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# FRAMING THE CITY:

## Windows, Newspapers and the Illusion of Reality in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

Stephanie M. Lee\*

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Through the lenses of urban planning, consumerism, and print and visual culture, this paper explores Theodore Dreiser's unsettled vision of the fin de siècle American metropolis as expressed in *Sister Carrie* (1900). The novel's troubling discrepancy between the appearance and true nature of things calls into question the apparent success achieved by the title character and envisioned by others. To tease out the implications of this discrepancy, it is important to consider the novel's representations of windows and newspapers—the media of modern perception through which the novel's protagonists, Carrie Meeber and G.W. Hurstwood, view the city. Acts of window-gazing and newspaper-reading trigger idealized images of life that challenge each character to transform his or her fantasy into reality. Yet, whether in the workplace, the home, or the streets, successfully bridging the two ultimately remains illusory.

*Subject categories:* Literature

*Keywords:* Theodore Dreiser; *Sister Carrie*; American literature; turn of the century; naturalism; urban history; cultural history; Chicago; New York; visual culture; journalism; windows; newspapers; 1900

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### INTRODUCTION: *SISTER CARRIE* AND THE CITY

In 1900, Theodore Dreiser stepped forth into a spectacular world. Turn-of-the-century New York surged with clamor and color, diners and theaters, billboards and saloons, auctioneers and confidence men. Yet the city of his dreams, as the American author called it, deceived as much as it dazzled. It seemed “marble and serene” upon first impression, so a casual observer might believe “that all the world was inordinately

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prosperous and exclusive and happy.”<sup>1</sup> A closer examination of the metropolis’ gilded surface, however, betrayed its rotten core—“the tawdry underbrush of society, the tangle and mat of futile growth between the tall trees of success, the shabby chambers crowded with aspirations and climbers, the immense mansions barren of a single social affair, perfect and silent!”<sup>2</sup> Dreamers young and old expected Manhattan to reveal what they wanted to see “in the shape of wealth or fame.”<sup>3</sup> But few ever realized those elusive visions, so they continued searching and wishing in vain. The city of their dreams, and of Dreiser’s, remained precisely a dream. “The illusion of it, the hypnosis deep and moving that it is!” Dreiser concluded.<sup>4</sup>

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the American city transformed into a site of visual marvels and contradictions—“a living, endless panorama,” as Walt Whitman wrote of New York in 1868.<sup>5</sup> People in cities saw each other as spectacles, in part because there were more urban-dwellers than ever before. By 1900, New York, Chicago and Philadelphia were among the largest cities in the world, each with populations exceeding one million. A mass influx of immigrants contributed to this rapid growth: of the 31.5 million who arrived in the United States between 1840 and 1914, 60 percent stayed.<sup>6</sup> Irish Catholics arrived in the late 1840s, joining African slaves and Chinese laborers. The last decades of the century saw immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, such as Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Poles and

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<sup>1</sup> Dreiser, Theodore. *The Color of a Great City*. Ed. Falls, C.B. (Syracuse, New York: First Syracuse University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Whitman, Walt and Doyle, Peter. *Calamus: A Series of Letters Written During the Years 1868-1880 by Walt Whitman to a Young Friend, Peter Doyle*. (Boston: Library of Congress, 1897), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Bairoch, Paul. *Cities and Economic Development: From the Dawn of History to the Present*. Trans. Braider, Christopher. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 223.

Russians. For new and old inhabitants alike, the street was a discordant scene of unfamiliar languages, religions, clothing and attitudes.<sup>7</sup>

New trends in urban architecture amplified that sense of visual disconcertment. While the metropolis swelled horizontally to accommodate its inhabitants, it also climbed vertically toward the heavens. Dozens of skyscrapers, each taller than the last, were erected in New York and Chicago beginning in the 1870s, triggering public awe and alarm.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the simple architectural styles of the colonial period were giving way to imitative revivals of Greek, Gothic, Tuscan and Egyptian designs. A mix of modern and ancient ornaments adorned everything from public buildings to private households, an eclecticism that T.J. Jackson Lears interprets as indicative of a widespread cultural confusion. The visual environment surrounding the urban-dweller was incohesive.<sup>9</sup>

Within the chaotic, ever-changing metropolis, the Parisian writer Charles Baudelaire coined a term for a particular kind of urban-dweller—the *flâneur*, an individual who strolled the city's streets in order to experience it. Even when he was inches away from other people, this figure perceived them as anonymous members of the crowd. He assumed a uniquely modern role that was both participatory and spectatorial: "to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world."<sup>10</sup> Dreiser, acting the role of a *flâneur* in Manhattan, saw in the city a discrepancy between illusion and reality. His struggle with that problem culminated in his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, published in 1900. In this seminal work of American naturalism, eighteen-year-old Carrie Meeber uproots herself from Wisconsin to start a

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<sup>7</sup> Barth, Gunther. *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Landau, Sarah Bradford and Condit, Carl W. *Rise of the New York Skyscraper: 1865-1913*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), x.

<sup>9</sup> Lears, T.J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Baudelaire, Charles. "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*. Eds. Schwartz, Vanessa R. and Przyblyski, Jeannene M. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 39.

new life in Chicago. There she meets and begins romances with Charles Drouet, a charming salesman who feeds and clothes her until she tires of his company, and G.W. Hurstwood, an even more charming and affluent saloon manager who is also a friend of Drouet's and a married man. On impulse, Hurstwood steals thousands of dollars from his business and runs away with Carrie to New York City. The intention, again, is to start fresh, but Carrie rises into an esteemed acting career while her lover, unnerved by all that he has left behind, descends into depression and poverty. While *Sister Carrie* is interested in many things concerning cities at the close of the Gilded Age, above all it chronicles the experience of seeing and attempting to make sense of a world of unfamiliar things.

Recent scholars, including Bill Brown, Amy Kaplan and Philip Fisher, have pointed out that windows and newspapers help facilitate Dreiser's portrayal of this experience. However, they have missed some essential ways that the city views gleaned from these objects are distant or distorted. Windows, in Brown's study, figure in a larger discussion of *Sister Carrie's* treatment of material culture in modern Chicago. Carrie is simultaneously impressed by the rows of factory windows downtown and intimidated by the imagined people behind them, a feeling that signals her entrance into what he calls the ever-watching "visual economy" of the metropolis.<sup>11</sup> Robert Butler focuses instead on the windows of Carrie's various apartments to track her growth in the domestic sphere, concluding that their scenic views infuse Carrie with optimism.<sup>12</sup> The domestic window also appears in Kaplan's analysis of the novel's dual approach to sentimentalism and realism. Yet its significance is secondary to that of the

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, Bill. "The matter of Dreiser's modernity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*. Eds. Cassuto, Leonard and Eby, Clare Virginia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87.

<sup>12</sup> Butler, Robert. "Urban Frontiers, Neighborhoods, and Traps: The City in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* and Wright's *Native Son*," in *Theodore Dreiser and American Culture: New Readings*. Ed. Hakutani, Yoshinobu. (University of Delaware Press, 2000), 278.

omnipresent rocking chair alongside it, where characters gaze into the distance, read newspapers or otherwise “dream their sentimental fantasies of escape.”<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, Fisher implies that commercial and domestic windows function in identical ways when he argues that the window theatricalizes the everyday urban experience. It frames and highlights what he dubs the future-focused state of “prospective being,” in which an individual—usually Carrie, the actress—is posed on the cusp of transformation.<sup>14</sup> In contrast is the past-obsessed state of “retrospective being.” This condition is best symbolized by Hurstwood, who, after losing his fortune and reputation, adopts an obsession with the newspaper that is “always about yesterday.”<sup>15</sup>

There is more to be said, however, about the specific roles of windows and newspapers in Dreiser’s treatment of these objects and larger interest in urban life. Their constant presence throughout the novel is no coincidence, as the author was preoccupied with both around the time he wrote *Sister Carrie*. While touring Fifth Avenue in New York, during the spring of 1902, he paused to admire decorated store windows. “What a stinging, quivering zest they display,” he wrote, “stirring up in onlookers a desire to secure but a part of what they see, the taste of a vibrating presence, and the picture that it makes.”<sup>16</sup> In his urban sketch “Christmas in the Tenements,” these windows, “filled with cheap displays of all that is considered luxury,” hypnotize crowds of children “peering earnestly into the world of make-believe and illusion.”<sup>17</sup> And when Dreiser adopts a voyeuristic view of Little Italy’s immigrant activity, he looks skyward at “window after window ornamented with a red

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<sup>13</sup> Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 144.

