

Sister Carrie: *Plus ça change . . .*

To the Editor:

Mr. Rupin W. Desai's comment (*PMLA*, March 1972) on "Gaslight and Magic Lamp in *Sister Carrie*" (March 1971) generously accepts my argument with regard to Drouet, Hurstwood (at least "partially"), and Carrie in Chicago. We differ, it seems, chiefly over Carrie in New York. Mr. Desai contends that "the Carrie of the latter half of the novel" grows into wisdom: "Her journey from innocence to wisdom has been long and arduous, and the Carrie who has achieved fame in New York is not quite the same as the eighteen-year-old Carrie who arrived in Chicago from Columbia City by train." I agree that she is not *quite* the same, but she is not substantially different either. She is a few years older, and perhaps more practical, but she has not outgrown the sadly immature psychology that characterizes Dreiser's American dreamers.

The quality of Carrie's dreaming at the end of the novel is very little changed from what it has always been. Drouet, Hurstwood, and comedy are "discredited" as "representatives of a state most blessed to attain," but Ames and comedy-drama threaten to replace them.¹ Faith in the blessed state itself has ebbed. Carrie's expectations remain apocalyptic and self-centered, and her fantasy life continues to be remarkably unaffected by experience: "Though often disillusioned, she was still waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real" (p. 557).

Her attitudes are no more altered by her tribulations as a chorus girl than they were by her failure to find professional theater work in Chicago in Chapter xxvi, an episode which Mr. Desai appears to overlook in his attempt to establish an amateur/professional dichotomy between the theatrical worlds of Chicago and New York. Insofar as her theatrical success turns to ashes, it is typical of all the people, places, and pursuits that temporarily seem real to Carrie because they give the illusion of total gratification, but become unreal once they are possessed. Mr. Desai seems to have understood my point in last year's essay to be that the theater and Carrie's two lovers are fixed delusions, but I meant to suggest only that they illustrate a process of self-delusion which does not change even though its objects may. There is little sign that Carrie has begun to understand her own experience, much less the experience of Hurstwood, in anything like the

terms that Dreiser has given the reader to understand it.

The rocking chair in which Carrie sits and dreams as the novel closes aptly symbolizes how little she and her fellows grow or change. Dreiser places a rocking chair in each of Carrie's principal domestic settings: the Hansons' and Ogden Place in Chicago, Seventy-eighth and Thirteenth Streets and finally the Waldorf in New York. It is the seat of mental activity, occasionally insight (pp. 219, 359, 485) but far more consistently fantasy, reverie, and escape (pp. 15, 32, 242, 343, 345, 380, 381, 419, 445). In the final chapter the chair harbors the latter processes once again: "In her rocking-chair she sat, when not otherwise engaged—singing and dreaming"; "In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel" (pp. 555, 557). Mr. Desai quotes one of these passages and suggests that Carrie has "come a great distance" from Chicago. But the opposite is true. The rocking chair is a static symbol in the novel. It points up the sad irony that, although Dreiser's mobile American questers cover great physical distances in trains and trolleys and use pseudonyms like "Wheeler," they do not come a greater mental distance than is represented by the hobbyhysical fixture in which Carrie is last seen.

HUGH WITEMEYER

University of California, Berkeley

Note

¹ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Modern Library [1932]), pp. 556–57.

Dreiser's Hurstwood and Jefferson's Rip Van Winkle

To the Editor:

It has been generally noted that in *Sister Carrie* Dreiser used for the basic matter of Hurstwood the flight of one L. A. Hopkins with \$3,500 and Dreiser's sister Emma, his own fears of life in New York,¹ and his memory of the decline of a fellow reporter named Clark. Of Clark's beggarly appearance, Dreiser remarked, "A stage tramp could scarcely have done better."²

In commenting on the importance of the theater in *Sister Carrie*, Hugh Witemeyer singles out as particularly significant Augustin Daly's *Under the Gas-*