

Trains and Billboards: Carrie's Existential 'Fall'

By Richmond B. Adams

Abstract

I argue that *Sister Carrie* can be interpreted through Paul Tillich's theological lenses. Tillich's exploration of the tension between what he calls the essential and existential selves also resembles the literary critical distinction proposed by Charles Child Walcott in his 1956 work *American Naturalism: A Divided Stream*. Walcott argued that naturalism developed from a split transcendentalism with Dreiser—like Crane, Norris, London and other writers like him—examining the dark sides of American life through his fiction. In his earliest novel, Dreiser presents Carrie Meeber as exhibiting her own version of the Genesis 3:3 fall, but in an ironic direction. Rather than, in Tillichian terms, falling from her essential to existential self, Carrie begins her journey from her existential self in Columbia City, Wisconsin, and begins to fall into her essential self in Chicago, completing the transition once she arrives in New York City. Dreiser's portrayal of George Hurstwood as undergoing the opposite nature of that fall from respectable business and family man to someone shivering in a New York winter goes beyond Carrie's spectacular ascension toward a thundering denunciation (even as Walter Benn Michaels argues otherwise) of the capitalism that makes Hurstwood's suicide just as inevitable and searing. In my article however, I do not propose to supplant more traditional forms of criticism. I believe, at the same time, that Judeo-Christian theological categories can shed additional light on these and other literary issues.

Keywords

essential self, existential self, Paul Tillich, Charles Child Walcott, transcendentalism, divided stream, American naturalism, *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser, theological categories, Walter Benn Michaels, June Howard, Richard Lehan, Donald Pizer, George Hurstwood, Robert Ames, and capitalism



In this paper I argue that Theodore Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, can be understood within the context of Paul Tillich's theological categories. More specifically, the characters of George Hurstwood, Robert Ames and especially

Carrie Meeber embody characteristics that Tillich articulated in his three volume *Systematic Theology*—published between 1951 and 1963—as the tension and division between the “essential” and “existential” selves.¹ Within the same post-World War II period—1956—Charles Child Walcutt authored *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* in which he argued for its origin within the “two rivers of thought” originating from transcendentalism.² Even as they employ terminology and concepts respective to their disciplines, Walcutt and Tillich’s basic precepts bear a striking similarity that merits an attempt toward integrating them as another means by which to explore both literary and theological questions. Dreiser’s novel—as a universally accepted naturalist text—provides an appropriate means through which that integration can begin to take place. The present essay desires to make that initial effort.

Walcutt’s “rivers” and Tillich’s “selves” each suggest a basic division that exhibit cosmological and ontological dimensions. Tillich views the division through an analysis of the human predicament represented through the Fall as itself is represented in Genesis 3:3.³ Rather than Hegelian idealism that portrays the Fall, in Tillich’s view, as “the difference between ideality and reality” and an “imperfect fulfillment” of an overall historical process, Christian theology “must clearly and unambiguously represent the Fall as a symbol for the human situation universally” without any effort to either concretize or avoid its implications.⁴ Rather than a form of incompleteness eventually unified, the Fall expresses a basic “break” that cannot in itself achieve either fulfillment or reunion.⁵ Tillich’s tension between what he understands as the “essential” and “existential” selves develops from the “break” that the Fall describes, represents, and symbolizes.⁶

Simultaneous with Tillich’s theological categories, Walcutt describes a division

¹ Tillich 2:19-44.

² Walcutt vii.

³ Tillich 2.29.

⁴ Tillich 2.28-29.

⁵ Tillich 2.30.

⁶ Tillich 2. 37-44, 20.

within American literary transcendentalism as the nineteenth became the twentieth century.⁷ Through their respective senses of division, it becomes apparent that Walcott and Tillich expressed a common view of the historical forces that shaped the world in which Dreiser penned his novel.⁸ Their mutual sense of break or division, however, does not suggest that either Tillich or Walcott argue for a type of permanent unawareness between, in their respective terms, the human “selves” and “two rivers.”⁹ Tillich describes his “selves”—through notions of existential “involvement and detachment”—as “poles, not conflicting alternatives.”¹⁰ Walcott argues that literary naturalism flows in both the “river” of “Spirit through intuition” that “nourishes idealism, progressivism and social radicalism” and, as it explores nature through science, “plunges into the dark canyon of mechanistic determinism.”¹¹ Tillich’s and Walcott’s categories express what can be described as ‘bound separation’ that forms the basis of their thought. That paradox rests at the heart of both Dreiser’s novel and his presentation of its three principal characters.

