

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-*

light: *A Totally Original and Picturesque Drama of Life and Love in These Times*. Of the play he says: "It creates the most intricate network of 'dramatic' ironies to be found in the novel. And it reveals the essential psychology of Dreiser's characters."³ I would propose, however, that even more suggestive is a play with the most famous stage tramp of the nineteenth century, the Joseph Jefferson version of *Rip Van Winkle*,⁴ which Witemeyer considers pertinent only in that "Hurstwood's courtship of Carrie commences in a theater" (at a performance of *Rip Van Winkle*) and that "Drouet is present, but asleep to the danger."⁵ I would further propose that Dreiser's Hurstwood and Jefferson's Rip bear more than a passing resemblance.

The Jefferson play,⁶ although it has much of the Irving flavor, contains significant changes in characterization and plot development. The Rip of the play has once owned most of the small village of Falling Waters but through drink and laziness has signed away his property to the villain of the piece, Derrick Von Beekman. All that remains is the cottage inhabited by the Van Winkles, a property not sold only because it is owned by Rip's wife Gretchen. The discovery that Beekman is not the legal owner of Rip's property causes town merriment and dancing—with Gretchen suddenly coming upon Rip embracing his young dancing partner. Although Gretchen loves Rip, she cannot tolerate his ways and finally turns him out of the house into a storm, following which he has his famous Kaatskills rendezvous. On his return, the unsympathetic town no longer recognizes him. Moreover, he finds that his wife, for the sake of their daughter Meenie, has married the villainous Beekman and that Meenie is being forced into a marriage with Beekman's nephew. Gretchen says of the possible marriage of Meenie, "Oh, wretch that I am, I must consent, or that man [Beekman] will surely thrust her out of doors to starve, to beg, and to become—" At which point she sees Rip, but does not recognize her changed husband. Feeling only pity for the old man, she leads him into the house. The highly dramatic last scene resolves the problems, and all ends well.

The costuming for Rip in the first three acts shows a man fallen from his presumably once-important place as owner of much of the town: "He is dressed in an old deerskin coat, a pair of breeches which had once been red, now tattered, patched, and frayed, leather gaiters and shoes equally dilapidated, a shapeless felt hat with a bit of the brim hanging loose—the whole stained and weather worn to an almost clay-colour, except for the bright blue of his jean shirt and the scarlet of his long wisp of a necktie" (p. 407). On his awakening after twenty years at the beginning of Act IV, Rip has deteriorated even more: ". . . his former picturesque rags have become so dilapidated that it is

a matter of marvel how they hold together. They have lost all traces of color [sic], and have assumed the neutral tints of the moss and lichens that cover the rocks" (p. 422).

After the closing of his New York saloon, Hurstwood's appearance undergoes a similar decline. "Sitting around the house, he decided to wear some old clothes. . . . Later still, he put off shaving to every other day, then to every third day, and so on, until once a week became the rule."⁸ At one time a well-dressed, well-groomed man, by the evening of his suicide, he joins a brotherhood of the destitute waiting before a Bowery flophouse. "They had on faded derby hats with dents in them. Their misfit coats were heavy with snow and turned up at the collars. Their trousers were mere bags, frayed at the bottom and wobbling over big sloppy shoes, torn at the sides and worn almost to shreds" (p. 551).

Ironic and portentous, then, is the fact that Carrie, Hurstwood, and Drouet watch a play of a well-liked and once-prosperous stage tramp, who, because of his drinking, his inattention to his family, and his apparent fondness for the girls, is locked out of the home owned by a nag of a wife. Like Rip, Hurstwood falls from a position of prominence to one of beggary. The reasons for his fall are similar. He is enchanted by Carrie, ignores his family, and has had too much to drink on the night of the closing of the safe. His wife, a scold who controls the property of the family, also locks him out-of-doors after discovering that he is seeing another woman. Moreover, Gretchen Van Winkle does not recognize her husband changed by his twenty-year absence and unwelcomed by the town. She says, "Here, my poor man, take this. It is only a penny; but take it, and may God bless you, poor wanderer, so old, so helpless" (p. 428). She leads him inside for food. Carrie, likewise, does not know the gaunt, waiting Hurstwood, who has not been received kindly by the city. "At first she did not recognize the shabby, baggy figure. He frightened her, edging so close, a seemingly hungry stranger" (p. 531). She immediately gives him nine dollars and says, "It's all I have with me" (p. 532). Further, Rip, when all things go against him, sleeps away his troubles. In his last days, Hurstwood does much the same. "The one recourse left to him was to doze when a place offered and he could get the money to occupy it" (p. 544). Finally, to blot out all reality, he enters a perpetual, gas-induced sleep in a cheap lodging house.

That Dreiser based *Sister Carrie* on fact is obvious. However, it would appear that he saw the tragic possibilities in the usually comic Rip for the development of Hurstwood. *Rip Van Winkle*, with an easily resolved bigamous marriage, is romantic domestic melodrama at its best (or worst). The Hurstwood-Mrs.

Hurstwood-Carrie triangle, with its own bigamous marriage, is naturalistic domestic melodrama at its best.

