

Delusion and Reality in *Sister Carrie*

To the Editor:

In his recent article (*PMLA*, March 1971), Hugh Witemeyer has presented an excellent analysis of *Sister Carrie*, but some of his conclusions need modification. He carries the logic of his approach too far when he says that "love and the theater both beckon toward fairyland" (p. 239). While this is true of Carrie's theatrical excursion in Chicago, as Witemeyer persuasively argues, this is certainly not true of her relationship with the theater in New York. Again, his dismissal of Carrie's personality as "eternally pre-pubescent," and his description of the novel as a "sad but sympathetic vision of radical American immaturity" (p. 240) fail to take cognizance of the changed, and changing, Carrie who, in New York, becomes in many ways wiser, more practical, and levelheaded than she was in Chicago. Also, his sweeping generalization that "the reactions of Dreiser's three principal characters to Daly's play offer a suggestive paradigm of their general psychology throughout the novel—a sadly immature, almost infantile, psychology" (p. 180) brackets Carrie, Hurstwood, and Drouet together as remaining immature from beginning to end. While this may well be true of Drouet, and perhaps partially true of Hurstwood, it is less than fair to the Carrie of the latter half of the novel.

Rapidly approaching impecuniousness in New York, Carrie begins to think frequently of "the stage as a door through which she might enter that gilded state which she had so much craved. Now, as in Chicago, it came as a last resource in distress."¹ The monetary crisis that she and Hurstwood face has not as yet dispelled her belief in the glamour of the world of greasepaint and footlights. It is only when she once again tries to enter that world in New York that its romance fades. Whereas in Chicago the prosperous Hurstwood could arrange for Carrie to have a sympathetic and admiring audience consisting of his friends ("a well-dressed, good-natured, flatteringly-inclined audience"—p. 158), in New York Carrie's attempts to secure the most minor of roles on the stage—that of a nonspeaking chorus girl—are thwarted at every step (Ch. xxxvii). She goes from one dramatic agent to another, and soon learns that "girls who can stand in a line and look pretty are as numerous as labourers who can swing a pick" (p. 343). Unlike Hurstwood who secures a job immediately as a motorman because of a strike on the trolley lines in

Brooklyn (Ch. xl), Carrie has to fight every inch of the way before she finally gets a place at the Casino.

Once in, she has a momentary glimpse of the theatrical world that had dazzled her in Chicago: "She saw a large, empty, shadowy play-house, still redolent of the perfumes and blazonry of the night, and notable for its rich, oriental appearance. The wonder of it awed and delighted her" (p. 347). But this nostalgic viewpoint is quickly banished when she realizes that any resemblances between her experiences of the stage in Chicago and in New York are purely superficial. Here, on the professional stage in New York, the director conducts rehearsals with "brutal roughness," he waxes "exceedingly wroth over trifles," and has "a great contempt for any assumption of dignity or innocence on the part of these young women" (p. 348). And even after she is fairly secure in this world that no longer enchants her, she understands that she is but a nonentity, a cipher. True, "she was now one of a group of oriental beauties who, in the second act of the comic opera, were paraded by the vizier before the new potentate as the treasures of his harem," but "there was no word assigned to any of them" (p. 389). Though an inmate of this glittering world of delusion, Carrie must remain silent, devoid of an identity. It is she, however, who asserts her identity entirely on her own, with her impromptu rejoinder to the leading comedian, "I am yours truly," when asked her name (p. 389). From this point on Carrie's success is assured.

Thus, whereas Witemeyer sees Carrie "as eternally pre-pubescent," the truth is that her experiences on the New York theatrical scene are responsible for her abandoning that pre-pubescent Chicago phase in the process of growing-up that she undergoes. In New York even her spectacular and continuing success on the stage does not delude her into believing that this is the ultimate reality. When Hurstwood, a total failure at the end of the novel, yet never without a touch of human, and even tragic, dignity, commits suicide by turning on the gas in the cubicle of a doss-house in the Bowery, his last words to himself are, "What's the use?" (p. 456). It is significant that immediately after this Dreiser directs our attention to Carrie, a total success, but paradoxically, in the same predicament as Hurstwood: "And now Carrie had attained that which in the beginning seemed life's object. . . . She could look about on her gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account. Friends there were, as the world takes it. . . . Applause there was, and publicity—once far off, essential things, but now grown trivial and in-

different. Beauty also—her type of loveliness—and yet she was lonely. In her rocking-chair she sat, when not otherwise engaged—singing and dreaming” (p. 456). Both Carrie and Hurstwood have come a great distance from their pleasant romance in Chicago.