Dreiser’s 1900 novel portrays powerful tensions between desire for life’s fullness and a belief in its final meaninglessness.¹² As Carrie Meeber moves from her hometown of Columbia City, Wisconsin, first to Chicago and later to New York City, she encounters forms of relationships and ways of living that result in her transformation from a sheltered, naïve girl to a sophisticated, experienced woman whose picture blazes on a Broadway billboard.¹³ Dreiser plainly describes Carrie’s sexual experiences beyond marriage with her initial benefactor “Chas. H. Drouet” and later with George Hurstwood who—after absconding with ten thousand dollars from the safe of his employer—eventually abandons his wife and

⁷ Walcott vii.

⁸ Walcott vii.

⁹ Tillich 2.30; Walcott vii.

¹⁰ Tillich 2.26.

¹¹ Walcott vii-viii.

¹² Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 186.

¹³ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 567.

family in a desperate love for Carrie.¹⁴ They travel to New York and what happens there to both Hurstwood and Carrie comprises the heart of Dreiser's novel. By chance, fate, and circumstance, and in what Walcutt describes as his "mixture of despair and idealism, of wonder and fear, of chemistry and intuition,"¹⁵ Dreiser juxtaposes naturalism's division through Hurstwood's ever-increasing march toward suicide with Carrie's rise to stardom. Dreiser uses Carrie, Hurstwood, and Ames to examine the desire-based system that shaped their meetings, conversations, and personal evolution (or, for Hurstwood, devolution). In so doing, Dreiser raises questions about the price paid for the attainment of their respective desires and the impulse that fueled it.

Dreiser does not present Carrie, however, as solely exhibiting a tension between life's fullness and meaninglessness that somehow disappears once she obtains material wealth. Carrie's tension and ongoing evolution from small-town Columbia City girl to urbanized New York starlet can be grasped in more than strictly socio-economic terms. Tillich's categories give Carrie's rise an ironic understanding through the lens of a 'fall.' Those categories, as Tillich puts it, represent the human dilemma of remaining "caught between the desire to actualize [. . .] freedom and the aspiration" of to continuing to live in what he calls a state of "dreaming innocence."¹⁶ Possessing not complete but only partial freedom to realize these desires, Tillich argues that such ambiguity creates a state of perpetual "transition from essence to existence"; he understands that transition as "a universal quality of finite being."¹⁷

Tillich categories shed several intriguing means through which to interpret Dreiser's portrayal of his female protagonist. While, of course, Dreiser wrote several years prior to Tillich, nevertheless his picture of Carrie as caught between a desire to find complete freedom and, even as she rises to fame in New York, the

¹⁴ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 9, 306-20.

¹⁵ Walcutt 180.

¹⁶ Tillich 2.35.

¹⁷ Tillich 2.36.

realities she faces can easily be read through Tillichian terms of a perpetual state of ambiguity. More interestingly still, instead of beginning with her essential self and transitioning existentially, Dreiser arguably presents Carrie as originating with the latter and falling by rising in the opposite manner. Carrie's fall, from a Tillichian perspective, constitutes an ironic fulfillment of her destiny. By falling into her essential self, Carrie rose toward becoming who she actually is.

Carrie's selves, like Walcott's divided stream, originate from a unified source. Yet Carrie does not live apart from the context in which her selves exist in tension. In Tillichian terms, Carrie's existential self "is estranged from [her] essential nature."¹⁸ Tillich's categories further suggest that Carrie's tension between and evolution from existential to essential self will continue for the rest of her life.