<sup>14</sup> Fisher, Philip. *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel*. (Cary, North Carolina: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1986), 157.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>16</sup> Dreiser, *The Color of a Great City*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

or green or orange iron balcony,” while “plump Italian mothers gaze comfortably out of open windows” and street vendors below are “turning a wistful eye to every window.”<sup>18</sup> “Looking out of my front window I can see a great deal of all that goes on here,” he wrote, in turn looking at himself as a distinct kind of urban-dweller—a window-gazer.<sup>19</sup>

Newspapers also offered Dreiser a front-row seat to big-city life. In June 1892, two months before his twenty-first birthday, Dreiser penned his first story for the *Chicago Globe*. He spent the next few years at Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, the *St. Louis Republic* and the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in various capacities, including drama critic, investigative reporter and features writer. Dreiser soon left journalism for fiction and published *Sister Carrie* on November 8, 1900, but he never forgot his newsroom days. Newspapers, he wrote, “by their general familiarity and intimacy with everything which was going on in the world, seemed to me to be the nearest and quickest approach to all this of which I was dreaming.”<sup>20</sup> Although journalism seems to offer vivid, immediate access to that “which was [presently] going in the world,” its narratives are necessarily fashioned from past events, such as those “of which [Dreiser] was dreaming.” In *The Color of a Great City*, he recounts a morning when unemployed strangers huddle in the cold, waiting for the papers to hit the stands. “They’re lookin’ to see which can git to a job first,” one informs the narrator.<sup>21</sup> Success calls for acting upon the job listings to secure work, instead of merely reading them and letting their possibilities become markers of the past.

Other nineteenth-century authors also treated newspapers and windows as filters through which to examine the enigmatic metropolis. Edgar Allan Poe’s short

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<sup>18</sup> Dreiser, *The Color of a Great City*, 269.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>20</sup> Dreiser, Theodore. *Newspaper Days: An Autobiography*. Ed. Noswitch, T.D. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Dreiser, *The Color of a Great City*, 223.

story "The Man of the Crowd" (1840) begins in a London coffeehouse, where the nameless narrator passes time by observing the patrons, "poring over advertisements"<sup>22</sup> in the newspaper and "peering through the smoky panes into the street."<sup>23</sup> Having established himself as a keen observer and reader, the man proceeds to analyze, in intimate detail, the crowd members who flood the sidewalks at twilight. He understands everyone except one man who remains elusive to the end, emblematic of the city that "does not permit itself to be read."<sup>24</sup>

*Sister Carrie's* naïve title character finds Chicago and New York similarly closed to interpretation. In seeking to read Dreiser's mysterious cities, then, we may find it worthwhile to look deeply at his windows and newspapers. I contend that these media of modern perception trigger idealized visions of life beyond the glass and page. Hurstwood reads newspapers to imagine inhabiting a romanticized past, while Carrie gazes through windows to imagine inhabiting a romanticized future. Both acts are attempts to ignore the unpleasant present. They also indicate a desire to become integrated into the masses and the city at large instead of being disconnected, as both characters are, from their present domestic spaces. Of the viewers who struggle to merge the illusory and true, only Carrie triumphs, since she becomes an actress whose reality is to act out a fantasy life before crowds of strangers. Performing is presented as a valid way to experience reality. Yet the very framework of theatricality—in both the literal sense of stage production and the general sense of contrived identity—casts doubt on the legitimacy of the novel's sequence of seeing, desiring and realizing a lifestyle. In Dreiser's vision of the city, who is a spectator? Who is a participant? And can one become the other? To translate illusory appearances into lived experience

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<sup>22</sup> Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Man of the Crowd," in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. (Doubleday Edition, 1984), 475.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 481. Poe's narrator concludes: "'This old man,' I said at length, 'is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd.*'"



results, ostensibly, in becoming fulfilled. But while the distinction between the two seems as thin as glass or paper, it may be more impassable than either medium appears.

## THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND NEW WAYS OF SEEING

The distorted views in *Sister Carrie* reflect a destabilized connection between sight and reality that characterized much of nineteenth-century popular visual culture. In the 1830s, scientists became preoccupied with a question that had gone unexamined until then: If an individual perceives a different image with each eye, how does he or she experience them as a single vision? One theory that had been offered for centuries suggested that humans never see anything except with one eye at a time. Another theory proposed that each eye projects an object to its actual location. But in 1833, Charles Wheatstone, an English physicist and inventor, determined that both eyes work together to synthesize two disparate views into one.<sup>25</sup> This discovery informed the stereoscope, a toy invented in the same decade. An observer peered through a camera-like body with two holes for viewing, fixing each eye on a flat image mounted on the end of two parallel sticks. The images merged into a three-dimensional photograph in the observer's vision, meaning his or her sense of reality was essentially a reconciliation of differences. Because the image's vividness increased with the apparent closeness of the object to the observer, the device created an impression of physical tangibility that remained purely visual.<sup>26</sup>

Just as the stereoscope "conflated the real with the optical,"<sup>27</sup> so too did the camera. Photographers, daguerreotypists and lithographers all captured the city from unprecedented vantage points made possible by roofs, hilltops and hot-air balloons.

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<sup>25</sup> Crary, Jonathan. "Techniques of the Observer," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*. Eds. Schwartz, Vanessa R. and Przyblyski, Jeannene M. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 85. A descendant of the stereoscope, the Viewmaster, is currently a popular children's toy.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Beginning in the 1830s, panoramas presented San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, New York City and other growing urban centers as unified bodies. Their impressive effects, however, could be manipulated to the operator's benefit. One 1854 daguerreotype of St. Anthony, Minnesota, for example, is positioned atop a bluff so as to highlight the town's river, warehouses, land office, carts and lumber. The result is a purposefully framed, but technically truthful, snapshot of St. Anthony's expansion.<sup>28</sup> The bird's-eye view was about completeness, not details, with an "almost inevitable tendency to render everything on an equal scale—buildings, areas, neighborhoods, even architectural styles or urban plans."<sup>29</sup> John Kasson frames this view in literary terms, noting that such a cityscape "appeared enclosed and defined, with its foreground especially highlighted as a brilliantly legible text, telling a story of dynamic enterprise and unity."<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, these panoramic visions could only be sustained by ignoring the "mole's-eye view" that also dominated nineteenth-century representations of the city.<sup>31</sup> On the ground and in the crowd, the mole's-eye viewer encountered fragmented images of poverty, vice and crime. One such observer was writer and photojournalist Jacob A. Riis, who exposed the deplorable conditions of New York's tenements in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). His mission was similarly adopted by George Bellows, John Sloan and the rest of the Ashcan School artists, who depicted slums and dive bars in all their unheroic squalor.<sup>32</sup>

Those who sought to understand the rapidly evolving metropolis had to see it through one of these perspectives. Yet privileging one view meant forsaking the value

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<sup>28</sup> Hales, Peter B. *Silver Cities: Photographing American Urbanization, 1839-1939*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 25.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>30</sup> Kasson, John F. *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 74.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Zurier, Rebecca. *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2006), 2.

of the other, either the details or the whole. Because any vision of the city was therefore incomplete, a viewer's biases, moods and motives filled in the rest of the picture, so to speak. In American literature, these city-viewers took the form of naturalist authors such as Dreiser, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris. The naturalist, in the words of Donald Pizer, tries to reconcile the "new, discomfoting truths" of his late nineteenth-century world with "his desire to find some meaning in experience which reasserts the validity of the human enterprise."<sup>33</sup>

Whether literary or visual, images of "reality" produced in the nineteenth century remained images first and foremost. The views offered by *Sister Carrie's* newspapers and windows thus may be considered images that are vulnerable to interpretation. When Dreiser's characters look at or through them, their observations are often what they think they see or merely wish to see. Individual perception cannot yield a complete vision of the city, even if such visions are seemingly broadened through a news sheet or a window pane.

## WINDOWS

Carrie catches her first glimpse of Chicago through the window of a train carrying her there. As fast-moving as the panorama is, her imagination outpaces it: "She gazed at the green landscape, now passing in swift review, until her swifter thoughts replaced its impression with vague conjectures of what Chicago might be."<sup>34</sup> Alone and armed with a few possessions, Carrie projects onto the window the city she hopes to see. Her entrance into urban life is therefore marked by vague impressions yielding to even vaguer, internally inspired "conjectures."

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<sup>33</sup> Pizer, Donald. *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

While motion characterizes this particular scene, it is not integral to Carrie's interaction with windows overall. Whether moving or stationary, the windows found in the rest of the novel play the same role in inspiring distorted perceptions of reality. They enable viewers, such as Carrie, to envision themselves existing in an idealized future among the masses. The glass also functions as a physical and symbolic barrier between urban spectators and participants, reminding the viewer of his or her inability to realize those visions. In Fisher's words, "the window creates a polarized world ... All scenes become opportunities for self-classification in that they seem to invite you in and invite you to imagine being in while strongly reminding you that you are out."<sup>35</sup> Fisher does not, however, consider how the novel's different types of windows cause this dynamic to operate in nuanced ways. The panoramic views from the windows of high-up domestic spaces, such as apartments and hotels, privilege impressions and downplay details. On the other hand, those looking into spaces—often sites of commercial activity, such as department stores and factories—offer framed glimpses of glamorous activities on the other side of the glass.

Carrie begins fantasizing about the horizon just moments after she unpacks inside her sister's apartment. The first characterization of Minnie's home on West Van Buren Street privileges its elevated view of Chicago: "It was on the third floor, the front windows looking down into the street, where, at night, the lights of grocery stores were shining and children were playing."<sup>36</sup> These windows afford only a local glimpse of the landscape, from which Carrie extrapolates and wonders "of the vast city which stretched for miles and miles in every direction."<sup>37</sup> The newcomer's first still glimpse of Chicago is a sublime, but dimly perceived, impression of a body that speaks and moves in unison.

