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Stepping Out: *Sister Carrie's* Liberation from the Old

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In a short article entitled “Dreiser’s Maggie” (1974), D. B. Graham made a case for Stephen Crane’s influence on Dreiser, by pointing out that Dreiser’s intertextual use of Maggie’s name applied to the heroine of *Sister Carrie*. At the scene in question, the poor factory worker Carrie is seduced by a male co-worker who falsely calls her Maggie: “Say Maggie,” he called, “if you wait, I’ll walk with you” (Dreiser 31). The situation in which this address is made, as well as the use of the girl’s name, may easily remind us that Carrie is seen more or less equivalent to a Maggie-like fallen woman. What distinguishes *Sister Carrie* from Norris’s or Crane’s novel, however, is that Dreiser’s heroine does not end up like Trina or Maggie. Carrie is left at the mercy of fate, but never, at the mercy of her lovers, as Maggie’s life is all about. As long as the plot is concerned, the reader notices that Carrie manages to liberate herself from sexual and economic dependence on two men in due course, so as to become a self-supporting woman at the very end of the novel. In this respect, it is possible to say that Carrie no longer belongs to the deflowered and deserted female victims of the old nineteenth century, but rather belongs to the New Women of the twentieth century, or their precedents such as Edna Pontellier of *The Awakening* (1899), another problematic female protagonist described by Dreiser’s contemporary female writer, Kate Chopin.

Like *Sister Carrie*, *The Awakening* is a novel published at the

turn of the century, which received condemnation for the heroine Edna's amoral love affairs unfit for Victorian patriarchal convention. Along with the heroine's craving for sexual liberty, the novel also focuses on Edna's rising consciousness of selfhood, independence, getting out of the realm of domesticity — namely, her "awakening." There is a scene in the early part of *The Awakening*, where Edna refuses to stay at home on her reception day, and begins an outing without any purpose. "I was out" she confesses. To this, her husband exclaims with rage: "Out!... What could have taken you out on Tuesday? What did you have to do?" Edna calmly answers: "Nothing. I simply felt like going out and I went out... I left no excuse. I told Joe to say I was out, that was all" (49). Insistingly repeated, the word "out" reveals Edna's strong wish to escape from her father-like husband, and even further, from the whole system in which she currently functions as the husband's "personal property" (4) rather than an individual human being. Although Edna's craving for freedom and independence was unacceptable to the contemporary readers, a century later, we may well interpret it as Edna's beginning of detachment, or stepping "out" from a historical tradition which long regulated women's confinement in domesticity.

Returning to the Dreiser's work, I will argue that *Sister Carrie* also presents a New Woman who experiences detachment from patriarchal line of tradition. Indeed, several facts regarding Carrie's unconventionality are apparent in the novel's plot. For one thing, legal marriage counts for little to Carrie; she remains single to the end, indifferent to her unsteady status neither as a wife nor a mother, the two most appropriate roles for a woman of her age. Speaking of a mother, lack of maternal instincts also displaces Carrie from the nineteenth century's patriarchal society, where women were

usually valued for their productivity (Barrineau 65). Her career as a single actress also characterizes part of her unconventionality. She is a breadwinner performing in public, rather than a part of decorative furniture safely installed at home. In fact, the novel's chapter 37, where Carrie acquires a place of professional actress to be independent, is entitled, "The Spirit Awakens: New Search for the Gate" (270 italics added)¹. Certainly, a career, rather than a decent husband to protect her, motivates this young girl's "spirit" to "awaken," and to conduct "new search." If Edna has her experience of awakening, why does not Carrie also experience her version of "awakening"?

The following essay is an attempt to read *Sister Carrie* as a novel of a new heroine, a New Woman who should be distinguished from the old traditional women of the nineteenth century. I will focus on two subjects. First, Carrie's movement toward an outer world, which, as Edna's outing, appears to be the key of her expansion and unconventionality. Second, her sexual and economic independence achieved through this movement. By doing so, I hope to show that *Sister Carrie* is a novel which offers a version of female independence possible at the turn of the century in America.