In terms of Dreiser's novel, Carrie's fall begins her descent as an existential product of her small town Midwestern circumstances toward becoming her essential self. She boards the train in Columbia City, Wisconsin, as existentially afraid and overtly anxious but still desirous of a life apart from her experiences of childhood.¹⁹ Carrie exhibits fear and anxiety (this Dreiser makes clear), yet she continues to yearn for what city life can bring.²⁰ By novel's end, Carrie has fulfilled that dream beyond perhaps even her wildest aspirations. She has become a capricious, discerning, magnetic performer whose image blazes on a billboard above the make-believe world of New York's Broadway and 39th Street.²¹ By novel's end, Carrie has become, in Tillich's terms, her essential self. Dreiser's notable irony, however, remains that as Carrie rises, she does so toward a Broadway whose reality exists only in make-believe.

Carrie's evolution, of course, did not occur within a literary vacuum. Dreiser, as his recent biographer Richard Lingeman notes, envisioned Carrie as representing the prototypical young woman of the late nineteenth century who

¹⁸ Tillich 2.25.

¹⁹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 1.

²⁰ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 19, 26, 200-01.

²¹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 567.

desires love, excitement and life apart from small-town provincialism.²² She also “was a girl Theodore encountered on a train in 1898 while traveling on a newspaper assignment.”²³ Dreiser’s sister Emma, who left the family home with her lover L.A. Hopkins after he stole 3,700 dollars in cash and jewels from his employer’s safe, served as an additional model for the author’s first novel-length protagonist.²⁴

Beyond Lingeman, other critics have noted that, in placing *Sister Carrie* alongside Dreiser’s biography, one can see that desire as an amorphous and multi-faceted notion stands at the core of his characters.²⁵ Carrie leaves for Chicago with few possessions, little money and only tepid promises of temporary shelter at her sister’s home. Dreiser describes Carrie as “troubled with a kind of terror,” “alone away from home,” and not able to prevent herself from feeling “a little choked for breath.”²⁶ In spite of her feelings, however, Carrie completes her journey, greets her sister, and begins to leave Columbia City behind with an ever-increasing rapidity.

Carrie’s journey, as Laura Hapke sees it, becomes part of Dreiser’s implicit distinctions between race, gender, and ethnicity amongst the laboring classes²⁷ Hapke argues that Carrie’s eventual employment in a series of low-paying jobs indicates the reality that “the only kind of (work) that an unskilled provincial young woman [. . .] can find rest[s] squarely on a comprehension of the hierarchies in the labor movement of [Dreiser’s] day.”²⁸ Hapke’s emphasis on labor division, while meritorious, stands as but one among several means to understand Carrie as a vehicle by which to question the system that shaped her rise toward the heights of a flashing billboard.

Hapke continues by astutely noting that Dreiser’s naturalism “exists in a

²² Lingeman 1.244.

²³ Lingeman 1.244.

²⁴ Lingeman 1.67.

²⁵ Morozkina 24.

²⁶ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 11.

²⁷ Hapke 129.

²⁸ Hapke 129.

dialogic interplay with the romantic sublime.”²⁹ *Sister Carrie*, Hapke argues, and later Dreiser works are “consumerist narratives” that embrace a capitalism that values excess rather than restraint.³⁰ I contend, however, that this is an excess that can easily enough be understood through terms of desire. For as Carrie’s initial economic situation provides her with few immediate choices, she comes to accept Drouet’s offer of financial assistance.³¹ As she does so, however, Carrie feels an anxiety, in theological terms, between those existential values of Columbia City and the essential luring she feels rising powerfully within her. By taking Drouet’s money—and probably realizing its multi-faceted meaning—Carrie chooses to begin claiming her essential self and its reward of fine clothes, plush housing and, not least of all, waves of attention. It seems that whatever qualms she may have still retained quickly gave way to a desire of much more external and internal forms of fulfillment.

As Eugenia Morozkina indicates, Dreiser wrote about desire quite purposefully. Employing Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy as a means through which to read not only the first two volumes of the (later) *Desire Trilogy* but arguably *Sister Carrie* also, Morozkina writes:

[Schopenhauer] develops his concept of desire as the main principle of people’s existence. The unrestrained, incessant desire of a person to achieve fortune, enjoyment, and pleasure, the philosopher asserts, is the driving force behind the will to live or “the inner essence of every phenomenon.”³²

Morozkina further argues that desire, according to Schopenhauer, incarnates the world’s “will” where each person seeks unending contentment and fulfillment.³³ Since that pursuit, of course, at least partly receives its shape through the peculiarities of a given context, it becomes necessary to understand Carrie as both

²⁹ Hapke 128.