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<sup>35</sup> Fisher, 156.

<sup>36</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

As Carrie becomes preoccupied with money, she continues to fantasize about the masses by way of bird's-eye views of the "vast" city that elevate her above the grim reality of toil and poverty. During the weekend after she obtains a job in a shoe factory and before she reports to work, she gazes at the city and dreams of the treasures her meager salary—\$4.50 per week—will surely bring: "Indeed, as she sat in her rocking-chair these several evenings before going to bed and looked out upon the pleasantly lighted street, this money cleared for its prospective possessor the way to every joy and every bauble which the heart of woman may desire."<sup>38</sup> This vision once again situates Carrie among the vast masses, allowing her "every" joy and aligning her desire broadly with "the heart of woman." However, as her first day of work soon proves, this vision exists solely in the future tense ("I will have a fine time," she thought"<sup>39</sup>).

When Carrie searches for employment downtown, she looks into opaque windows and a world that seems as out of reach as the one observed from above:

It was so with the vast railroad yards, with the crowded array of vessels she saw at the river, and the huge factories over the way, lining the water's edge. Through the open windows she could see the figures of men and women in working aprons, moving busily about. The great streets were wall-lined mysteries to her; the vast offices, strange mazes which concerned far-off individuals of importance. She could only think of people connected with them as counting money, dressing magnificently, and riding in carriages. What they dealt in, how they laboured, to what end it all came, she had only the vaguest conception. It was all wonderful, all vast, all far removed, and she sank in spirit inwardly and fluttered feebly at the heart as she thought of entering any one of these mighty concerns and asking for something to do—something that she could do—anything.<sup>40</sup>

Carrie "could see" men and women working in the factories, but "could only think" of the imagined rich. In other words, her view through the windows is not truly based on

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<sup>38</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 27.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

what she sees, but rather on what she imagines seeing instead. Physically and symbolically removed from the rich, the young woman can only imagine “far-off individuals” —located in some unknown sphere, under unknown names and deemed significant for some unknown reason—engaged in “counting money, dressing magnificently, and riding in carriages.” This vision of the factories, or projected vision *onto* the factories, is also glimpsed from far away. The river, “the crowded array of vessels” and “the vast railroad yards” forge a physical distance between Carrie and the working world, which reaffirms her symbolic distance from the vision in her imagination. Furthermore, Dreiser’s overuse of the adjective “vast” —seen here three times within a half-dozen sentences—links this sight with Carrie’s earlier window panorama of “the vast city which stretched for miles and miles in every direction.” If both the bird’s-eye perspective and the mole’s-eye perspective yield similarly vague visions, we have reason to doubt the objectivity of the viewer instead of the views. As real as Carrie’s visions appear to be, they are in fact fantasies.

Carrie’s struggle to transform those fantasies into reality begins when she crosses to the other side of the glass to officially become a working girl. With no work experience to her name, she fields rejections from an embarrassing number of firms. She finally passes a wholesale shoe house, whose door’s plate-glass window reveals a man at a desk. The chance sighting inspires Carrie to walk through the door and inquire about employment. To her surprise, this assertive move produces a job, and upon re-entering the sidewalk crowd, she reflects with pleasure on her success: “This was a great, pleasing metropolis after all. Her new firm was a goodly institution. Its windows were of huge plate glass. She could probably do well there.”<sup>41</sup> Brown suggests that this “apparent *non sequitur*, where glass seems somehow integral to success,” alludes to Carrie’s innocence. It also, according to Brown, enforces the notion that “Carrie’s own

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<sup>41</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 26.

status in the modern city—her embarrassment, her unwitting success in attracting the attention of Drouet and Hurstwood, and her success on the New York stage—depends on a visual economy.”<sup>42</sup> I would further specify that Carrie views *being behind* that glass as integral to success. She admires the windows’ surface, as she has before, but now perceives a function for herself within the interior they reveal, a plausible hope that “she could probably do well *there*” (emphasis added). She views her new job as having transformed her from an outsider to an insider, from a spectator to a participant. At last, she has cracked the streets’ wall-lined mysteries and brought her window-facilitated dreams to life—or so it would seem.

Yet the toil of work hardly seems to match the fantasies showcased in the window. Outside the factory, Carrie remembers its windows as its most striking feature. She brags to her sister of its “great big plate-glass windows and lots of clerks”<sup>43</sup> and, before entering the building on her first day of work, notices that “the big windows looked shiny and clean.”<sup>44</sup> But once she falls into the mechanical routine of fastening leather to men’s shoes, she finds herself nowhere near a window. From the inside, this workplace more closely resembles a prison, dark (“the room was not very light”<sup>45</sup>) and stifling (“As the morning wore on the room became hotter. She felt the need of a breath of fresh air and a drink of air, but did not venture to stir”<sup>46</sup>). Whereas Carrie viewed the factory from the outside as an institution that would lead to a bright future, time seems to stand still within: “Would noon never come? It seemed as if she had worked an entire day.”<sup>47</sup> The room has windows, but they once again distinguish Carrie as an outsider among insiders: “The other girls had ranged themselves about the

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<sup>42</sup> Brown, 87.

<sup>43</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 28.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

windows or the work-benches of those of the men who had gone out.”<sup>48</sup> Carrie retreats to a kind of fantasy window view akin to the panorama from Minnie’s apartment and daydreams about “the city outside and its imposing show, crowds, and fine buildings.”<sup>49</sup> Curiously, however, when Carrie leaves for the day, she is greeted by the window that initially caught her eye: “As she turned the corner, she saw through the great shiny window the small desk at which she had applied.”<sup>50</sup> This window is only viewed from the outside looking in, as if it—and by extension, the hopeful future it once displayed—is an illusion. Carrie can project a fantasy vision onto its screen, but when she tries to inhabit that fantasy on the opposite side of the glass, she feels disillusioned and isolated from the rest of the world.

Since glass represents a disconnect between Carrie’s idealized vision of work and actual work experience, it also signifies a disconnect between spending and earning. The day after Drouet, the flirtatious salesman, loans her twenty dollars, Carrie urges herself to return the money and resume the brave, lonely hunt for work. But this vision of financial independence from him is undermined by department store windows, where the lure of consumerism is on full display.

Without much thinking, she reached Dearborn Street. Here was the great Fair store with its multitude of delivery wagons about, its long window display, its crowd of shoppers. It readily changed her thoughts, she who was so weary of them. It was here that she had intended to come and get her new things. Now for relief from distress, she thought she would go in and see. She would look at the jackets.<sup>51</sup>

Standing before the Fair store, Carrie’s intentions of earning and saving give way to desiring and acquiring. Her impressionable mind shows little resistance to these consumerist visions, practically inviting them to impress themselves upon her. She

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<sup>48</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.



approaches the store “without much thinking,” as if the accidental quality of the encounter might justify lingering there. The store’s marvels compose a panoramic-like exhibit, with “its multitude of delivery wagons about, its long window display, its crowd of shoppers.” The “it” in the next observation, “it readily changed her thoughts,” could refer to the store. But since the pronoun follows the list of objects, “it” may instead fold the aforementioned things into an all-encompassing consumerist vision that trumps logic. The sense of “everything” indicated by “it” is further narrowed into a specific brand, for “it was here,” the Fair store on Dearborn Street, “that she had intended to come and get her new things.” Wishing she could “get” these things—acquire them without explicitly spending—Carrie settles for the pleasure of visually and physically immersing herself in them. She would “go in” past the windows and “see” the merchandise up close. With this decision, the desired objects have narrowed from generic “new things” to jackets in particular. The shopper believes her wants are specific and finite, a conviction that is an act of self-deception.

Like Carrie, people meandering through American cities were struck by the sight of endless shining windows. From the late eighteenth century onward, retail merchants in urban centers began showcasing their goods in flat display windows and projecting “bulk,” or bay, windows that appeared first in London and in America soon after.<sup>52</sup> Most shops used ordinary domestic windows, some of which had old-fashioned shutters that could be fastened horizontally as service counters.<sup>53</sup> But show windows, which began appearing in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, radically differed because they aimed to stimulate desire in consumers instead of merely satisfying their

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<sup>52</sup> Upton, Dell. *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008), 152.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

needs. The new retail merchants crammed them with fabrics, translucent colored bottles or whatever line of merchandise in which the store specialized.<sup>54</sup>

These narrowly focused luxury shops anticipated the department stores of the late nineteenth century, bearing the names of Alexander Turney Stewart, John Wanamaker, Rowland H. Macy and Marshall Field. Together, these men changed the way people saw and understood goods. They sold a dizzying variety of things in immense quantities: R.H. Macy's stores stocked dry goods, ready-to-wear, home furnishing, toys, books, candy, sporting goods, china, glassware and silver.<sup>55</sup> The storefront window served as the pitch to the casual stroller, hinting at the treasure trove inside, and the resulting practice of window-decorating sought to achieve on both commercial and aesthetic levels. One unlikely expert in this unique line of work was L. Frank Baum, the author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). In 1899, he launched *The Show Window*, a monthly magazine devoted to window-trimming. As its circulation surged into the tens of thousands, Baum published pictures of electrical displays of moving stars, mechanical butterflies, revolving wheels, incandescent lamp globes and other visual wonders. "People will always stop to examine anything that moves, and will enjoy studying out the mechanics or wondering how the effect has been obtained," he said.<sup>56</sup> Wanamaker, whose offices and stores in New York and Philadelphia contained thousands of windows, summarized this fascination with storefront displays in 1916: "Our minds are full of windows."<sup>57</sup>

It may come as a surprise, then, to realize that the "long window display" in *Sister Carrie* contains none of Baum's bells and whistles. Dreiser downplays the art of window-trimming to highlight the basic tension between object, glass and consumer. To

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<sup>54</sup> Upton, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Benson, Susan Porter. *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*. (Illinois, Chicago: Illini Books, 1988), 14.

