

Plot carrie settles into  
her new living



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The novel, *Sister Carrie*, written by Theodore Dreiser commences in 1889 with Caroline Meeber, an innocent, naive eighteen-year-old girl, departing from her home in Columbia City to reside with her sister Minnie in Chicago. While on the train, Carrie encounters a young man by the name of Charles Drouet, whom she hopes to visit with once she settles into her new residence. Unfortunately, Carrie learns that she will be unable to receive Drouet as a houseguest at her sister's flat. Carrie is encouraged to search for employment in order to facilitate her sister and brother-in-law in paying their rent.

She manages to hold down a job for a short period of time but then falls ill. After regaining her strength, Carrie has trouble locating another job. Coincidentally, she reencounters Drouet and takes him up on an offer to move in with him. Soon after Carrie settles into her new living arrangement, Drouet invites his friend, Hurstwood, over to meet her. Carrie and Hurstwood fall in love despite the fact that he is married and believes that she is Drouet's wife. Upon discovering that Hurstwood is married, Carrie becomes upset and refuses to contact him any longer.

Drouet moves out after his discovery that Carrie has been meeting with Hurstwood behind his back. Subsequently, Hurstwood steals ten thousand dollars from the safe where he works and tricks Carrie into traveling to Canada with him. The pair settles in New York and Hurstwood begins a fruitless search for employment. A long period of time elapses and Hurstwood, who had been a member of high-society in Chicago, is unable to obtain a job. Carrie abandons him and pursues her dream of becoming an actress, while living with her friend, Lola Osborne, who is also an actress.

Carrie becomes successful, yet she never achieves the state of happiness based on material possessions that she left Columbia City to pursue at the commencement of the novel. Rather, she discovers that her ideal happiness is merely an unattainable illusion. Characters Caroline Meeber, often referred to as Carrie by most other characters, serves as the character whose actions the reader follows throughout the course of the novel.

Carrie represents the opportunity for advancement within the class system that Dreiser creates for the novel. She believes that becoming a part of high-society will allow her to obtain the happiness that she so desires. She begins as part of the lower stratum of society and climbs higher through her relationship with Drouet. Although Carrie enjoys her improved social standing, she still wishes for more. She wishes to be part of the high-class society that Hurstwood represents.

Her goal throughout the novel remains to achieve happiness by acquiring enough money and status in order to gain access to “high society.” Carrie also acknowledges that she does not desire to return to where she came from.” She could possibly have conquered the fear of hunger and gone back; the thought of hard work and a narrow round of suffering would, under the last pressure of conscience, have yielded, but spoil her appearance?—be old clothed and poor-appearing?—never!” (Dreiser 81) Rather than achieving happiness, at the conclusion of the novel, after Carrie has obtained both the money and independence she so desired, she realizes that she is still alone. “Amid the tinsel and shine of her state walked Carrie, unhappy.” (399) Minnie Hanson, Carrie’s sister in Chicago, represents the beginning of Carrie’s search for something “better.

"The sisters do not have much in common." "Minnie was no comparison for her sister-she was too old." (41) When Minnie greets her in Chicago, Carrie, "...feels cold reality taking her by the hand.

"(8) Minnie serves as Carrie's transition between living at home with her family and living alone with a man in the "real world." George Hurstwood epitomizes the achievement of the "American dream," even still today. He possesses money and a seemingly perfect family; however, as is often the case, "Hurstwood's residence could scarcely be said to be infused with this home spirit." (68) To Carrie, Hurstwood represents everything that she desires to be and to have. She falsely infers that he must be happy; for he has everything that one could possibly desire.