³⁰ Hapke 128.

³¹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 67-69.

³² Morozkina 23.

³³ Morozkina 23.

an individual character and as a product of her Columbia City and early Chicago experiences coupled with a subsequent rise toward a Schopenhauer-type of contentment once she breaks from Hurstwood in New York.

By employing Tillich's categories, one can see that Dreiser initially presents Carrie as increasingly grasping for the strength to exhibit her essential self. Raised primarily, if not exclusively, in Columbia City, Carrie arrives in Chicago with notions of propriety, manners and perhaps even standard religious beliefs. While Dreiser implies that Carrie does not feel rigidly linked with her background and had, since childhood, heard tales about Chicago's fame, it seems almost inconceivable that she would not, during her first weeks in the city, initially maintain the assumptions of her girlhood environment. Carrie's mutual fear and delight in Drouet's attention, a man whose charming persistence might conceivably lead to improper encounters, then presents her simultaneously as both Columbia City's existential child of traditional morality and the essential city adult of Chicago and New York who desires something different.

Carrie's climb toward contentment, of course, rests significantly on her decision to remain with Hurstwood in his flight from Chicago.³⁴ At first Carrie is contemptuous of his several deceptions but unsure about whether to stay or leave their train. Her ambiguity reflects a singular expression of what Tillich called the "existential predicament."³⁵ Carrie hangs in a "state of estrangement"³⁶ between her Columbia City origins and a desire for the fame and fortune she has begun—even in Chicago—to sense as being within her grasp. As Carrie no doubt heard and felt from her earliest days, no respectable citizen of Columbia City sleeps with a married man in the first place, to say nothing of helping him evade the authorities after he has stolen ten thousand dollars from his place of business.³⁷ As Carrie said herself to Hurstwood as their train hurtled away from Chicago, "Don't talk to

³⁴ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 314-317.

³⁵ Tillich 2.28.

³⁶ Tillich 2.27.

³⁷ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 304-09.

me [...] I hate you. I want you to get away from me. I am going to get out at the very next station.”³⁸

Carrie’s words suggest a desperate horror at the possible damage that Hurstwood’s mounting actions might bring to her personal and social reputation. In those terms, Carrie’s desire to leave him at a subsequent train station conveys traditional forms of propriety. Unmarried Columbia City women, she seems to tell Hurstwood, do not travel without a chaperone under any circumstances. In so doing, she reminds Hurstwood of the Victorian social code with which both of them as respectable people had great familiarity.

Prior to these words with Hurstwood, however, Dreiser made clear that Carrie had already violated several portions of that same social code by living with Drouet and lying about their marital standing.³⁹ Carrie’s choices, even as she debated with Hurstwood and—just as importantly—with herself, had already taken her beyond Columbia City’s Victorian—or existential—ethos toward something she had perhaps only imagined in periodic fantasies during her childhood. In an ironic use of Tillich’s categories that stress the falling from essential to existential self, Dreiser portrays Carrie in a way that suggests the opposite. Carrie lived her existential self from birth and adolescence in Columbia City through her first several forays within Chicago. Once she stayed with Hurstwood on the New York train, however, Carrie began to sense with increasing power her actual—essential—self, which had been previously sublimated by her small-town and Victorian trappings.

The irony of Carrie’s fall toward her essential self becomes that, by rising in wealth, fame and privilege, she comes to exhibit an increasingly existential blindness *vis a vis* those suffering almost literally in front of her eyes. Blind to what loomed in plain sight, Carrie immersed herself in the billboard trappings of an unmitigated capitalism that magnificently rewarded her apathy. Rather than

³⁸ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 316.

³⁹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 99, 213.

somehow then providing, as Michaels argues, an “unabashed and extraordinarily literal acceptance of the economy that produced (conditions of unrestrained capitalism),”⁴⁰ Dreiser produces a thundering denunciation of a system that creates conditions of starvation, freezing and, perhaps most poignantly, a deep callousness that mirrors the cold of a New York winter.