<sup>56</sup> Leach, William. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 60.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

begin, Carrie's shopping involves a unique examination that is simultaneously psychological/inward-facing and visual/outward-facing. A gaze fixed on an object is "the pause for *reflection* in which it is looked at in terms of how it would look on the looker."<sup>58</sup> Yet the desire for the object and the reality of acquisition are separated by the looker's inability to afford said object. When jobless Carrie lingers among the corsets, jackets and jewelry, she fools herself into believing "that she could buy it right away if she chose."<sup>59</sup> Although she has physically crossed to the other side of the establishment's windows, the distance between her and the fulfillment of her consumerist wishes remains unbridgeable. "As both barrier and transparent substance, representing freedom of view to suspension of access, the shop window figures an ambivalent, powerful union of distance and desire," Rachel Bowlby suggests.<sup>60</sup> This distance is accentuated by the fact that these visions can never be fulfilled, not even by money—for as Walter Benn Michaels argues, Carrie regards money itself as the thing she wants, instead of merely a means of acquiring what she wants. "If money, by definition, is the desire for money, then money can never quite be itself. And if money can never succeed even in being itself," he observes, it can never fully empower Carrie the way she thinks it ought to.<sup>61</sup>

Since Carrie finds the objects in the window unattainable, their value or existence in relation to her is restricted to the ocular realm. They effectively function as images, as visual representations of wishes that Carrie yearns to make tangible. The substitution of

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<sup>58</sup> Bowlby, Rachel. *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola*. (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1985), 32.

<sup>59</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 64.

<sup>60</sup> Bowlby, 32-33.

<sup>61</sup> Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1988), 33. Michaels discusses at length the sense of power that rises in Carrie when she comes into contact with money, beginning with the "two soft, green, handsome ten-dollar bills" that Drouet gives her. The need to acquire it, Michaels points out, inherently operates on a self-perpetuating sense of loss, as money is "a thing that you want and don't have."

image for reality is not necessarily satisfying, but it is a new truth of the modern age, as Walter Benjamin argues in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction,” he writes.<sup>62</sup> Though Benjamin was referencing photography and film in particular, his observation of a generally diminished connection between reality and transitory, reproducible image helps illuminate the psychology behind Carrie’s feverish reception of the window’s goods. To see and want what she cannot “get hold of” at present, but perhaps someday, is what fundamentally animates consumerism.

In the city, the opportunity to view images or objects presents the reciprocal opportunity to be viewed as such by urban-dwellers. On the “other” side of the glass, window-gazers can surreptitiously observe, judge and categorize Carrie based on her appearance. However, “as [Carrie] contemplated the wide windows and imposing signs, she became conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was—a wage-seeker.”<sup>63</sup> Not only does her invisible jury have the freedom to decide for themselves who Carrie is, she has no way of knowing who they are. This reciprocal looking, as Brown calls it, is “a new urban condition, the condition that humiliates her as she walks through the wholesale district.”<sup>64</sup> It extends beyond glass panes to the streets:

With a start she awoke to find that she was in a fashion’s crowd, on parade in a show place—and such a show place! Jewellers’ windows gleamed along the path with remarkable frequency. Florist shops, furners, haberdashers, confectioners—all followed in rapid succession....The whole street bore the flavour of riches and show, and Carrie felt that she was not of it.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Arendt, Hannah. (New York: Random House, 1988), 217.

<sup>63</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 16.

<sup>64</sup> Brown, 87.

<sup>65</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 286.

Carrie feels self-conscious of being watched while strolling down Broadway—not coincidentally, the street bearing the name of the institution where she will soon be “on parade” professionally. The vibrant, expensive objects (which include windows) echo those displayed in the storefront windows, as if she is standing before them once again. Dazzled by the panorama-like display of “riches and show,” Carrie turns her gaze on her own identity and declares herself out of place, a lone object who “was not of it.”

Even when Carrie is physically within the crowd, a window-like divide separates her from “them,” as Bowlby shows: she “can see but not have, see but not ‘be seen’ as ‘an equal’ to her companion or anyone else.”<sup>66</sup> I would make the further distinction that Carrie envisions her acceptance into the well-dressed masses as situated in an elusive, almost imaginary, future. She habitually pursues visions with the expectation they will yield happiness in some “other” time, location or circumstance, whether she is moving to Chicago (“she would have a better time than she ever had before—she would be happy”<sup>67</sup>), admiring a mansion (“she was perfectly certain that here was happiness”<sup>68</sup>) or, as has been discussed, gazing out a window (“...and was therein as happy, though she did not perceive it, as she never would be”<sup>69</sup>). This yearning is so oft-repeated, and so repeatedly unsatisfied, it turns from sentimental to ironic. So at the close of the Broadway scene, when Dreiser exults, “...she longed to feel the delight of parading here as an equal. Ah, then she would be happy!”<sup>70</sup>, the underlying suggestion is that Carrie is in fact unlikely to ever obtain the requisite clothes and attitude to become a true participant/insider. Her chance of closing the distance between herself and the masses, reality and image, and the present and future will remain a possibility in the conditional tense.

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<sup>66</sup> Bowlby, 286.

<sup>67</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 26.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

Carrie is not the only one looking at, or looked at by, others. As her relationships with Drouet and Hurstwood intensify, their domestic lives increasingly become spectacles on the stage of the modern metropolis. When Drouet and Carrie lunch together, the salesman chooses a table next to a window “to see and be seen as he dined.”<sup>71</sup> In the restaurant, Drouet is in full control of his dual role as a participant in the urban pastime of fine dining and a spectator of “the changing panorama of the street.”<sup>72</sup><sup>73</sup> But participants are not always so aware of when spectators may be watching. When Jessica Hurstwood, for example, unsatisfactorily answers Mrs. Hurstwood’s questions about a potential love interest, window-gazing provides the mother “the other half of this picture,” as if her daughter’s life were a framed view needing completion or context.<sup>74</sup> From the third floor, Mrs. Hurstwood watches as “young Blyford, son of Blyford, the soap manufacturer, walked home with her.”<sup>75</sup> Since she then asks Jessica about Blyford’s identity, it is unclear whether she knew his background all along or if the narrator revealed those details to the reader alone. In either case, the ambiguity positions both us and Mrs. Hurstwood as voyeurs watching from above. This type of view also yields knowledge of a more incriminating nature. When Carrie returns home from visiting Hurstwood, with Drouet safely out of town, Mrs. Hale watches from her upper window. Her snap judgment of Carrie’s morals is made as clear as the view itself: “‘Um,’ she thought to herself, ‘she goes riding with another man when her husband is out of the city. He had better keep an eye on her.’”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 54.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Fisher uses this scene to demonstrate how windows “define a state of the self in motion that we might call the self in anticipation,” comparing Drouet to an actor whose performance of dining and serving food “converts objects into settings and props.” This results in the “transformation of the spectator,” Carrie, effectively inspiring her career on the stage (Fisher, 157).

<sup>74</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 82.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

Such voyeurism and unwanted public exposure call attention to views from windows, and more intriguingly, to the lives of window-viewers. During episodes of domestic discontent, the reader assumes a voyeuristic role while the window-gazers and the act of window-gazing become spectacles. When Drouet accuses Carrie of seeing Hurstwood romantically, the confrontation places her in an awkward situation. She has fallen in love with the manager, but also “acknowledged benefits received”<sup>77</sup> from Drouet, including clothes, food and shelter. As an unmarried, non-working woman, she has no legal or financial power and no place to go. Leaving the apartment and Drouet, on whom she wholly depends, means entering a world of uncertainties. Caught in this conundrum, she seems physically unable to leave and “merely pulled at the door.”<sup>78</sup> For Carrie, “an anchorless, storm-beaten little craft which could do absolutely nothing but drift,”<sup>79</sup> the door is an impassable gate between two equally undesirable realms: the tense, confining apartment and the frightening, vast streets. The apartment’s window also functions as a barrier between these spaces, but unlike the opaque door, its transparent glass more distinctly highlights Carrie’s uneasy state of “betweenness.” Once Carrie retreats, sobbing, to the window, window-gazing becomes an excuse to neither stay nor leave, but to stay emotionally and physically stagnant:

“You’d better do that,” he said. “There’s no use your packing up now. You can’t go anywhere.”

