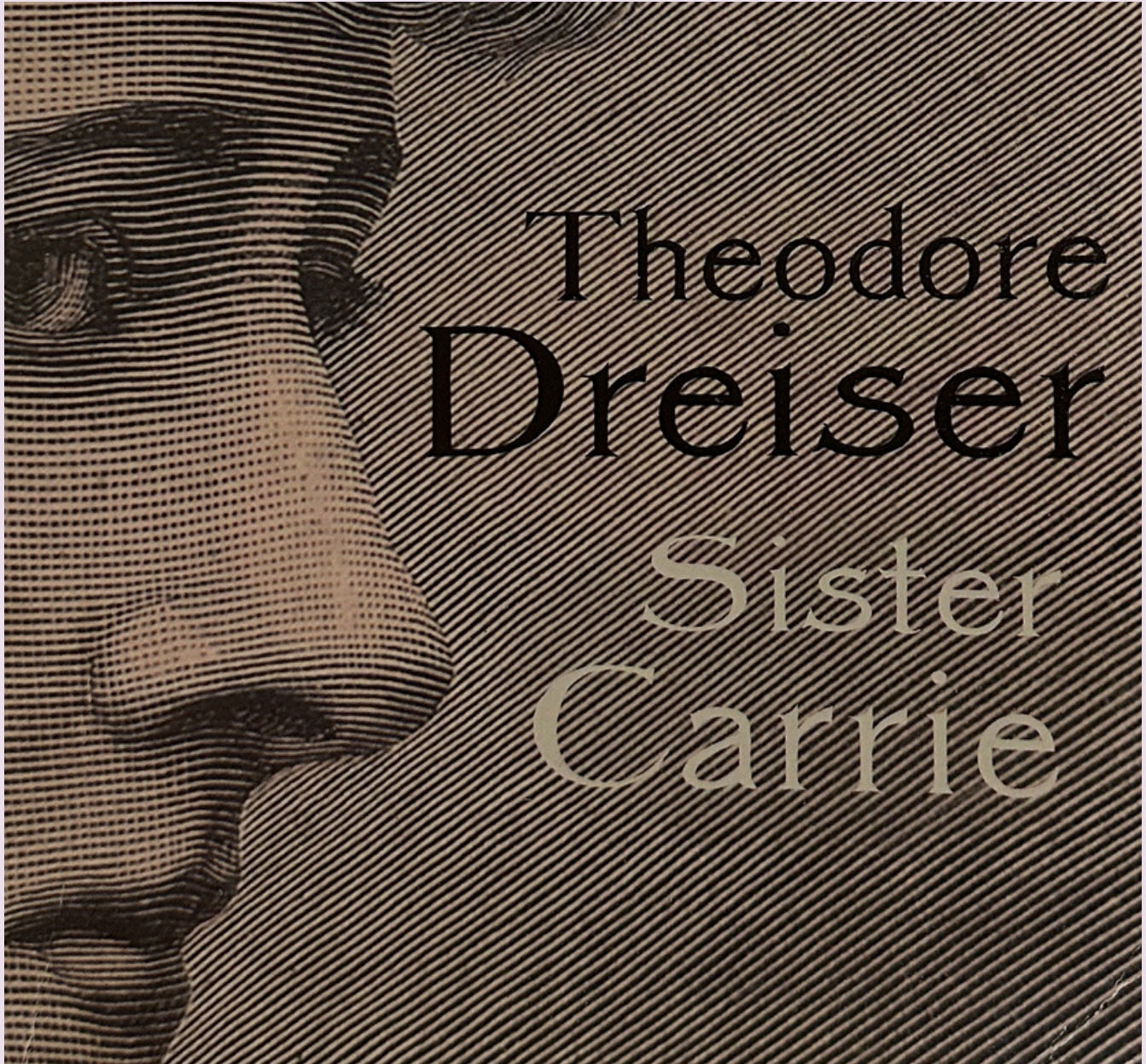


SISTER CARRIE

A Pens and Poison Study Guide



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Overview

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Sister Carrie is the story of Carrie Meeber, a young woman who moves from a small town in Wisconsin to 1890s Chicago. Carrie is initially naive yet soon realizes that life in the city is not what she expected. She takes on strenuous and low-paying jobs just to survive and must soon deal with the harsh realities of urban life. Her beauty, however, catches the attention of two men, Charles Drouet and George Hurstwood, both of whom begin to make a difference in her life.

As the novel progresses, Carrie climbs the social ladder, transforming from a struggling factory worker into a successful New York City actress. She faces several setbacks along her journey, most notably the loneliness that comes with her newfound success. Dreiser's portrayal of Carrie's rise to fame and the ultimate emptiness she feels is a powerful commentary on the illusion of the American Dream and the pitfalls of American capitalism.

Theodore Dreiser: Short Biography

Theodore Dreiser was an early 20th century American author from Indiana who enjoyed a successful career as a journalist, but despite his widespread journalistic work and his two famous novels—

Sister Carrie and An American Tragedy—he is not as well known as other American greats like Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway. One reason for this discrepancy might be that Dreiser was a hardcore socialist with Stalinist sympathies. He was a great critic of American capitalism and believed that America was worth saving by moving away from the capitalist system and into a more socialist regime.