Consider the famous opening scene of *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser begins the heroine's first movement toward an outer world with her departure from the old patriarchal authority, as she leaves behind "the flour mill where her *father* work[s] by the day" (1 italics added). If Carrie the heroine is not intentionally making the movement toward an outer world, it is the plot that dares to detach her from a shelter, first of all, represented by her "father." Indeed, a mere escape from her family in the country does not free her immediately. When the train

brings her to the first destination Chicago, Dreiser temporarily replaces this loss of shelter with her sister and brother-in-law, the Hansons. To some extent, the Hansons' flat simply functions as an exploitative boarding house to Carrie, since she is to pay almost entire amount of money earned at the factory. Nonetheless, as far as the kinship is concerned, the Hansons evidently possess immense paternal authority over Carrie. Her brother-in-law Sven always inspects her behavior suspiciously, giving a critical opinion on Carrie's being at the foot of the apartment's stairs in the evening to observe the front street: "I wouldn't let her stand in the door down there. It don't look good" (39).

As for Carrie on the other hand, the life at the Hansons offers nothing but "a conservative round of toil" (10), or, "an exceedingly gloomy round" (38). The "round" is a routine without change from which she only wishes to get out. Her rebellion against this "round" thus starts first with her standing at the foot of the stairs, which exceeds in degree when she strolls a little further on the street to look at people. Meanwhile she happens to meet Drouet in the town, where he seduces her by saying, "Come *out* of it" (55 italics added). The announcement of Edna Pontellier's revolutionary word "out" is found here in Drouet's alluring persuasion. After all, it is this "out" that leads Carrie to a series of expansive moves. She gets out of the Hanson's "round" to be with Drouet, she gets out of Drouet's protection for Hurstwood, and even out of Chicago to be bound for the bigger city, New York.

Once settled as Hurstwood's kept woman in New York, Carrie appears well confined within the house. But it is only for a short time. While Hurstwood imagines "she [is] of the thoroughly domestic type of mind" (222), Carrie's state of mind regarding her confinement in the realm of domesticity is

described as follows: "*The great awakening blow* had... been delivered. As often as she might recover from these discontented thoughts now, they would occur again" (230 italics added). The word "awakening" signals her "discontent" with staying at home, and is followed by pursuit of a place of her own, again, in an outer world. Presently, Carrie begins going "out" either to shop or to see a play, or sometimes to eat at famous restaurants such as Sherry's and Delmonico's.

Several Dreiser critics have affirmatively placed Carrie's pleasure-seeking character at the core of their discussions in attempt to interpret *Sister Carrie* in relationship to American capitalism or to the rising consumer society in the late nineteenth century. Walter Benn Michaels writes that "Carrie's body, infinitely incomplete, is... the body of desire in capitalism" (56). He would have argued that Carrie's continuous movement toward an outer world could be attributed to her innate ceaseless desire. Rachel Bowlby and Amy Kaplan, whose concerns are rather focused on the objects of Carrie's desire, would have remarked that a wide range of commodities naturally directs her to the public marketplace. In a sense it is true that Carrie's obsession with abundant material goods was inevitably connected with the relatively new marketing strategies being established then, of which their display was the main feature. Remarkable about the display was not only its effect on the commodities on sale, but its trend, which drove people to competition of their self-exhibition surrounded by such commodities. Those who emphasize this aspect of the novel may, thus, find Carrie's outings merely a result of her instinctive craving for pleasure without any political defiance against the gendered society. After all, Dreiser himself sees Carrie as a "victim of the city's hypnotic influence" (60).

Yet, by "the city's hypnotic influence" does Dreiser only

mean the fancy display and material wealth that Carrie finds so attractive in the theaters and department stores? Urban history of New York and Chicago contains, among outside amusement facilities, development of restaurants as well, which once thrived as the best social space available for men and women to spend considerable amount of time eating and talking together. Compared to the theaters and department stores, this peculiar social establishment provided more proper a space where people could be publicly seen and yet be privately engaged. In *Sister Carrie*, many crucial (and sexual) events that would affect advance of the plot most often take place in restaurants. Carrie is seduced by Drouet in "the old Windsor dining-room" (44); Drouet dines with his female friend in "one of the better restaurants" (80) where they are seen by Hurstwood who sympathizes with Carrie. Later, Carrie is again taken to Delmonico's by some male friends of a chorus girl she knows, and stands up Hurstwood.

