support her (Dormon 456). These women tend to be “fairly avaricious, hardhearted sorts” in their dealings with suitors (456). The song “I’m Always Glad to See You When You Buy” from 1899 exemplifies this:

A coon once had a ladyfriend,
A black gal from Kentucky.
His money she would help him spend,
Whenever he was lucky.
But when dis colored man was broke, she’d shake him mighty soon.
She seemed to think it was a joke to tantalize dis coon. (qtd. in Dormon 457)

The attitude of the girl in the song matches the calculating, opportunistic manner in which Carrie handles her relationships with Drouet and Hurstwood. Carrie lets her suitors buy clothes and other luxuries for her, but when, for example, Hurstwood goes bankrupt, she decisively breaks off her relationship with him. This calculating and ‘spendthrift’ attitude, of course, might not have been ascribed solely to black women but to ‘amoral’ and ‘loose’ women in general. However, the examples point to how, in popular culture, such behavior could be racialized and associated with black ‘degeneracy.’

Another similarity between Carrie and popularly held notions of ‘black’ behavior can be identified in her living situation. While she at first travels the route of respectability when she comes to the city by moving in with her sister, she soon is set up by her first suitor Drouet in an apartment of her own, and later in the story she lives with Hurstwood while they remain unmarried. Such a “living together arrangement” was not only highly frowned upon at the time, it was, in fact, “commonly believed to be the typical form of black domesticity, as opposed to marriage and the nuclear family of the white norm” (Dormon 458).

Eric Sundquist adds that racist commentators often claimed “that the ‘failure’ of the black family was a sign of racial degeneration” (394); Carrie’s situation might be said to constitute such a ‘failed’ family life. Her unsuccessful attempt to live with her sister, her living together out of wedlock with two men, and also her seeming disregard for her parents are all signs of this failure. Aside from a “gush of tears” and “a touch in the throat” that Carrie feels upon parting from them in the first paragraph of the novel, her parents seem to play no role in Carrie’s life (Dreiser 3). This indifference corresponds to what in the post-Reconstruction era was thought to be an underdeveloped “family sense” among African Americans (Sundquist 394). As Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, author of “The Permanence of Race Characteristics,” notes in 1890: “I have never heard a [Negro] refer to his grandfather, and any reference to [his] parents is rare” (qtd. in Sundquist 394; brackets in original). It

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becomes clear again how Carrie’s conduct signifies what was coded at the time as ‘black’ behavior. In her ‘spendthrift’ ways, her ‘amoral’ dealings with men, and her disregard for her family, the turn-of-the-century reader could recognize stereotypes about African Americans that were both prevalent and influential at the time.

“THAT GILDED STATE”: CARRIE, BROADWAY, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN SUCCESS

Carrie distinctively comes to embody a ‘black threat’ to the social order in the manner in which she gains social mobility. The fact that “African-American liberation during this period was often figured as a desire to enter a preexisting social order” stirred up enormous anxiety in American society and fueled racial tensions (Warren 13). Carrie’s upward mobility is achieved through a successful stage career—the same social avenue opening up to some African Americans living in urban centers in these years. She is a remarkably apt student of other people’s behavior, which helps her succeed as an actress. When Carrie and Drouet pass a superiorly dressed woman on the street, for example, it is stressed in the text that “[i]nstantly [Carrie] felt a desire to imitate [the woman’s demeanor]. Surely she could do that too. When one of her mind sees many things emphasized and re-emphasized, she gathers the logic of it and applies accordingly” (Dreiser 99-100). Significantly, it was argued in contemporary racial theory that the “innate capacity for imitation” was one of the distinguishing aspects of African American ‘character’ (Hiro 189). As Shaler claims: “The black man at once becomes the mirror of his superior [...]. He . . . naturally imitates the tones, gestures, and even the superficial aspects of thought of our race” (qtd. in Hiro 189).⁹ This capacity for imitation was, in fact, seen as the only way in which African Americans would be able to survive in American society (Sundquist 286). It is, similarly, because “Carrie was naturally imitative” that she is able to succeed as an actress (Dreiser 104), as the following passage points out:

She was created with that passivity of soul which is always the mirror of the active world. She possessed an innate taste for imitation and no small ability. Even without practice, she could sometimes restore dramatic situations she had witnessed by recreating, before her mirror, the expressions of the various faces taking part in the scene. (157)

9 Hiro quotes from Nathaniel Southgate Shaler’s *The Neighbor: The Natural History of Human Contacts*, published in 1904.

Importantly, then, Carrie's financial success and her fame as an actress derive from a talent that was supposedly innate to blacks, who were thought to be natural imitators, too.