Rather than an existential self that brackets her desires through cognizance and empathy, as Carrie might have earlier demonstrated, she falls into her essential self of personal absorption and, with few exceptions, detached indifference. Her response of “We’ll have to take a coach tonight” to Lola’s remark that “Men look sheepish when they fall, don’t they?”⁴¹ indicates the extent to which, paradoxically, Carrie has fallen as a result of her rising. The existential Carrie of Columbia City and initially in Chicago might have at least glanced toward those men and women who fell on the ice of their very discontented winter. Instead, the essential Carrie of New York could only respond with smilingly ambiguous reassurance to Lola’s apathetic indifference to the very real human beings slipping, and falling on the ice outside their carriage window. Carrie’s essential self, rooted in desire, illusion, performance and ephemeral beauty, presents itself for the entire world to see. Perhaps, Dreiser seems to suggest, that what the world tends to see, in spite of its own desire for wealth and privilege, might give it cause for thought.

In his Dreiser biography, Lingeman describes Carrie’s indifference, when juxtaposed with Hurstwood’s final words of “What’s the use?” as “one of the most moving in our literature”⁴² Those sentiments directly referencing Hurstwood certainly apply to Dreiser’s personal story. As Lingeman notes, part of Dreiser’s power emanates from his deliberately drawn parallel between Hurstwood and himself.⁴³ Like his fictional character, Dreiser had lived at New York’s Bowery for a time but managed to extricate himself, as Lingeman put it, “because he had

⁴⁰ Michaels 35.

⁴¹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 570.

⁴² Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 575; Lingeman 1.270.

⁴³ Lingeman 1.269.

youth and hope.”⁴⁴ Dreiser’s memory of people who daily drifted through Chatham Square appears never to have left him. Lingeman indicates that the 1893 Depression provided the setting and (if Hurstwood serves as a model) for the hopelessness that Dreiser expresses in *Sister Carrie*’s final chapter.⁴⁵ Those historical and economic roots, however, continue to provide additional fodder for a Tillichian reading of Dreiser’s first novel.

Given that the novelist worked within the context of American post-Civil War industrialization, it stands to reason that *Sister Carrie* provided Dreiser with a means to examine the consequences of this social, economic, historical and theological environment. As a naturalist, Dreiser easily drew himself toward an examination of those interlocking questions as well. Such a process became part of what he argued, in an earlier non-fiction essay, as the basis for all literary and social morality: telling “the truth.”⁴⁶

In the early sections of his novel, Dreiser describes a Chicago where new people “[pour] in a rate of 50,000 a year.”⁴⁷ Such an image suggests a dangerous environment for almost every newcomer, perhaps especially young women without significant financial resources. Lingeman writes, however, that Chicago’s relative newness allowed it also to be seen as “a place of enchantment and wonder” and that such newness made Chicago, much more than New York, stand “in a state of becoming” at the time of Carrie’s arrival.⁴⁸ Conversely, Dreiser and Hurstwood first experienced New York as rewarding not so much authenticity and acquired wealth as pretense and established riches. Demonstrating the parallel between Dreiser and his initial male protagonist, Lingeman expounds upon a necessary line of thought. By leaving his analysis strictly between individuals and their encounter with the city—not so much of a name, but as type—however, Lingeman misses an opportunity to investigate a larger overall context.

⁴⁴ Lingeman 1.269.

⁴⁵ Lingeman 1.269.

⁴⁶ Dreiser, “True Art Speaks Plainly” 155.

⁴⁷ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 13.

⁴⁸ Lingeman 1.257.