She falls in love with him and until they are in New York does not realize that underneath all of his possessions and wealth, he has imperfections similar to those of Drouet, or any other man. After he loses all of his money and has no prospect of future employment, "Constant comparison between his old state and his new showed a balance for the worse, which produced a constant state of gloom or, at least depression." (260) Unwilling to contend with the prospect of impending poverty, Carrie moves out to live with an actress friend of hers. Charles Drouet is Carrie's first experience with a man in her life. She does not particularly have any affection for him, but she feels that she owes him something for assisting her in her time of need. He facilitates her by giving her money and a place to live when she is unable to locate a job, although he is only this generous in order to make her feel dependent on him. She greatly appreciates his efforts, ".

.. feeling as though a great arm had slipped out before her to draw off trouble.

” (50) Drouet functions as a static character, upon which one can measure the progress of Carrie and Hurstwood throughout the novel. He does not represent as high of a class in society as does Hurstwood, but he still lives comfortably, with money to spare. “ His clothes were particularly new and rich in appearance.” (78) Drouet becomes disturbed when he learns of Carrie’s relationship with Hurstwood but is actually more disturbed by the fact that she prefers another man over him than the fact that he loves her. Julia Hurstwood epitomizes a woman living the life of luxury. She stays out of her husband’s business matters, and he compensates by providing her with everything materialistic that she could ever need or want.

Julia is very concerned with appearances and desires to have only the best of everything, both for her and for her children. After she discovers Hurstwood’s relationship with Carrie, she demands money to go on a trip with her children and does not wish to see Hurstwood ever again. Jessica Hurstwood palpably follows in the footsteps of her patrician mother, Julia. Her main goal throughout the novel is to search for a suitable husband.

She acts supercilious and believes that she is superior to anyone possessing less money than her, a belief undoubtedly spurned by her mother’s example. Jessica succeeds in locating a wealthy husband and will likely continue to follow in her mother’s footsteps throughout her adult life. Mrs. Vance and Mrs. Frank Hale represent another example of what Carrie believes will make her happy.

Mrs. Frank Hale lives in the same building as Carrie and Drouet and opens Carrie's eyes to the class above her in society. Mrs. Vance, who lives in the flat next door to Carrie and Hurstwood in New York, serves a similar purpose. "Both flats were good to look upon, though that of the Vances tended somewhat more to the luxurious." (243) These women set standards for Carrie that outline her desires for the future. Bob Ames, a cousin of Mrs. Vance, who the latter introduces to Carrie, impresses the young girl very much.

She enjoys his company, finding value in what he has to say. In comparing him to both Hurstwood and Drouet, she notices, "He seemed wiser than Hurstwood, saner and brighter than Drouet." (257) Carrie believes that Ames may have even discovered the elusive happiness that she, herself, is unable to locate.

Lola Osborne gives Carrie the courage to move out of Hurstwood's flat, and life. The two women live together as roommates until Carrie begins to make more money, at which point they both move into a hotel. Lola is also an actress and encourages Carrie to reach her potential in the theater. Lola also seems to possess the happiness that Carrie searches for. She tells Carrie, "There're lots would give their ears to be in your shoes." (363) Yet, Lola does not seem unhappy.

**Major Conflicts** Many of the conflicts in *Sister Carrie* are motivated by the desire for money, status, or happiness. One such example is Carrie's conflict between herself and society, pertaining to her search for happiness. It seems that society repeatedly shows Carrie something out there

that represents more affluence than she has access to, which in her mind signifies more happiness. This conflict is never resolved, for Carrie never reaches that state of happiness, which she searches for throughout the novel. Near the conclusion, Carrie realizes that money does not assure happiness.

“ She had learned...in her own present state, was no happiness.” (399) Hurstwood engages in a conflict of the type man versus man with his wife, Julia, motivated by the desire for money once she decides to divorce him. She believes that she should be able to obtain his money, especially since he was unfaithful to her. Hurstwood obviously disagrees with this train of thought and fights to keep his money.

Julia files suit with McGregor, James, and Hay, who send Hurstwood a note saying, “ We beg to inform you...before filing suit against you...for divorce and alimony.” (192) Unfortunately for Hurstwood, Julia ends up with all of his money.