Indeed, in this period there was an increasing number of African Americans with a successful stage career—with noticeable parallels to Carrie's. African Americans who, like Carrie, were moving to Northern urban centers could find few alternatives to menial jobs other than a career in the theater. The final years of the 1890s would “catapult to fame a number of black performers, male and female alike,” and the period would generally provide “far wider employment for blacks in American musical theater than ever before” (Sundquist 283). Will Marion Cook, a black writer of musical comedies, observes that “Negroes were at last on Broadway, and there to stay” (qtd. in Sundquist 283). Carrie similarly expresses the “long[ing] to feel the delight of parading here [on Broadway] as an equal” (Dreiser 324). Her ambition and her ultimate success on Broadway—in light of her strong resemblance to the ethnic Other and what was thought to be her morally corrupted nature—come to remind us of the fame that African Americans achieved there. The 1890s were the decade of the black vaudeville stars in Broadway theaters (Lemons 107-08). Although the roles played by black actors were almost exclusively demeaning, becoming part of the Broadway scene, “at a moment when few professional doors were open to the talented black artist, [...] was one of the best paths to independence [for African Americans]” (Sundquist 285). Carrie feels similarly: “Frequently she had considered the stage as a door through which she might enter that gilded state which she had so much craved,” Dreiser writes (376-77).

Carrie's entry into this “gilded state,” then, parallels the way in which the ethnic Other could achieve social mobility and threaten the status quo. As Riggio summarizes, “if Carrie is the hidden ethnic who becomes a success story, Hurstwood is the American who realizes the worst fear of the nativists: their economic and social displacement by the new ethnics” (61). Carrie's behavior stands in stark contrast to the values and dispositions associated with the properly Anglo-Saxon American ‘race’ through, for example, her distaste for hard work. From this characterization, it can be read that she does not belong to what were thought of as the higher ranks of the racial hierarchy. In a telling passage, the narrator asks “what led and schooled the race before it thought logically—*before it came into the wisdom to lead itself?* Carrie was *unwise*, and, therefore, like the sheep in its unwisdom, strong in feeling” (Dreiser 64; my emphases). This demonstrates once more how Carrie seems to be of a different ‘race’ than the ‘leading race’ that thinks logically: She is “unwise” rather than wise, and the sheep metaphor suggests docility and an inability “to lead [her]self.” In *The Black Image in the White Mind*, George Fredrickson points out that, at the turn of the century, African

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Americans were thought to be “unfit for self-government” (183), “simpleminded,” and willing to “follow the leadership of demagogues” (275). Carrie being “strong in feeling” (Dreiser 64), therefore, establishes a further link with an African American stereotype, which held that blacks were more emotional than whites (Fredrickson 124, 259, 327).

“UNSPEAKABLE THINGS UNSPOKEN”: CARRIE AND ‘BLACKNESS’ IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Sister Carrie’s abstract treatment of issues related to the ‘Negro problem’—a thorny issue for the white middle class—seems to function in a way that made it discussable. As late as 1946, Richard Wright would state that “American whites and blacks both possess deep-seated resistances against the Negro problem being presented, even verbally, in all of its hideous fullness, in all of the totality of its meaning” (xxviii).¹⁰ There was, in fact, a sense of shame about the black presence in society among some Americans, as is evident from the following essay written in 1903: “As an unprejudiced observer, it seems to the writer impossible that a country which prides itself, as does the United States, on enlightenment, freedom and justice [...] can afford to have at its very heart this disintegrating force [i.e., African Americans], this constant irritant, this potent reminder of past and present mistakes” (Colquhoun 660). Thinking about African Americans as a “disintegrating force” and “irritant” served to ignore and repress the idea of African American socioeconomic successes. In a covert way, *Sister Carrie* relates to this (in Toni Morrison’s sense) ‘unspeakable’ idea. A novel that would have openly proposed the possibility of social displacement of middle-class whites by blacks would likely have met the scorn and ridicule of a white readership. *Sister Carrie*, in contrast, draws up the contours of this idea through the use of allusion.

In the spirit of Morrison’s seminal essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” (1989), which has been instrumental in furthering the “examination and re-interpretation of [...] the founding nineteenth-century works [...] for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure—the meaning of so much American literature,” this essay sought to discern an “Afro-American presence” in a text not commonly thought of in these terms (2306). One of the tasks in thinking about American realist and naturalist literature—published in the period that is viewed by many as the nadir of American race relations—is to keep paying

10 Cf. also W. E. B. Du Bois’s opening remarks in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) about the ever “unasked question” (3).

attention to the various levels at which these narratives might speak to their audiences (Daigle 633).

CONCLUSION

Carrie behaves in a way that resembles the supposed lifestyle of African Americans, who, at the time of the novel's publication, were thought to be careless with money, care only for clothes and appearances, shun hard work, exploit romantic encounters for selfish reasons, live together out of wedlock, and have degenerate family structures. Carrie, furthermore, manages to rise in society and becomes famous in a way in which African American entertainers coming to New York City could become famous as well. Since she represents more than only a deviation from the white norm but rather conforms to African American stereotypes, we have seen that Carrie's fate and fortune in the city can be read as addressing the fear of black upward mobility, even if the novel does little to alleviate it. In fact, the narrator mentions that "[Carrie] had the aptitude of the struggler who seeks emancipation" to reach her goals (115). Carrie's coming to and thriving in the Northern city, then, is a story that can be read as having implications for the ways in which the gathering momentum of the African American Great Migration would be understood.

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