Delmonico's, as well as other restaurants that appear in *Sister Carrie*, was a real-life eating establishment renowned in New York. Lewis Erenberg notes in *Steppin' Out* (1981) that Delmonico's was originally an ordinary "wine and pastry store" (9) especially for business men, which did not permit entrance to women. However, by the 1860's when escorted women were gradually allowed to enter, it began to change from an ordinary eating place to a respectable dining hall. Significantly, the entrance of women into Delmonico's influenced men's behavior; because of women's presence, the restaurant fostered high standards of male decorum. By the 1890s, following the lead of Delmonico's, many public restaurants in New York eventually "allowed for the gradual releasing of the hand of convention that tied women to the domestic circle" (Erenberg 37). If the role of restaurants was,

as Erenberg showed, to contribute to women's leaving the home, Carrie's going "out" is tied to this social phenomenon of women's parting from domesticity. She is lured out not only by displayed material goods of department stores, as Rachel Bowlby or Amy Kaplan argue, but by outside amusements gaining a hold in cities and involving the socialization and modernization of women.

Erenberg's *Steppin' Out*, whose colloquial title suggestively means "to take part in social activities,"² however, does not result in introducing various kinds of public entertaining places to which people physically "stepped out" between 1890 to 1930. The trend toward outside amusements, according to Erenberg, eventually brought about a widened range of sexual liberty in the young generation. Along with the spread of birth control devices, acquaintance with unspecified individuals in these places prompted women to step out of the line of chastity. In other words, away from parental authority, women began to break out morally, and to have premarital sexual relationships. Carrie is no exception. Starting with Drouet's seduction in the Windsor dining-room, her premarital sexual initiation inescapably corresponds with these public entertaining places. Noticeable are Dreiser's lengthy descriptions of every single outside activity in which Drouet and Carrie are engaged. The following extract consists of several scenes in which Carrie is taken out by Drouet to a store, a theater, and a restaurant, while she meditates what the result of all this would be:

At Carson, Pirie's he bought her a nice skirt and shirt waist... They went to see "The Mikado" one evening, an opera hilariously popular at that time. Before going, they made off for the Windsor dining-room... She paused and wrung her little hands.

“What’s the matter?” said Drouet.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, her lip trembling... They dined and went to the theatre... (58-59)

After they stop in again “at a restaurant for a little after-theatre lunch” (59), this exhaustive parade of activities finally ends. They come back to the apartment which Drouet rents especially for Carrie. Dreiser writes: “At last they came to *the steps*, and Carrie stood up on the first one, her head now coming even with his own” (61 italics added). The steps before the apartment are leading Carrie to the bedroom in which she “at last” experiences her sexual initiation. The sentence, “Carrie stood up on the first one [step],” then symbolically suggests her being on the verge of entering a new life stage which inevitably detaches her from traditional convention, a line of chastity. Being at the turn of the century, Dreiser remarkably ignores any negative aspects in his heroine’s sexual affairs. On the contrary, he seems to regard it as an upward movement, as she ascends the stairs. The power relationship between the couple is also taking an unusual form. With “her head now coming even with his own,” the young girl has even become equal to her patron at her loss of virginity.

Carrie’s behavior is further contrasted when Dreiser refers to her elder sister Minnie Hanson’s reaction to Carrie’s going away. Shortly after Carrie’s escape, Minnie, who belongs to the old conservative tradition of the nineteenth century, feels “suffering as though she ha[s] lost something” (61). She has “lost” Carrie both in a literal and a figurative sense. Literally, Minnie is never to see her little sister again; figuratively, Carrie’s having “gone to live somewhere else” (57) with a man from nowhere itself sounds such an illicit, incomprehensible behavior to Minnie that she cannot but conclude that Carrie “doesn’t know what she has done” (57). Yet unfortunately,