Still he got nothing for his words.

“If you do that, we’ll call it off for the present and I’ll get out.”

Carrie lowered her handkerchief slightly and looked out of the window.

“Will you do that?” he asked.

Still no answer.

“Will you?” he repeated.

She only looked vaguely into the street.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 207.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

In instances elsewhere, when Carrie sits in her rocking chair and gazes out the window, the emphasis is on the bird's-eye view of the cityscape. Here, the narrator does not describe the world with which Carrie is visually engaging, but rather frames sight itself as an act of disengagement from the world of the apartment. The reader can only guess which sights below might be encountering Carrie's line of vision—crowds, perhaps, and public spaces into which one might blend unnoticed. The window, in short, offers an image whose allure is stronger than that of reality. Since no solution to Carrie's dilemma exists in the present, the window view facilitates the possibility of imagined escape into the future when actual escape from the present is impossible. Another mode of seeing, newspaper-reading, also offers an escape from the present, but its trajectory stretches into the past.

## NEWSPAPERS

*S*ister Carrie's debut in 1900 coincided with the metropolitan newspaper's era of "new journalism."<sup>81</sup> Following the rise of the penny press in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore in the 1830s,<sup>82</sup> the number of dailies nationwide doubled to 1,731 between 1880 and 1890.<sup>83</sup> The industry was buoyed by a burgeoning population of readers, composed largely of immigrants moving into cities. It was also facilitated by printing innovations that succeeded on a large scale in the 1880s, namely the web perfecting press that printed, cut, folded and pasted 30,000 papers per hour.<sup>84</sup>

The metropolitan daily covered the boundless and enigmatic city's department stores, prisons, diners, theaters, concert saloons, dance halls and ball parks, and all those who frequented them. Hawked by newsboys on corners for affordable prices, the newspaper

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<sup>81</sup> Schudson, Michael. *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*. (Basic Books, 1978), 88.

<sup>82</sup> Barth, 70.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.



“satisfied people’s need for information about the bewildering place they found themselves in, the other inhabitants, and themselves.”<sup>85</sup> In the last decade of the century, the nation’s two largest papers—the *New York World* and the *New York Journal*—told stories about inhabitants that were entertaining, provocative and not always truthful. To promote its articles about crime, scandal and high society, the *World* ran extravagant cartoons, cast large, dark headlines across multiple columns, used simple language and frequently boasted of its circulation.<sup>86</sup> Such attention-grabbing tactics were key to building not only a mass audience, but also advertising revenue, which represented 55 percent of total newspaper income in 1900.<sup>87</sup> With their turn to “yellow” journalism, newspapers like the *World* were “a guide to living not so much by providing facts as by selecting them and framing them.”<sup>88</sup>

For the most part, however, the newspapers in *Sister Carrie* are not notable for their sensationalism. Dreiser does not focus on journalistic content, presenting few items word for word. What intrigues him more about the metropolitan daily is its audience’s acts of reading, interpreting and responding. Dreiser’s newspapers, like his windows, physically and symbolically divide participants from spectators. His characters, especially Hurstwood, read indoors and alone, in contrast with the culture of public reading that developed in nineteenth-century cities. They vicariously live through others and disengage from domestic life. Newspapers enable them to familiarize themselves with the city in imagination only and to perform selective, romanticized readings of the past that inform dimly perceived notions of the future.

Sven Hanson, Carrie’s brother-in-law, reads newspapers to acquaint himself with personally favorable aspects of Chicago and to distance himself from less favorable

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<sup>85</sup> Barth, 59.

<sup>86</sup> Schudson, 98.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

ones. His strict routine—to “get his evening paper and read in silence”<sup>89</sup>—transforms him into a nearly invisible figure for whom “the presence or absence of his wife’s sister was a matter of indifference.”<sup>90</sup> But although reading appears to be entirely spectatorial, Hanson’s discussion of it suggests that he views the activity as no less engaging than Carrie views theater spectatorship. When his young guest declares that she wants to go to the theater, Hanson voices disinterest and asks Minnie, “What does she want to see?”<sup>91</sup> She provides the theater’s name, H.R. Jacob’s, not a play’s. This apparent incongruity suggests that the brewing conflict does not concern the value of a particular production, but rather that of the theater as an urban institution. Though Hanson “looked down at the paper and shook his head negatively,”<sup>92</sup> his aversion to theatergoing does not necessarily reflect a disinterest in the world; in fact, he assumes an intimate knowledge of Chicago’s streets. When Carrie asks Minnie where to find a job, Hanson jumps in as a guide: “‘It’s that way,’ he said, pointing east. ‘That’s east.’ Then he went off into the longest speech he had yet indulged in, concerning the lay of Chicago.”<sup>93</sup> He directs Carrie to inquire at the manufacturing houses on the other side of the river, presuming a familiarity with the lifestyle of the masses: “lots of girls work there.”<sup>94</sup> Hanson never steps outdoors, but newspapers allow him to imagine himself as an urban-dweller with an intimate knowledge of the metropolis.

For Hurstwood, newspaper-reading is a full-blown obsession. As the manager becomes romantically involved with Carrie without Drouet’s knowledge, he idealizes their time together at the expense of the reputation and the family he has crafted in Chicago. Reading is his attempt to ignore the reality of his domestic tensions and succumb to fantasies about the past, the masses and the city beyond the confines of his

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<sup>89</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 27.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

house. Like a pane of window glass, the sheet of newsprint physically and symbolically separates him from “them,” the family members sitting inches away at breakfast. Whereas Hanson reads newspapers a river away from downtown, Hurstwood’s reading forges a much deeper “river of indifference”<sup>95</sup> between him and his wife. More significantly, “his paper” is not as riveting alone as when juxtaposed with the familial chatter surrounding him. It is “heightened in interest by the shallowness of the themes discussed by his son and daughter.”<sup>96</sup>

Newspapers, as shown by Michael Schudson, allow readers to simultaneously assume the contradictory roles of passive participants and active spectators. Strangers become a spectacle to watch, read and interact with. But viewers also “[understand] their own ordinary lives to be of valuable and of possible interest to others,” and avoid the public to protect their privacy.<sup>97</sup> In this vein, Hurstwood grows fascinated with strangers reported in the news, all while distancing himself from his increasingly troubled marriage. Just before Mrs. Hurstwood confronts her husband about his affair and demands the money that leaves him broke, Hurstwood remains oblivious to the impending conflict. An article about a baseball game leaves him “smiling merrily.”<sup>98</sup> He delights, too, in a report of a traffic accident: “‘Ha ha,’ he exclaimed softly, as if to himself, ‘that’s funny.’”<sup>99</sup>

Hurstwood thus initiates a peculiar one-way dialogue with newspapers, wherein he mentally or audibly talks to them as if they were real interlocutors. These imagined conversations effectively replace conversations with people. Mrs. Hurstwood is the first witness to this kind of interaction when her husband reads aloud a story instead of engaging in a conversation with her: “‘Did you notice,’ he said, at last, breaking forth

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<sup>95</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 130.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Schudson, 60.

<sup>98</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 197.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

concerning another item which he had found, 'that they have entered suit to compel the Illinois Central to get off the lake front, Julia?' he asked."<sup>100</sup> She, consumed by the rumors of Hurstwood's affair, only "managed to say 'No,' sharply."<sup>101</sup> Her husband's reading of the news weaves the outside narrative of the lawsuit into the couple's tense dialogue, in turn building the unspoken narrative of their deteriorating relationship. Despite the manager's careful reading of the news, he fails to read the subtext of his wife's silence in time to save himself.

Mrs. Hurstwood develops her own reading of her husband's obsessive reading while reflecting on their marriage in the mirror. She has a view of both his "pleasant and contented manner"<sup>102</sup> and her unspoken suffering. Not only does she see the immediate situation as a sign of their crumbling relationship, she pictures their confrontation down to "what stress and emphasis she would lend her assertions."<sup>103</sup> She then realizes this vision by demanding the money in precisely the way described, steering their marriage to an end that is, at least in her husband's eyes, unexpected. One of her final blows—"I'm not dictating to you ... I'm telling you what I want"<sup>104</sup>—shows her building the future around her self-interest or, put another way, wielding the power to write the story of their marriage. Hurstwood, who habitually reads aloud newspaper accounts from the past, finds himself speechless and unable to shape that narrative.

Hurstwood's reading coincides, appropriately, with another escapist view from his armchair that "looked through the open windows into the street."<sup>105</sup> His particular view, however, is not revealed in detail, as is the case even when Carrie looks out the window mid-argument with her lover. Hurstwood's window more simply represents the possibility of escape. Its outward-facing direction affords him no greater insight into

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<sup>100</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 198.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

the interior spaces of his home, whereas Mrs. Hurstwood's mirror—a kind of two-way window—lets her observe and judge her cheating husband.<sup>106</sup> On the verge of leaving his home and Chicago, Hurstwood surrounds himself with vistas of the outside world to ignore the present. But the newspapers and windows inches away offer no true escape from the inevitable confrontation that leads to his downfall.

