The duality of desire in dreiser’s sister carrie

In Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser creates a world in which people are defined by desire. By viewing this world through the eyes of his protagonist, Carrie, the reader becomes aware of a dichotomy. On one hand, there is the desire for wealth, status, and material possessions. While the majority of the novel is dedicated to this kind of desire, there exists another kind of desire of “ the mind that feels” (398), which longs for beauty. Most of the way through the novel, Carrie becomes increasingly aware of the superficiality of the former kind of desire, as well as the nobility of the latter, which she explores through her experience in acting. At the end of the novel, Dreiser praises Carrie for transcending the former kind of desire and embracing the latter, nobler kind of desire. When Carrie is taken in by Drouet, she is confronted with intermittent instances of moral misgivings about her situation. Dreiser writes: “[Carrie] looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mindand saw a worse. Between these two images she wavered, hesitating which to believe” (74). When Carrie is alone, a voice says to her: Oh, thou failure! Look at those about. Look at those who are good. How would they scorn to do what you have done. Look at the good girls; how will they draw away from such as you when they know you have been weak. You had not tried before you failed. (75)These flashes of morality, which become virtually dormant for the majority of the book, reappear in the voice of Ames, who is extremely influential in helping Carrie shed away the desire for materials and focus on the desire for beauty. Carrie’s introduction to acting marks the beginning of her exposure to the positive kind of desire. However, at first she is only fond of acting because of the praise she gets; she is unaware of her potential to have a positive influence on the world. The following passage, in which Dreiser addresses

the reader, is one of several which deals with Carrie as an actress. These passages serve as landmarks in Carrie’s realization of the better kind of desire: Carrie was possessed of that sympathetic, impressionable nature which, ever in the most developed form, has been the glory of the drama. 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. And shortly after: In such feeble tendencies, be it known, such an outworking of desire to reproduce life, lies the basis of all dramatic art. (125-126). In this passage, Dreiser recognizes Carrie as a talented actress, capable of “ reproducing life.” The importance of this ability is explained later by Ames. In her first meeting with Ames, Carrie begins to see the artificiality of the desire for material wealth in the following passage:” I shouldn’t care to be rich,” he told her, as the dinner proceeded and the supply of food warmed up his sympathies; “ not rich enough to spend my money this way.”” Oh wouldn’t you?” said Carrie, the, to her, new attitude forcing itself distinctly upon her for the first time.” No,” he said. “ What good would it do? A man doesn’t need this sort of thing to be happy.” Carrie thought of this doubtfully; but, coming from him, it had weight with her. (257)This “ new attitude” is one which explicitly denounces the desire for wealth and all things material. At this turning point, Carrie begins to see the wrongness of her desire of her adopting the “ cosmopolitan standard of virtue” (1). Not only does she begin to see this, but she also begins to see the righteousness the pursuit of a better kind of desire, which she demonstrates in acting. Carrie is certainly on to this idea when she soon after asks of Ames, “ Don’t you think it rather fine to be an actor?” (258). Ames’ approval is all that she needs to set her on the path to the good kind of desire. Dreiser indicates this dawning of awareness:

“ Through a fog of longing and conflicting desires she was beginning to see. Oh, ye legions of hope and pity of sorrow and pain! She was rocking, and beginning to see” (258). At this critical point in the novel, Dreiser begins the chiasmus of plot between Carrie and Hurstwood. Carrie, because of her growing awareness of the righteous path, starts on the rise, while Hurstwood, for opposing reasons, starts on his decline. The key idea in Dreiser’s analogy between a man’s material progress and his bodily growth is that once a man ceases to move forward, he begins to decay. Carrie does not decay because she does not cease to look forward. In fact, she is constantly longing for something which can never be achieved. However, it is this perpetual longing which keeps her in “ youthful accretion” (259). On the contrary, Hurstwood never transcends the hollowness of the desires of the material world. He lives for himself, and subsequently, begins to decay. This passage is paralleled by one at the end of the novel, in which Ames advises Carrie on the evanescence of her gift for acting: You can lose it, you know. If you turn away from it and live to satisfy yourself alone, it will go fast enough. The look will leave your eyes. Your mouth will change. Your power to act will disappear. You may think they won’t, but they will. Nature takes care of that. (386)The first significant part of this passage is the matter about the danger of living to satisfy the self alone. This is precisely why Hurstwood does not rise as Carrie does. The other matter of significance is Ames’ comment that “ Nature takes care of that.” Ames’ mentioning of Nature as an agent of fate is a direct reference to the passage in which Dreiser describes the scientific process of growth and decay, which, in Hurstwood’s case, results in a “ sagging to the grave side” (259). When Hurstwood chooses not to go out on that wintry day and look for work, he stops looking for something more, and

Nature takes over. The preceding paragraph is prefaced by one in which Ames tells Carrie how she has the power to voice the feelings of others. “ The world is always struggling to express itself,” he tells her, and “ Most people are not capable of voicing their feelings. They depend upon others” (385). Of her “ sympathy” and “ melodious voice,” he tells her to “ make them valuable to others. It will make your powers endure.” This is Dreiser’s way of suggesting that to use one’s abilities valuable to others is the best way to preserve the self. Dreiser concludes the scene saying: “ It was a long way to this better thing” (386). At this point Carrie realizes fully her duty in using her gift for expressing the desires of others. She realizes that to do so is a “ better thing” than to live for herself and long for material possessions. While this kind of life seems “ a long way” for Carrie, it is important to note that she strives for something which can never be attained. Just as the longing for status will never be satiated, “ the blind strivings of the human heart” will never be ceased. But it is from the longing for that which cannot be attained that those of the minds that feel gain their pleasure. In Dreiser’s final pages, Carrie reflects on the futility of the first kind of desire: “ Chicago, New York; Drouet, Hurstwood; the world of fashion and the world of stage these were but incidents. Not them, but that which they represented, she longed for. Time proved the representation false” (398). Shortly after, Dreiser writes a passage which refers back to the time when Carrie walked down Broadway with Mrs. Vance, desiring to be rich enough in wealth and status to be part of such a world. In this passage, however, Carrie has realizes the hollowness of such desire: “ In her walks on Broadway, she no longer thought of the elegance of the creatures who passed her. Had they more of that peace and beauty which glimmered afar off, then were thy to

be envied” (398). This is truly noble: no longer does Carrie envy other women for their clothes, their jewelry, or their collections of expensive possessions. Rather, “ peace and beauty” are all that Carrie strives for.