Drouet and Hurstwood join in a conflict motivated by the desire to “ win” Carrie and her affection. It is not particularly clear whether either Drouet or Hurstwood actually love Carrie. Drouet lives with Carrie for an extended period of time and never wishes to marry her, yet when Hurstwood appears in the picture, Drouet suddenly must have his precious Carrie around. “...his attitude had been that of the jealous lover.

Now his feelings were a mixture of anger at deception, sorrow at losing Carrie, misery at being defeated.” (181) Hurstwood does not want to change his status in society or mar his reputation, but still wishes to have Carrie all to himself. It seems as if Hurstwood wins her affection, but this is only

temporary. Although they marry, it is not legal. In the end, the conflict is resolved when Carrie goes off alone and does remain with either man. An alternate example of a conflict between man and society is that between Hurstwood and society. Hurstwood begins as an opulent man in Chicago. When he and Carrie travel to New York, he discovers that, "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.

" (232) Without a job, Hurstwood succumbs to society and emerges as the loser in this conflict. Society pushes him down farther and farther until he is unable to reach back up again. Symbols and Motifs The rocking chair represents a significant symbol in *Sister Carrie*.

From her sister's flat in Chicago, to her suite in a fancy hotel Carrie finds a rocking chair in almost every room. In Minnie's flat, Carrie, "...

drew the one small rocking-chair up to the open window, and sat looking out upon the night and streets in silent wonder." (11) Also, in Carrie's beautiful hotel suite in the Waldorf, "In her rocking-chair she sat, when not otherwise engaged—singing and dreaming." (398) The ubiquitous rocking chairs illustrate Carrie's ride to "Dream Land," or high society.

Additional symbols in the novel exist in the form of the theaters, hotels, restaurants, and other buildings. As Carrie strolls down Broadway, she notices these buildings and determines what she believes will bring her happiness. Upon visiting a restaurant with Mr. Vance, Mrs. Vance, and Mr. Ames, Carrie muses, "Ah, how fortunate was Mrs.



Vance; young, beautiful, and well off—at least, sufficiently so to come here in a coach. What a wonderful thing it was to be rich.” (253) While walking down Broadway with Mrs. Vance, Carrie longs, “...to feel the delight of parading here as an equal.

Ah, then she would be happy!” (247) Therefore, the presence of these symbols illustrates the theme of searching for happiness and the foreboding allusion that complete happiness may be just a dream. Themes In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser attempts to express to the reader how the misguided search for happiness through the achievement of the American dream of success can do more harm than good. Carrie begins as part of the lower-middle class of society and makes her way to the top. Throughout the novel, “In the view of a certain stratum of society, Carrie was comfortably established—in the eyes of the starveling, beaten by every wind and gust by a sheet of rain she was safe in a halcyon harbor.

” (74) Her advances are in part due to arduous work and in part due to her good luck. Carrie is meant to represent the, “...middle American class...” (2), Drouet, a class higher, and Hurstwood, a class higher than that.

“Carrie was not by any means a gloomy soul;” (76) however, she never feels completely happy. For the duration of the novel, Carrie searches vainly for true happiness. This theme remains relevant today because many people still possess the American dream of success and happiness based on wealth and social status. Dreiser wants the reader to contemplate whether this true happiness exists at all.

Ironically, as an actress in the play, “Under the Gaslight,” by Augustin Daly, Carrie speaks this line, “...It is a sad thing to want for happiness, but it is a terrible thing to see another groping about blindly for it, when it is almost within the grasp.” (148) If Carrie would realize that contentment in life is not simply based on materialistic possessions and income, she could possibly become happy. Unfortunately, she never comes to realize this. The reader is left with the impression that the happiness that Carrie searches for does not exist and perhaps this is true. Perhaps the American dream of happiness is just that—a dream, an illusion.” 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 shall never feel.” (400) The Achievement of True Happiness AP English Summer Homework August 31, 2000