In his analysis of the manager's decline, Fisher suggests that "the newspaper possesses its reader with lives and events not his own in much the same way that a role does an actress."<sup>107</sup> Yet the lives and events chronicled in Hurstwood's papers are very much his own. When he robs his firm and flees to Montreal and Manhattan, his life becomes tabloid fodder that deepens his perception of the pages as interlocutors. He is anxious what the familiar and unfamiliar faces of Chicago will say and think. That crowd includes his newly estranged wife, employers and strangers, as well as newspapers, which he personifies or mistakes for people. We have seen him talk out loud while reading them, and in the next step of this imagined discourse, he worries how they will "talk about it" behind his back.<sup>108</sup>

Hurstwood, the culprit, then performs a self-interested reading of the papers to convince himself they have portrayed the situation incorrectly. He criticizes their reportage by way of an imaginary rewriting, wherein he adopts a reporter's mindset to marshal the journalistic essentials of "who, what, where, when, why and how." The newspapers make plain the first four facts ("All the newspapers noted but one thing, his taking the money"<sup>109</sup>). But they apparently omit the last two elements, according to Hurstwood, whose interpretation is questionable since the actual wording is unknown: "How and wherefore were but indifferently dealt with. All the complications which led

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<sup>106</sup> The mirror in this context, unlike windows and newspapers, enables a clarifying gaze: the ability to put into perspective one's vision of the world with one's vision of the self.

<sup>107</sup> Fisher, 175.

<sup>108</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 213.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

up to it were unknown. He was accused without being understood."<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, because the press' retelling, not his, is immortalized in print and distributed to the masses, he cannot erase or dismiss these so-called discrepancies.

By lending Hurstwood's story a certain size and boldness on the page, newspapers contextualize its meaning and location within city life as a whole. Hurstwood considers his theft to have social, financial and legal consequences because the article about "it was there, several 'sticks' in all, among all the ruffraff of telegraphed murders, accidents, marriages, and other news."<sup>111</sup> As the runaway manager deteriorates into a paranoid reader, the newspapers' columns, rows and headlines become map coordinates that track his every move. Scanning the major dailies indeed "resembled and paralleled walking down the city's major thoroughfares," as David Henkin has shown of antebellum reading culture.<sup>112</sup> In 1811, the New York Commissioners' Plan rejected diagonal streets in favor of rectilinear and rectangular ones in an effort to simplify the city, both for building cheaper houses and maintaining basic sanitation.<sup>113</sup> The gridded streets and news sheets mirrored each other in both design and use, acting as "spaces in which anonymous strangers could gain easy access to information, make quick public impressions, expose themselves to the gaze of others (a gaze that is itself implicated obliquely in the scandalousness of the gesture), and expect to meet one another again," according to Henkin.<sup>114</sup> This reciprocal relationship is clear in *Sister Carrie* when Hurstwood flees from Chicago to Montreal to New York, worrying about reports of where he has been, is and will be. Warns the detective who follows him to a hotel in Montreal, "...The newspapers don't know you're here yet. You

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<sup>110</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 264.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>112</sup> Henkin, David. *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 125.

<sup>113</sup> Upton, 118-119.

<sup>114</sup> Henkin, 126.

might as well be reasonable.”<sup>115</sup> This threat holds weight because Hurstwood is inclined to believe that dailies, like people, can “know” and reveal their readers’ whereabouts. In a way, the detective is offering him a reprieve—a chance to turn himself in and change the course of the narrative that has been dominated, up to this point, by the past. But Hurstwood evidently decides it is easier to allow the papers’ characterization of him to exist as is, cementing his image as a thief in the public eye.

The metropolitan newspapers of the nineteenth century indeed reflected their readers’ behavior and movements, most directly in personal advertisements. In these bulletins, anonymous and pseudonymous urban-dwellers cited streets, landmarks and other sites of public gathering as places where they had encountered, or wished to encounter, one another. One ad in the *New York Times* in 1862 read, “If the young lady (one of two sisters) who sat on the end and back seat at Wallack’s last evening will honor the gentleman with whom she flirted ... please address Montgomery Peyton, Union square post office.”<sup>116</sup> Commercial advertisements similarly located goods, jobs and services within the city. Intended to appeal to consumers, these notices in turn documented “the hopes, the thoughts, the joys, the plans, the shames, the losses, the mishaps, the fortunes, the pleasures, the miseries, the politics, and the religion of the people,” in the words of Frederic Hudson, a managing editor of the *New York Herald*.<sup>117</sup>

In *Sister Carrie*, Hurstwood treats the job listings as a map. He scours New York for work, literally “tracking the business advertisements.”<sup>118</sup> No matter how far he walks, however, the hope extrapolated from their words never quite replaces the reality of his unending joblessness. Preoccupied with memories of his glamorous life in Chicago, “everything he discovered in his line advertised as an opportunity, was either

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<sup>115</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 263.

<sup>116</sup> *New York Times*, July 6, 1862, as quoted in Henkin, 177.

<sup>117</sup> Schudson, 26.

<sup>118</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 309.

too expensive or too wretched for him.”<sup>119</sup> After learning in a real estate column that a saloon has been sold, Hurstwood proposes that he and his partner open one nearby, hoping to duplicate the success of his previous bar. But his optimistic reading of the listing fails to account for the subtext of his disintegrating partnership with Shaughnessy, whom Hurstwood later realizes “was merely tired of the arrangement, and would probably lease the new corner, when completed, alone.”<sup>120</sup> With every dead end, Hurstwood grows ashamed that he cannot secure work like the New Yorkers he encounters; at the same time, this shame is superseded by his fear of public humiliation. He contemplates, and disregards, the idea of presenting his true self to employers: “Would he have to go personally and ask; wait outside an office door, and, then, distinguished and affluent looking, announce that he was looking for something to do? ... No, he could not do that.”<sup>121</sup> Hurstwood’s failure to close the gap between reading about jobs and acquiring them points to a broader problem. What he really cannot reconcile is his “affluent looking” surface—an image sustained, temporarily, by newspapers alluding to his past—with the private knowledge of his impending downfall.

As he free-falls into poverty, Hurstwood avidly reads newspapers while drifting in and out of hotel lobbies. His choice of location is appropriate, as hotel lobbies embody urban transience. They are situated between the streets and rooms of temporary habitation, reserved for those who can afford to travel. Neither impoverished nor rich at this juncture, neither homeless nor welcome at home, but drifting between these delineations, Hurstwood momentarily finds relief in this transitory space. The appearance preserved from his “past” again sustains him, if only momentarily, for “he knew hotels well enough to know that any decent looking

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<sup>119</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 309.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.



individual was welcome to a chair in the lobby."<sup>122</sup> Such behavior was historically common. Following the rise of the penny press in the early to mid-nineteenth century, urban-dwellers primarily consumed newspapers in public sites such as hotels and restaurants. A copy of a daily, made accessible by its small size and cheap price, was often read by several people passing through the same area.<sup>123</sup>

But Hurstwood soon rejects hotels because they bring him uncomfortably close to acquaintances that may recognize him. He moves from lobbies, where he is a lowly "chair-warmer," into the apartment's beckoning rocking chair: "He sank into it gladly, with several papers he had bought, and began to read."<sup>124</sup> By reading in private instead of in public, he treats the newspaper as a one-way window through which he can scrutinize the masses without being scrutinized. Just as he "went to the windows and pulled down the curtains"<sup>125</sup> before robbing his firm, he now uses newspapers to conceal the consequences of that deed. The chair's rocking motion suggests that Hurstwood's mind is uneasily moving from the apartment to outside and back again, all while his body is firmly planted inside.<sup>126</sup> Reading about affluent socialites, new theatrical productions and celebrated actresses quickly replaces the thrill of witnessing them in person. "Oh, the rest of it—the relief from walking and thinking!"<sup>127</sup> the ex-manager thinks. To not walk, think or observe events first-hand is to effectively shut

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<sup>122</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 316.

<sup>123</sup> Henkin, 110.

<sup>124</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 316.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>126</sup> Fisher observes that Dreiser's world is composed of "images of motion," beginning with Carrie and Drouet riding a train into Chicago. Most significant of all, however, are "the tragic and vertical motions of rising and falling: the motion of the rocking chair." It mediates between motion and stasis in a mechanized society, as well as between public and private space (Fisher, 155). Kaplan suggests that the chair also mediates between sentimentalism and realism, since the chair "magically resurfaces" in every rented room and allows characters to "dream their sentimental fantasies of escape" (Kaplan, 144).

<sup>127</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 317.

oneself off from life, and to this effect, Dreiser characterizes Hurstwood's eagerness for rest as the moment in which he "buried himself in his papers."<sup>128</sup>

This allusion to death, the most permanent form of rest, bears even greater significance considering that Hurstwood browses dailies to ignore the passage of time. He sinks into his reading routine every day to postpone, perhaps indefinitely, his never-ending job search. At first, he cannot bear to leave the flat because "nothing he saw in the papers he studied—till ten o'clock—appealed to him."<sup>129</sup> Then the hour when he leaves his printed world for the outside world turns to twelve o'clock: "It was noon before he finally abandoned his papers and got under way."<sup>130</sup> And inevitably, as the hours accumulate, whole days elapse "since Hurstwood had done more than go to the grocery-store or the news-stand."<sup>131</sup> By filling his time and energy with the events of the previous day, Hurstwood ignores those of the present.

