

Traditional Morality and Hurstwood as Fallen Woman

In his 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser tells the story of a young woman leaving her small town and coming to Chicago. At first blush, the poor girl from the country seems ripe for the role of the Fallen Woman. But this does not happen. Only once does Dreiser allude to such a fate, and it is on the first page: “When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse” (1). For the remainder of the novel, he places no moral judgment on any of his characters, even when they behave in morally reprehensible ways. Herein lies the power of *Sister Carrie*. Not only does it flip the script on the trope of the Fallen Woman, but Dreiser leaves it to the reader to judge the morality of his characters’ actions.

The fallen woman trope typically involves a female character who has transgressed moral or societal norms, often through actions such as premarital or extramarital sex, infidelity, or involvement in sex work. It implies a descent from a higher moral or social standing to a lower one, often resulting in social ostracism, shame, and punishment for the character. Historically, this trope has been used to enforce patriarchal norms and control female sexuality. It reinforces the idea that women who deviate from societal expectations of purity and chastity deserve punishment or redemption. Even though *Sister Carrie* seems that it will take on the guise of the fallen woman trope, it does not. Rather, George Hurstwood is the one who falls.

Carrie starts as a young, naive girl who moves to the city with dreams of success. She stays with her sister, Minnie Hanson, and Minnie’s husband Sven. Living with them is depressing

to Carrie and antithetical to her unformulated ambitions: "She felt the drag of a lean and narrow life" (8). She encounters difficulty in finding a position that will support her, and she quickly becomes entangled in the first of two relationships with wealthy men who provide her with material comfort but also, by conventional standards, compromise her moral integrity. It begins with Charles Drouet.

Drouet represents the allure of materialism and the temptations of city life. He seduces Carrie with promises of wealth, luxury, and marriage, leading her down a path of moral ambiguity. However, Drouet himself is not portrayed as a particularly moral character. Dreiser writes of him: "He loved to make advances to women, to have them succumb to his charms, not because he was a cold-blooded, dark, scheming villain, but because his inborn desire urged him to that as a chief delight" (46). He takes advantage of Carrie's naivety for his own pleasure and convenience. Carrie initially feels drawn to Drouet due to his flashy lifestyle, however, her feelings towards him are not deep or genuine. Drouet sees Carrie as an object of desire, and their relationship is more superficial, based on his attraction to her and her willingness to be with him for the benefits he provides. In this fashion, Drouet is a steppingstone for Carrie.

Then comes Hurstwood, who quickly grows obsessed with Carrie: "Hurstwood felt the bloom and the youth. He picked her as he would the fresh fruit of a tree. He felt as fresh in her presence as one who is taken out of the flash of summer to the first cool breath of spring" (88). His feelings for her are entirely about how she makes him feel and have nothing to do with her as a person. He thinks little of her and is so ensconced in his obsession that he kidnaps her and takes her to New York, on the way arranging a sham marriage in Montreal. His affair with Carrie

was the first step in his decline, the theft from his employer the second, and leaving for New York the third.

Carrie's relationship with Hurstwood evolves more significantly throughout the novel. Initially, she sees him as a wealthy and sophisticated man, especially compared to Drouet. As their relationship deepens, Carrie becomes genuinely attached to Hurstwood. However, their relationship faces challenges, particularly due to Carrie's learning of Hurstwood's marital status, his kidnapping of her, and his declining fortunes. Despite these obstacles, Carrie remains emotionally connected to Hurstwood, although her feelings towards him become more complicated as the story progresses.

As she rises in society, she is confronted with the consequences of her choices and the societal judgment placed upon women who do not conform to traditional standards of virtue. Dreiser writes, "Society possesses a conventional standard whereby it judges all things. All men should be good, all women virtuous" (65). Throughout the novel, Carrie is exposed to various social circles and encounters a range of reactions from society at large. She faces judgment and criticism from some, while others, those who want something from her, are more accepting or intrigued by her.