We see hints of his disdain for capitalism early in the novel, such as in Carrie's saunter through Chicago department stores and shops in Chapter 3, where she witnesses the harsh working conditions of minimum wage manual laborers.

Dreiser's naturalistic style of writing made him a controversial figure in his time, especially with his raw depictions of poverty, ambition, and the pursuit of pleasure. Because of this, his work didn't find much traction domestically, but his novels resonated deeply with readers in the Soviet Union, where his critique of capitalism and exploration of social issues aligned with the state's ideological values.

Sister Carrie is fundamentally about the American Dream—both the glamors of the American Dream and its pitfalls.

Characters

Characters

CARRIE MEEBER

The protagonist of the novel, Carrie is a young, ambitious woman who seeks a better life in the city. She evolves from a naive country girl into a sophisticated and successful actress, but she remains haunted by feelings of emptiness and discontent.

CHARLES DROUET

A charming and carefree traveling salesman who becomes Carrie's first lover. Drouet represents the easygoing, superficial aspects of urban life and is largely responsible for introducing Carrie to a more glamorous lifestyle.

GEORGE HURSTWOOD

A manager at a high-end bar, Hurstwood becomes infatuated with Carrie and eventually ruins his life to be with her. His tragic decline from a respected businessman to a destitute wanderer serves as a counterpoint to Carrie's rise, highlighting the harsh realities of social ambition.



Summary

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The novel opens with Carrie's train ride from a small town in Wisconsin to industrial Chicago. On the train, she meets a dapper man named Drouet, who promises to call on her that coming Monday. Carrie arrives at her sister's apartment and immediately sets out to look for work, becoming quickly disillusioned by the working conditions of industrial city life. Soon, she is dismissed from her job after falling ill, and out of desperation she takes money from Drouet to secure a place of her own. Drouet and Carrie then move in together, and Carrie begins to feel morally insecure; in the 1890s, it was scandalous for an unmarried couple to share a living space. Carrie later meets Drouet's friend Hurstwood, with whom she enters into an affair; shortly afterwards, she makes her debut as an actress. As Drouet and Hurstwood both marvel at her newfound talents, Carrie resolves to run away with Hurstwood, but is then disappointed to learn that Hurstwood is married. She sulks until, one day, Drouet begins to suspect her affair, leading to a rift between the two that causes Drouet to move out. Meanwhile, Hurstwood decides he is going to do whatever it takes to get Carrie back and comes to her one night claiming that Drouet is sick and they must see him immediately. He puts her on a train

to Detroit and forces her to unwittingly run away with him. It's not until halfway through the train ride that Carrie suspects Hurstwood has tricked her. He nevertheless soon convinces her to marry him, and the two move to New York City.

Hurstwood takes another managerial post, and Carrie begins to enjoy New York life. However, harsh conditions soon lead to the closure of the bar that Hurstwood manages, and he has to look for a new job. In a rather predictable plot twist, he is unable to find anything and soon becomes a beggar on the streets. Meanwhile, Carrie becomes disillusioned by Hurstwood's incompetence and leaves him to become an actress. She soon enjoys fame on the stage, and she rises to riches by the end of the novel. However, despite her ambition and success, she is not happy, and Dreiser leaves us asking: what constitutes happiness, then, if not success and ambition?

Themes

Themes

THE AMERICAN DREAM

From the novel's start, Carrie embarks on a journey from a small town to Chicago and eventually to New York City. She is drawn throughout the novel by the allure of glamor, luxury, and extravagance, a lifestyle that Drouet introduces her to. One of the most telling scenes of her draw to luxury is a dinner she shares with her friends the Vances and their cousin Robert Ames at a fancy restaurant called Sherry's. She is captivated by the elevated prices until Ames suggests to her that all these luxuries are unnecessary. By the end of the novel, she does live in luxury but is unhappy—leading Dreiser to suggest that the American Dream is perhaps an illusion.

URBAN LIFE

The novel is set in two urban metropolises—Chicago and New York—and highlights some of the struggles that come with such a lifestyle, especially around the turn of the century. Hurstwood struggles to find decent work, and Carrie is ultimately lonely and alienated. The bustle of city life may have its allure, but the hyper-fixation on individuality that emerges from such a dynamic leads to deep loneliness.

NATURALISM AND DETERMINISM

Dreiser was a key figure in the Naturalist movement, which emphasized the idea that individual people are often at the mercy of economic, social, or psychological forces beyond their control. Naturalist writing paints reality in a stark and raw manner instead of using euphemistic or flowery writing. Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall are both depicted as almost inevitable outcomes of the environment and circumstances in which they find themselves, rather than as the result of free will.



Study Questions



Study Questions

1. How does Dreiser's portrayal of Carrie challenge traditional notions of morality in literature?
2. What role does the setting (Chicago and New York) play in the development of the novel's themes?
3. How does Carrie's rise to fame reflect the broader social and economic trends of the late 19th century?
4. In what ways does the novel explore the tension between individual ambition and societal expectations?
5. How does the relationship between Carrie and Hurstwood evolve throughout the novel, and what does it reveal about gender roles and power dynamics?
6. What is Dreiser's final conclusion about the American Dream?