All his reading about the glamorous masses inspires Hurstwood to dream of Chicago, where he was once truly the success that he is now only masquerading as: "well dressed, smiling, good-natured, the recipient of encores for a good story."<sup>132</sup> Upon awakening, Hurstwood seems disconcerted about the possibility that he was fantasizing about his past life. To prove he has been fully alert, he looks to the piece of paper "so straight in his hands ... and the items he had been reading so directly before him."<sup>133</sup> Though the newspaper is inscribed with that day's date, it is an unsteady anchor in the present due to its quality of being, in Fisher's words, "always about yesterday."<sup>134</sup> In this regard it echoes the back-and-forth rhythm of Hurstwood's rocking chair, in which he shifts into the past without willingly acknowledging the

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<sup>128</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 317.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Fisher, 160.

future. This physical and mental shift loses its jarring sensation over time, so when the ex-manager's dream of Chicago surfaces a second time, "it did not seem quite so strange."<sup>135</sup>

Hurstwood's romanticized reading of the strike in Brooklyn, and disastrous decision to participate as a scab, marks his last, futile attempt to bridge the gap between the imagined and real.<sup>136</sup> The newspaper accounts are not unreliable; on the contrary, Hurstwood's reading of the events and his envisioned role in them are distorted.

Reading nearly all the news, he was attracted first by the scare-heads with which the trouble was noted in the "World." He read it fully—the names of the seven companies involved, the number of the men.

"They're foolish to strike in this sort of weather," he thought to himself. "Let 'em win if they can, though."

The next day there was even a larger notice of it. "Brooklynites Walk," said the "World." "Knights of Labour Tie up the Trolley Lines Across the Bridge." "About Seven Thousand Men Out."

Hurstwood read this, formulating to himself his own idea of what would be the outcome. He was a great believer in the strength of corporations.

"They can't win," he said, concerning the men. "They haven't any money. The police will protect the companies. They've got to. The public has to have its cars."<sup>137</sup>

Reading newspaper accounts allow Hurstwood to sympathize with both sides and assume neutrality, while the labor strike thrusts him into "the incoherence of social conflict," as Kaplan has shown.<sup>138</sup> What leads from reading to participating as a scab, in an attempt to make money, is the discourse with newspapers that Hurstwood began imagining in Chicago. The first time he reads about the strike in the *World*, his reaction is strictly mental ("They're foolish to strike in this sort of weather," he thought to himself"). The next day, however, the *World* is described as having "said" the newest

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<sup>135</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 393.

<sup>136</sup> Kaplan has suggested that Hurstwood's mistake lies in trying to convert what Walter Benjamin called "information," or isolated facts, into personal "experience" (Kaplan, 154).

<sup>137</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 371.

<sup>138</sup> Kaplan, 154.

developments, to which Hurstwood responds aloud. He proclaims himself as “a great believer in the strength of corporations” and predicts the outcome of the conflict based on this pre-existing belief and the news he has read; in short, he uses accounts of the past to imagine the future. He convinces himself to work as a scab by shifting his imagined dialogue with the papers to a totally non-disputing party—himself: “‘Why not?’ his mind said. ‘Any one can get work over there. You’ll get two a day.’”<sup>139</sup> In a movement that parallels this mental departure from facts, he shifts his gaze from the papers to “the window [looking] into the chilly street.”<sup>140</sup> Before leaving Manhattan, he defends his attempt to translate imagination into reality (while symbolically “putting some bread and meat into a page,”<sup>141</sup> or placing the burden of sustenance on the newspaper). His means of defense is to disregard the reality of the situation altogether. As he tells Carrie, “You can’t go by what the papers say. They’ll run the cars all right.”<sup>142</sup>

For all the hours Hurstwood has devoted to the news, he is a selective reader who chooses to engage with his often irrational thoughts more often than evidence-based facts. As a result, he acts woefully naïve to the danger of the strike, even when he participates in it. Comments that validate the newspapers’ warnings go unheeded. “Did you see by the paper they are going to call out the militia?” one man remarks, which another confirms in turn. Still another mentions an employee on a separate railroad line who clashed with company employers, “according to the papers.”<sup>143</sup> Hurstwood does not allow their sentiments to clash with those he has formed, dismissing them as “feverish—things said to quiet their own minds”<sup>144</sup> and the workers as “ignorant and

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<sup>139</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 373.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

commonplace, poor sheep in a driver's hand."<sup>145</sup> He, however, is the most ignorant of them all. The narrator reveals that in the week preceding this afternoon, "cars were assailed, men attacked, policemen struggled with, tracks torn up, and shots fired," yet "Hurstwood knew nothing of the change of temper."<sup>146</sup> As angry union workers heckle, throw stones and shoot, the former manager's illusions screech to a halt: "He had read of these things, but the reality seemed something altogether new."<sup>147</sup> These up-close views shatter Hurstwood's fantasies of the streets, as underscored by mentions of several broken car windows. Hurstwood may read the news to admire the people of New York City, but they hardly consider him worth lauding in return: as "people gazed at the broken windows of the car and at Hurstwood in his plain clothes,"<sup>148</sup> he is exposed for the fool he is. His leap from spectatorship to participation, an attempt to realize a fantasy, ends as a humiliating wake-up call. Back in his rocking chair in Manhattan, he dives back into the much more comfortable role of a spectator whose attention now concerns his participation in a past event: "'Strike Spreading in Brooklyn,' he read. 'Rioting Breaks Out in all Parts of the City.'"<sup>149</sup>

By focusing on the masses and public spaces, newspapers permit Hurstwood to disengage from personally known individuals and domestic interiors. The headlines, articles and advertisements in *Sister Carrie* are not exaggerated or false, a portrayal that differs from the sensationalist journalism that was historically practiced near the close of the nineteenth century. What is distorted, however, is Hurstwood's romanticized interpretation of the printed word. His frightening and unprofitable experience as a scab reveals his failure to be a participant who lives out a spectator's visions. The reality is that Hurstwood is a participant in nothing, just a "chair-warmer" who rocks in his

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<sup>145</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 377.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

chair and reads, reads, reads—a show of passivity that, in the eyes of onlookers, writes the story of his downfall.

## THE ILLUSION OF REALITY

When Carrie and Hurstwood look at windows and newspapers, they envision a world that is not their objective reality. Because the sheets of glass and paper frame some aspects of the city while excluding others, they offer inherently incomplete views that inspire their onlookers to project idealized visions onto them. And while both characters seek to merge their realities with the fantasies gleaned from newspapers and windows, only Carrie succeeds in this respect, catapulting to celebrity on the stage. The divergence in their paths parallels the divergence in the views proffered by her window-gazing and his newspaper-reading. Hurstwood rejects the surrounding apartment and city, absorbing his visions of the past so deeply that he cannot see himself as the impoverished, desperate being he has become. The newspaper allows him to imagine himself as the businessman he once was, though he makes no effort to reappear as that individual in the present. His seeing is so selective that it seems indistinguishable from blindness.

Carrie, on the other hand, sees the man who convinced her to flee Chicago now “hunched up and reading,” physically and mentally withdrawn into himself.<sup>150</sup> Hurstwood does not return her worried gaze, as has become custom in their household, in response to which Carrie “sat by the window and cried. This was the life cut out for her, was it?”<sup>151</sup> Hurstwood, who believes his newspaper-reading makes him an expert in viewing the world, has in fact become viewed and judged—a spectacle. Following

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<sup>150</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 324.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

one of countless fights about his unending unemployment, Carrie stands at the window, erect and “dry-eyed,” as a disgraced Hurstwood trudges through the streets below.<sup>152</sup> His musing that Carrie is known as a “swell-looker” calls attention to her and his appearance alike. Looking at Carrie bears the reciprocal sensation of her looking at him, a man who “had tried to put on the air of being worthy of such as she, in front of her.”<sup>153</sup> His resulting sense of shame—“to think she had caught him looking this way”<sup>154</sup>—refers to a new consciousness of his disheveled-“looking” exterior, but perhaps also the guilty act of “looking” at newspapers. Looking down from above, Carrie is able to read the man she once admired as the shell of a man he has become.