Overall, Carrie's feelings towards both Drouet and Hurstwood are influenced by her desires for material comfort, social status, and emotional fulfillment. The novel challenges conventional notions of morality by portraying Carrie as a complex and sympathetic character rather than a one-dimensional fallen woman. Dreiser examines the societal pressures and economic realities that shape Carrie's decisions, highlighting the hypocrisy of a society that condemns women for pursuing their desires while simultaneously rewarding men for the same

behavior. Drouet and Hurstwood are both complicit in Carrie's "fall from grace," though she bears the brunt of it, and she knows this, insisting to both men, in turn, that they marry her. Absent of society's judgment, would she still do this?

Early twentieth century sensibilities would be on the side of Hurstwood. He's an upright man doing upright things, and his descent from this state would reflect on Carrie, with the idea that her influence on him caused him to forsake the life that he had. His decision to be with her compromised his position within the upper class.

Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall are mirror inverted images of one another with one exception. Carrie, again applying the morality of the time, would still be judged. One need only read a few essays about Sister Carrie online to see that she is often portrayed as a villainess who sinks her claws into men and is solely responsible for Hurstwood's inability to act in self-preservation: "Carrie's indecent behavior, that she disregards the traditional code of ethics in the sole pursuit of material, should be strongly condemned" (Wang). "It is the survival of the fittest, thus, she sinks her claws into the 'fittest' she sees, in order to get her way" (Torun). Which is it? What does Dreiser say? A close study of the text, what he writes, does not really depict a woman of questionable morals. It does depict a young woman in trying situations making difficult decisions, while Hurstwood steadily relinquishes his agency, rendering himself helpless, having taken the route of the Fallen Woman. In the end, he does not resort to prostitution, but he does beg on the street. The social ostracism he faces is from being a beggar—he has fallen.

Yet it is Carrie who would be villainized. She did not adhere to the morals of her time from the moment she befriended Drouet. Her experiences and the choices she made from them

were, without doubt, to seek a better life for herself. Her rapacious materialism is viewed as a shortcoming, something for which she should be punished. Seeking nice things is not, by itself, a moral transgression. Instead, it is something that everyone, to one degree or another, thinks about. At least from time to time. A young woman mustn't desire pretty dresses, attractive hats, and shiny jewels, yet she is rewarded for having them. That Carrie consorted with men, one of whom was married, is a sorry mark on her moral chalkboard. Having abandoned them both, particularly Hurstwood in his condition, tars her with the harlot brush, even though Hurstwood is the architect of his own failure. He's a man who is stuck in a place in time, the Chicago of his fortune, and once away from there, he is unable to fend for himself. This places Carrie in the role of breadwinner for them both, but the fact that she repeatedly tried to encourage him to seek work mattered naught for him and for her estimation in society.

Hurstwood experiences a gradual decline in morality as he becomes increasingly entangled in his affair with Carrie and the pursuit of his own desires. In addition to committing infidelity, he commits the crime of embezzlement, telling himself that it will be used to support himself and Carrie. Throughout the novel, Hurstwood demonstrates a pattern of selfishness and manipulation in his interactions with Carrie and others. He prioritizes his own happiness and well-being at the expense of those around him, deceiving Carrie and using his influence to control her. As a result of his actions, Hurstwood experiences a dramatic decline in his social standing and reputation. He loses his job, his wealth, and his status in society, culminating in his eventual destitution and isolation. He then experiences moments of remorse and regret for the harm he has caused others, reflecting on his actions and the consequences they have had, and

recognizing the depth of his moral collapse and the irreparable damage it has caused to his life and relationships.

Despite this, it is Carrie that the reader expects to be punished. Hurstwood has fallen as far as a man can fall, short of incarceration. Here, Dreiser's writing is tinged with pity, albeit faint. When Hurstwood is contemplating asking Carrie for money, "How successful she was—how much money she must have! Even now, however, it took a severe run of ill-luck to decide him to appeal to her" (327). Hurstwood is ashamed. There is no redemption for him at this point.

Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall are the inverse of each other, and the opposite of what the turn-of-the-century reader would expect. He is the male version of the fallen woman, and she, if a man, would have been praised for making something of herself. Instead, some may feel that Carrie's actions, particularly her involvement in extramarital affairs and her pursuit of material wealth, warrant consequences or punishment. They may view her as morally compromised and believe that she should face repercussions for her choices. As Dreiser says, "All men should be good, all women virtuous" (65). Carrie Meeber flipped the script.