JOHN R. BYERS, JR.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Notes

¹ Dreiser himself, in watching “that large company of bums, loafers, tramps, idlers, the flotsam and jetsam” of City Hall Park, said, “I presume I looked at them and then considered myself and these great offices, and it was then that the idea of *Hurstwood* was born. *A Book about Myself* (New York: Liveright, 1922), pp. 463–64.

² *A Book about Myself*, p. 225.

³ “Gaslight and Magic Lamp in *Sister Carrie*,” *PMLA*, 86 (March 1971), 238.

⁴ That Dreiser admired Jefferson as an actor is clear. He said of the American theater, “A few things had been done, in acting at least, by Booth, Barrett, Macready, Forrest, Jefferson, Modjeska, Fanny Davenport, Mary Anderson, to name but a few,” and “Richard Mansfield and Felix Morris stand out in my mind as excellent, and Sol Smith Russell and Joseph Jefferson as amusing comedians” (*A Book about Myself*, p. 176). Moreover, Jefferson came to be so associated with the role of Rip that he continued to act the part from 1865 until a year before his death in 1905 (see Arthur Hobson Quinn, *A History of the American Drama from the Beginning to the Civil War*, 2nd ed., 1923; rpt. New York: Appleton, 1951, p. 332).

⁵ Witemeyer, p. 237.

⁶ For an account of the evolution of the play *Rip Van Winkle*, see Quinn’s *A History*, pp. 325–32.

⁷ “Rip Van Winkle,” as played by Joseph Jefferson, *Representative American Plays*, 7th ed., ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: Appleton, 1953), p. 427. The Quinn edition of the play will be cited hereinafter with parenthetical page references in the text. Donald Pizer, ed., *Sister Carrie* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 376, n. 2, observes that Dreiser’s sister “Emma, whose full name was Emma Wilhelmina, was . . . often called Minnie, which suggests that Dreiser may have derived the name Carrie as a diminutive parallel to Minnie. Carrie’s sister, it should also be recalled, is named Minnie Hanson.” The idea of a young girl named Meenie about to be thrown out into the world on her own may have struck an especially responsive chord with Dreiser.

⁸ *Sister Carrie* (New York: Modern Library [1932]), p. 531, cited hereinafter with parenthetical page references in the text.

Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*

To the Editor:

In his ingenious examination of “The Lofty Game of Numbers: The Mynheer Peepkorn Episode in Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*” (*PMLA*, Oct. 1971, pp. 924–39), Oskar Seidlin gives brief attention to

Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*. Of its section 34, he says: “The sum of the digits makes 7, and each of the two digits, 3 and 4, are indeed the reason why 7, as their sum, is the holy number: 3 is the Trinity, the divine and noumenal; 4 is the earth with its four corners, seen under this symbol all through the ages” (p. 925). In a note to this statement, he continues: “The conception [sic] of the four-cornered earth probably goes back to the Babylonians. . . . In *Der junge Joseph*, Jaakob speaks of the four elements, ‘das vierte, die Erde’ ” (p. 936, n. 11). Now, the number 4 may well stand for “the earth with its four corners”; but, continuing the idea of the number 3, the usual meaning of 4 in medieval Christian symbolism would have been more appropriately adduced: the Empedoclean classification of matter into fire, air, water, and earth. The passage in *Der junge Joseph* from which the author quotes, in fact, includes the mention of fire, air, and water as well as of earth (and this from Mann’s Jaakob, incidentally, well in advance of Empedocles’ time). Mr. Seidlin, indeed, seems to hint in note 11 at this ancient quaternary (the term “elements” is his, not Mann’s). But to pass abruptly from the subject of “the four-cornered earth” to that of the elements (with incomplete quotation) confuses the reader, when no mention of these elements has been made. “Das vierte” after which three? he asks himself. To be sure, reference to the points of the compass is made elsewhere in *Der junge Joseph*, when the youth receives instruction from old Eliezer. “Auf der anderen Seite war vier die Zahl der Weltgegenden, denen die Tageszeiten entsprachen . . .” (Thomas Mann, *Gesammelte Werke*, Frankfurt, 1960, iv, 403): this passage, rather than the one cited, demonstrates that “Thomas Mann was well aware of this idea” (Seidlin, p. 936, n. 11).

Elsewhere in the article, two statements are made which find no support in textual fact. Again with reference to *Der junge Joseph*, we read: “When young Joseph takes his walks with little Benjamin through the countryside in order to teach the boy about the living things that surround them, he holds him by the wrist and lets the tiny hand wiggle back and forth. . . . The hand of the ‘seized’ one is free to move as it pleases, not constrained, not forced, obeying its own will, and yet there is leadership, loving, friendly, brotherly” (p. 935; no reference is cited). But Thomas Mann, in describing Benjamin at this time, specifically mentions “seine kurzfingerigen Hände, deren eine er immer dem Bruder gab, wenn sie zusammen gingen” (Mann, p. 441); and states: “Hand in Hand gingen sie weg” at the start of the excursion that forms much of the *Drittes Hauptstück*: an unambiguous expression, or better denotation, of manual, not carpal, contact (Mann, p. 442). A bit later on this walk, Joseph does indeed take Benjamin by the wrist, but not at all to