As Dreiser presents her, Carrie undoubtedly wants to reach for a life in the city. By moving from a rural small town toward an industrialized urban metropolis, Carrie embodies the sizeable changes that took place within the United States in the last third of the nineteenth century. Most of America's 31 million people in 1860 lived on farms or within small towns.⁴⁹ However, historian Lawrence Goodwyn describes the growth of major American cities by century's end as "the first great gathering of American wealth [...] power [...] and [...] consumption."⁵⁰

Dreiser accordingly presents Carrie, along with Hurstwood and Ames, as representing the evolving realities of the late nineteenth century. Prior to meeting Carrie, Hurstwood lives a conventional and traditionally moral life.⁵¹ His early life apparently had been consumed in finding a well-paying job, marrying an acceptable woman, and raising properly ambitious children. In time, however, Hurstwood comes to desire something more than the respectability based upon following rules that he had no part in formulating. He apparently comes to view, in Tillichian terms, Carrie as representing an essential life that he has sacrificed or, perhaps, had sacrificed for him. To Hurstwood, Carrie embodies a vitality that comes from almost a form of refreshed naiveté. As Dreiser put it, Hurstwood "picked [Carrie] as he would the fresh fruit of a tree" and "drew near to [her] as a thirsty traveler draws nigh to a fountain."⁵² By picking from Carrie's tree and drinking from her stream, Hurstwood quickly relinquishes his respectability in order to embrace an illusion of renewed youth, energy and, in terms of the Puritanical American myth, a rebuilt city shining on increasingly taller hills. Such a relinquishment for illusion, as seen through Tillichian lenses, represents a fall from essential to existential self.

A conventional man for most of his life, Hurstwood eventually violates the bromides of hard work and marital fidelity and pays the price with his suicide.

⁴⁹ Burns.

⁵⁰ Goodwyn x.

⁵¹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 95, 124.

⁵² Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 139.

Conversely, Carrie violates the same standards and, for reasons that apparently rest only on the luck of youth and looks, rises to mind-numbing stardom, wealth and sex appeal. In having Hurstwood commit suicide while Carrie rockets to fame, Dreiser sets up the question of the meaning of these parallel events. With Ames, however, Dreiser offers another example by which he answers and yet continues to pose his basic question. Here once more, Tillich's categories can assist in understanding Ames' place within the novel and relationship toward his fellow characters.

A relatively young man, Ames exhibits the same type of vigor that Hurstwood sees in Carrie. Ames, pointedly, also serves as Dreiser's means to ask if 'falling' into wealth, power and illusion actually merit the price they tend to exact. In an early conversation, Ames refuses Carrie's offer of dinner wine by saying "I sometimes think it's a shame for people to spend so much money this way," and upon her open-ended, subsequent question, Ames continues by suggesting that "Yes [. . .] they pay so much more than those things are worth. They put on so much show."⁵³

By then having Ames, after these first meetings with Carrie, leave New York, Dreiser might well appear to acquiesce to his primary feelings about desire's price, both for individuals and the societies in which they live. Tillich's categories frame Dreiser's apparent feelings of despair in both Carrie's rising fall and Hurstwood's utter collapse. They each, it seems, got what they wanted and lost the best part of themselves as a result. Carrie fell from her existential life of Victorian propriety into her essential self of glistening billboards while Hurstwood tried to escape from his essential life of respectability only to fall into the existential pit of a flophouse. Their juxtaposition makes clear that Dreiser believes something very wrong had happened to each of them.

⁵³ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 381.

Such wary pessimism, however, does not stand entirely by itself. As Walcutt argues, Dreiser does not simply write fictions of nihilistic despair. On the contrary, Walcutt argues that Dreiser’s “belief in the vitality and importance of life” pulses throughout the novel.⁵⁴ Walcutt continues:

Throughout the book it is this quality of life—shifting, elusive, unaccountable—that holds our attention, rather than the spectacle of carefully analyzed forces operating under “experimental” conditions. Dreiser’s affirmation of the human spirit is in the transcendental tradition.⁵⁵

Expressed toward the novel’s end in Ames’ reappearance, such affirmation also counters the more recent notions of Dreiser as somehow expressing support for laissez-faire capitalism rather than the social, economic, and political alternatives left all too unclearly specified by Walter Benn Michaels and his new-historicist school of criticism.⁵⁶ Ames’ reappearance, in combination with Carrie’s extra care to dress for him, implies that Dreiser expresses the ongoing tension between billboards, flophouses, and life in its fullest.