While Hurstwood finds himself paralyzed under Carrie’s accusing gaze, she is empowered by both “seeing” her mess of a domestic life and profiting from the state of being “seen”—by becoming an actress. Whether gazing at the skyline from a second-floor window or into a store window from up close, Carrie dreams of becoming well-dressed and well-liked enough to join the glamorous people who seem so close and yet so far away. Having long envisioned the city’s streets as “wall-lined mysteries,” she finds the stage “a door through which she might enter that gilded state which she had so much craved.”<sup>155</sup> Theatrical success, she imagines, entails performing a scripted reality and idealized lifestyle before a sea of strangers, both on and off the stage: “She pictured herself appearing in some fine performance on Broadway; of going every evening to her dressing-room and making up. Then she would come out at eleven o’clock and see the carriages ranged about, waiting for the people.”<sup>156</sup> This self-imagining is characterized as “picturing,” which likens the theatrical stage to two-dimensional works of art like paintings, photographs and drawings. All frame fictional

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<sup>152</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 334.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

and visual representations of the world—as do the windows of *Sister Carrie*. And while this actress' visions begin as fiction, their picturesque quality eventually becomes more real than the grayness of Hurstwood's downward spiral, which in contrast "makes [her dreams'] beauty become more and more vivid."<sup>157</sup> Fittingly, Carrie's first words on the New York stage are "I am yours truly," voiced in response to the question "Well, who are you?"<sup>158</sup> Indeed, by fulfilling the fantasies she once imagined through windows, Carrie establishes herself as someone who belongs to the crowds of the theater and the city. For Carrie, as indicated by her careless adoption of various surnames (including Meeber, Drouet, Hurstwood, Wheeler and Madenda), necessarily exists and thrives as slight variations of an image. She is seen on the window-like stage of the theater and proliferated for profit in the visual economy of urban life.

Newspapers attract Hurstwood because they offer a relief from the present through an escape to the past. But as he grows ever distant from the people and events spotlighted in the newspapers, Carrie increases her presence in and use of the dailies. Her theatrical career is spurred, for instance, by a newspaper ad for a Chicago play, which reminds Drouet to encourage her to audition. Dailies later help her locate the same kind of work. At Madison Square Theatre on Broadway, she discovers a theatrical news publication called *The Clipper* and begins "hunting aimlessly through the crowded columns" to write down agencies' addresses.<sup>159</sup>

Carrie soon goes from reading newspapers to starring in them. Stories and headlines declare her a figure revered by the masses, and the ultimate proof of having "completed her triumph" is the critics' rave reviews.<sup>160</sup> Now, Carrie no longer searches for the people described in the papers. Readers and viewers instead strive to find her, to verify that a real person lies behind the image on stage and in print. After spotting a

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<sup>157</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 341.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.



black-and-white photograph of an actress in the paper, a former neighbor visits Carrie in her dressing room to confirm that she is the figure depicted. As newspapers construct a romanticized narrative of the events that become Carrie's past, they reinforce her image—and thus build her future—as a beloved actress. Hurstwood, in contrast, relies on newspapers to overwhelm himself with memories of better times. Before long, however, those accounts revolve around Carrie, who soon fades into his past, too: "Ah, she was in the walled city now! Its splendid gates had opened admitting her from a cold, dreary outside."<sup>161</sup> By the close of *Sister Carrie*, Hurstwood's capacity to imagine a future for himself has evaporated. Hurstwood is unable to make newspaper stories come to life, but she—an actress-turned-tabloid item—is able to fill her existence with the imagined realm of the theater and its very real successes.

Reading aside, Hurstwood does little but stare at the well-dressed, comfortably fed masses. He finds them, as Carrie once did, separated by impenetrable glass: "Through bright windows, at every corner, might be seen gay companies in luxuriant restaurants. There were coaches and crowded cable cars."<sup>162</sup> Nonetheless, Hurstwood's greatest loss is not monetary, but rather his very ability to look through windows, read newspapers or see at all: "Then he noticed that his eyes were beginning to hurt him, and this ailment rapidly increased until, in the dark chambers of the lodgings he frequented, he did not attempt to read."<sup>163</sup> At the same time, his imagined dialogue with the newspapers has deteriorated into a nonsensical monologue. He is a man who cannot see and is not seen, whose life is a darkened theater without an audience. And so, when Hurstwood commits suicide by gas, he is finalizing his state of powerlessness—his vanishment from sight altogether. "Standing calmly in the

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<sup>161</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 409.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

blackness, hidden from view," he poses a defeatist question to no one and fades to black. "'What's the use?' he said, weakly, as he stretched himself to rest."<sup>164</sup>

Carrie, on the other hand, has an awareness of the theatricality of vision that enables her to control both how she sees and is seen, as demonstrated when she and her friend Lola observe Broadway from the top floor of a luxurious hotel. Here Carrie seems to show sympathy for the street urchins below: "Aren't you sorry for the people who haven't anything to-night?"<sup>165</sup> But she is not demonstrating "genuine compassion for the bums milling below her window as they seek food and shelter," as argued by Butler, who overlooks the strong likelihood that Carrie's ex-lover is among the "bums."<sup>166</sup> Yet Hurstwood's presence (or absence) has a bearing on how we might interpret Carrie's reaction. Indeed, it is key to determining whether Carrie is naïve to the world's cruelties or cruel enough to ignore the man who forfeited his livelihood for her.

Moments before, "Hurstwood slipped and fell in the snow. It hurt him, and some vague sense of shame returned."<sup>167</sup> The narration then shifts back to the hotel: "'Look at that man over there,' laughed Lola, who had caught sight of some one falling down. 'How sheepish men look when they fall, don't they?'"<sup>168</sup> That Hurstwood is the "fallen" individual in question is implied, not specified. This visual ambiguity, facilitated by the bird's-eye view, ultimately frees Carrie from the burden of moral judgment. Unable to discern individual faces, she is spared the decision to express either grief or glee over her former lover's fate. Either reaction would indicate her feelings about her role in the events preceding the scene before her. Does Carrie feel guilty that she did not work hard enough to save Hurstwood from such unfortunate circumstances? Or is she

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<sup>164</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 458.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

<sup>166</sup> Butler, 280.

<sup>167</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 452.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

relieved to have secured enough wealth and independence to leave him by the wayside? Regardless of the answer, it is clear that her concerns now lie with herself first and foremost. Carrie's closing remark reveals a base interest in survival, by way of demanding safe, money-facilitated passage through the hazardous city: "We'll have to take a coach to-night."<sup>169</sup> Looking out her window, the actress seems to see the city precisely as she wants to see it. The illusory and real have converged into a singular vision that excludes elements unfavorable to the powerful viewer. Those who threaten to disrupt that vision are simply overlooked.

## CONCLUSION: FRAMING THE CITY

The windows and newspapers of *Sister Carrie* exemplify theatricality on a quotidian scale. Their rectangular shapes echo the stage, bordered by curtains, floor, back wall and ceiling. Despite the fact that window views can reach beyond the skyline, news pages are flat and the stage is a three-dimensional enclosure, all three mediums frame the many stories, individuals and places that city life has to offer. The relationship between windows, newspapers, stages and their respective viewers is structured by multiple yet parallel levels of seeing. In the theater, the actor and audience look at each other at a fixed distance, though no actual barrier separates them. In the city, however, windows and newspapers serve as a filter between spectators and participants; indeed, Dreiser often downplays their turn-of-the-century attributes of each medium to focus on the social and psychological dynamics they facilitate.

Newspapers and windows enable viewers to adapt different roles that are structured by gazing and being gazed at. Carrie gazes both into and out of commercial and domestic windows as a laborer, a consumer, a lover, a loner and a dreamer, while

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<sup>169</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 453.

window-watchers view her alternately as a promiscuous woman and an idealistic girl. Carrie reads newspapers to learn about promising theater roles, and the masses read news articles to learn about her career. Hurstwood reads papers as a deceitful husband, a man on the run, a job-seeker and a beggar, and looks through windows to reaffirm his visions of himself as a successful individual. In turn, windows and newspapers frame him as a criminal and a desperate soul—until he vanishes from sight altogether.

Only the actress merges the events of her life with the fantasies of wealth and glamour inspired by newspapers and windows, a union that suggests she succeeds in the end. That triumph is undermined, however, by the fact that no matter how many theatrical roles Carrie adopts, and no matter how strongly she believes she has realized her visions, what actually sparks and sustains her “acting” is her natural appearance. Her greatest success on the stage is not explicitly linked to an internal talent to feel and project, say, sadness. It is, more precisely, a physical characteristic interpreted consistently by others. Her mouth’s involuntary frown (“Carrie did not know it, but ... her mouth was puckered quaintly”<sup>170</sup>) intrigues a director, who then casts her as the star of the play. And Ames, an engineer from Iowa, convinces her that she is more suited for drama than comedy because her features have a “natural look” that make her seem “about to cry.”<sup>171</sup> Insisting Carrie is born to act, he cites not her skill but “this quality in your eyes and mouth and in your nature.” Since this countenance is unintentional and uncontrollable, it also “will disappear”<sup>172</sup> without warning and she will be powerless to retain it. If Carrie’s “natural” or real appearance defines her in a world of illusion, then her story’s triumphant conclusion belongs to the realm of pure make-believe.

Carrie Meeber’s ascent to fame can be simplified into the sequence of seeing, desiring and achieving. But what she “achieves” is the in-between state of perpetual

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<sup>170</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 406.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 444.

desire, of wanting to become, or acquire, what she sees. Our last glimpse of the actress shows her beside a window overlooking the city, just as she does in her sister's apartment at the beginning of her journey. Her figure is framed by the glass and the moralizing, unmistakably theatrical voice of Dreiser's narrator:

It is when the feet weary and the hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise. Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. 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.<sup>173</sup>

In the modern city of endless spectacles, the desire to realize all that one sees can never be fulfilled.

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<sup>173</sup> Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 460.

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