Surely the Carrie of these concluding pages is not a specimen of “radical American immaturity” as Witemeyer would have us believe. 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. At the novel’s end Dreiser tells us that “even had Hurstwood returned in his original beauty and glory, he could not now have allured her. She had learned that in his world, as in her own present state, was not happiness” (p. 458). Likewise, her final meeting with Drouet, the perpetual boy, shows her as having left behind her youthful immaturity of an earlier time. When Drouet dines with her in New York after she has become “elegant” and “famous,” he begins “to imagine it would not be so difficult to enter into her life again, high as she was.” But his advances elicit no response from her: “‘You mustn’t talk that way,’ said Carrie, bringing in the least touch of coldness” (pp. 435–36).

Yet Dreiser does not leave us with a Carrie disillusioned and cynical. She still entertains a secret hope that happiness will some day come her way: “Though often disillusioned, she was still waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real” (p. 458). Perhaps it is in terms of this combination of realization and lingering illusion that Dreiser defines true wisdom.

RUPIN W. DESAI
University of Delhi, India

Notes

¹ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Harper, 1965), p. 336.

Melville’s *Clarel* Continued

To the Editor:

If a very few, minor inaccuracies, which do not materially affect my conclusions, be deemed sufficient cause to reject as “quite irrelevant” my carefully elaborated philosophical analysis of *Clarel*, then Mr. Chamberlain’s criticism of my article [Forum, Jan. 1972] is subject to similar dismissal.

I shall begin with Mr. Chamberlain’s most egregious example of inaccuracy and misinterpretation, his item #5. Mr. Chamberlain objects to my shortened form of reference, “Star of Wormwood,” citing a Mel-

ville text—“ii.xxvi.22–24”—which closely approximates the *Revelations* phrase “The star is called Wormwood.” I should first like to point out that Mr. Chamberlain’s reference to the Melville text is inaccurate: it should read “ii.xxxvi.22–24.” Second, Melville later changes his own wording to “that Wormwood Star” (ii.xxxix.41), apparently not considering himself bound to stick as closely to the *Revelations* text as Mr. Chamberlain would require. More significant is Mr. Chamberlain’s misreading of Melville in his following objection to my analysis: “To apply these lines, spoken by the misanthrope Mortmain, to Nehemiah is misleading in the extreme.” Mr. Chamberlain has apparently missed Mortmain’s later comment upon his discovery of Nehemiah’s death in the bitter waters of the Dead Sea: “The Swede stood by; nor after-taste / Extinct was of the liquid waste / Nor influence of that Wormwood Star / Whereof he spake” (ii.xxxix.39–42). Mortmain sees Nehemiah’s death as fulfilling the implicit prophecy in his earlier statement, quoted by Mr. Chamberlain. It is true that Nehemiah goes to his death with a “beatific vision,” as Mr. Chamberlain said. I indicated this on p. 378 of my article, just after Mr. Chamberlain chose to end his quotation of my analysis. But Mortmain now rejects any consoling implications of such a death, seeing it as an authentic example of human mortality, of the primal death: “Mortmain, relentless: ‘See: / To view death on the bed—at ease—/. . . In chamber comfortable:—here / The elements all that unsay! / The first man dies. Thus Abel lay” (ii.xxix.45–46, 49–51). Clearly, then, my application of Mortmain’s lines to Nehemiah’s death is not “misleading in the extreme” but required for an understanding of that event.

Item #11 again reveals Mr. Chamberlain’s inability to read the Melville text accurately or to relate slightly separated sections of the text. Rolfe’s calling the priest’s act of lighting the Easter fire “cheatery” does not involve serious criticism of that act, as Mr. Chamberlain suggests, but a tolerance essential to his character. This can be easily shown by quoting in full the passage to which Mr. Chamberlain alludes: “Thus you see, / Contagious is this cheatery; / Nay, that’s unhandsome; guests we are; / and hosts are sacred” (iii.xvi.109–12). Rolfe continues: “as yon docile lamps receive / The fraudulent flame, yet honest burn, / So no collusive guile may cleave / Unto these simple friars” (iii.xvi.115–18). Though the discussion of the dead king on a live horse “occurs some eighty lines after,” as Mr. Chamberlain points out, it is part of a continuing discussion of clerical means of supporting faith, which extends from the Greek and Roman priests to the Lutheran: “does the Lutheran, / . . . In candor own the dubious weather” (iii.xvi.158, 161). Rolfe next admits that some modern pulpiteers and religious