My employment of Walcutt’s stream and Tillich’s selves to discuss Dreiser’s novel and its principal characters, however, does not indicate a desire to supersede more recent and specifically literary criticisms by Michaels and June Howard or certainly Donald Pizer and Richard Lehan. Rather, I propose a specifically theological criticism as a supplement to these previous, more ‘secular,’ efforts. Carrie’s divided self, in Walcutt’s words, “assumes one stream or the other, and sometimes both.”⁵⁷ How that division exhibits itself, how Carrie ‘falls’—with powerful theological irony—both can and perhaps ought to reenter literary discussions.

Such a reentering neither proposes a *nouveau* type of New Criticism that avoids

⁵⁴ Walcutt 193.

⁵⁵ Walcutt 193.

⁵⁶ Michaels 35.

⁵⁷ Walcutt viii.

socio-economic awareness nor a form of theology that specifies its politics. Post modernism's description of an environment that exhibits the sorts of divisions and breaks as exhibiting not a potential for meaning—or even meaninglessness—but only for fundamentally nothing, invites a response from a working combination of literary and theological criticism. Such integrated approaches seek neither to avoid unanswerable questions nor the incompleteness of a given response. These alternative avenues embrace their incompleteness as a recognition that the existential situation categorized by Tillich and exemplified in literature will continue apace. Such integrated criticisms, at the same time, seek to acknowledge the unique methodologies of literature and theology while yet affirming that such separation need not create conditions of suspicion and avoidance. Rather, separation can actually lead to enhancement, understanding, and a mitigation of misery as expressed through Dreiser's novel in the person of George Hurstwood.

Yet by raising the notion of alternatives, such a literary-theological criticism of Dreiser's novel does not downplay his scathing portrayal of Carrie's indifference to what takes place outside her hotel window. I argue, in fact, that such indifference exemplifies not simply Carrie's rise to wealth and fame, but rather how her achievements exemplify an ironic fall from her existential self of Victorian propriety in Columbia City to her essential self of artifice and pretense in New York. Such essential artifice and pretense, Dreiser makes clear, precludes Carrie from noticing those whose fall has assumed more conventional forms.

Even as he condemns Carrie's indifference, Dreiser, through his use of Ames, suggests that she recognize what plain sight seems unable to accomplish. Ames invites Carrie to understand that her beauty, wealth, and illusion will someday fade. In order to face that reality, Ames urges Carrie to rekindle her more human—more existential—powers. He indicates that she “would do well in some sympathetic part. Your natural appearance would suggest more to the audience

than the careful make-up of most people.”⁵⁸ Perhaps in so doing, Dreiser creates the final paradox that as Carrie descends further into her essential and illusory self, she can discover the necessary compassion to sympathize with the very real and painfully existential Hurstwoods—who remain ever-present even to those that seek to ignore them—that continue to slip on the ice outside the window of her hotel.



Works Cited

- Burns, Ken, dir. *The Civil War*. Perf. Jason Robards, Jr., Sam Waterston, and Jody Powell. Florentine Films, 1990.
- Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. New York Public Library Collector's Edition. Unexpurgated Version. New York: Doubleday, 1981.
- . "True Art Speaks Plainly." *Theodore Dreiser: A Selection of Uncollected Prose*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1977. 155-157.
- Goodwyn, Lawrence. *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976.
- Hapke, Laura. "No Green Card Needed: Dreiserian Naturalism and Proletarian Female Whiteness." *Twisted from the Ordinary: Essays on American Literary Naturalism*. Ed. Mary E. Papke. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2003. 128-143.
- Howard, June. *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985.
- Jurca, Katherine. "Dreiser, Class, and the Home." *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*. Ed. Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004, 100-111.
- Lehan, Richard. *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2005.
- Lingeman, Richard. *Theodore Dreiser*. 2 vols. New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1986.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.
- Morozkina, Eugenia. "Dreiser and Schopenhauer: The Concept of Desire." *Dreiser Studies*. 28 (1997): 22-33.
- Pizer, Donald. *The Novel of Frank Norris*. New York: Haskell, 1973.
- . *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser: A Critical Study*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology*. 3 vols. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951.
- Walcutt, Charles Child. *American Naturalism: A Divided Stream*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1956.

⁵⁸ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 557.