not only Minnie, but also Dreiser's contemporary critics thought that Carrie didn't know what she had done. Although they simply attributed her incomprehensible behavior to the creator Dreiser's literary flaw. One newspaper reviewer, for instance, indicated soon after the novel's publication that Dreiser failed "to appreciate the power and depth of certain feminine instincts," for "after having yielded up that which woman holds most precious... this strange heroine feels but the slightest pangs of remorse or shame" (Rev. of *Sister Carrie* 64). This comment is typically Victorian: the reviewer — supposedly male — had no doubt about women's "pangs of remorse or shame" at her loss of virginity, totally unaware that this could be his personal opinion imposed on Carrie's case. Another critic of this kind was Stuart Sherman, who attacked Dreiser's lack of deliberate preparation to make his narrative realistic:

What, if anything, Carrie Meeber's typical American parents taught her about the conduct of life is suppressed; for we meet the girl in a train to Chicago, on which she falls to the first drummer who accosts her. (76-77)

While pointing out Dreiser's literary flaw, his remark ironically indicates the very truth of Carrie's nature. After all, it is more likely that Dreiser's heroine belongs to a new generation, distinguished from her "typical American parents."

Carrie's stepping out of the line of tradition has another important aspect in that it becomes a key to the new world of the professional actress through which she accomplishes economic independence. Financial independence was one of the supreme qualifications for the turn-of-the-century women to be "out" of the patriarchal convention. Focusing mostly on fictional working girls of the nineteenth century in America, Laura Hapke states that "*Sister Carrie* is a tribute to working

womanhood" since Carrie "is rewarded for 'coming and toiling in the city,' as she had wished" (81). Carrie's initial engagement in the amateur theatrical role in Chicago is foretold so that it directs her to take up such a job professionally when in New York. The steps on which she originally stands before Drouet's apartment, therefore, are the token of her expansion, extended to the dancing steps she later performs as a self-supporting chorus girl at the theater. In fact, Carrie makes progress toward her ultimate goal "step by step." Her dream in the beginning was expressed: "Oh, if she could only have such a part, how broad would be her life!" (229). Then, a path leading to the goal is shown by a senior dancer at the theater: "Miss Clark... stepped forward, so that Carrie saw where to go, and the rehearsal began" (280). And finally, Carrie's original wish to broaden her life is granted as she leaves Hurstwood in chapter 42, entitled, "A Touch of Spring: the Empty Shell" (313). Spring is coming not to the deserted man Hurstwood but to Carrie, who is about to slip from the "shell" of his apartment so as to proceed to her next life stage, blooming into a star of Broadway. Dreiser seems to distinguish Carrie's realistic story of success from that of a fanciful fairy-tale, making clear that being a star is not so much her supreme ambition as her subsidiary result. We may remember that Carrie initially started hunting for a job in Broadway not because she was ambitious to pursue her selfish dream, but rather, she was feeling financially strapped, only made worse by Hurstwood:

It did not matter whether she was the star or not. If she were only once in, getting a decent salary, wearing the kind of clothes she liked, having the money to do with, going here and there as she pleased, how delightful it would be. (272)

Carrie has only a small dream as to her future earnings, humbly practicing her allotted performance at home, "sustained by visions of freedom from financial distress" (281-2). Earning wages being her top priority, the power relationship between the couple, again, shifts its superiority to the woman: "Her dawning independence gave her more courage to observe, and she felt as if she wanted to say things" (282). Michelle Perrot's revealing passage from her essay (entitled "Stepping Out") of the nineteenth century's women in the West becomes applicable to Carrie's case:

They [women] . . . attempted to "break out" so as "at last to be at home everywhere." Breaking out could be as simple as physically stepping out: taking a walk outside the home, in the streets, traveling, entering a forbidden place such as a café or meeting hall. It could also mean breaking out morally, stepping outside one's assigned role, forming an opinion, abandoning subjugation in favor of independence. . . (450)

The discussion above has focused so far on Carrie's deviation from the old tradition in terms of her continuous movement toward an outer world. But her unconventionality in its most prominent way can be found in the end of the novel, where Carrie performs with erotic costumes on. The following passage is Dreiser's description of her skirt on the debut day:

A group of twelve girls were assigned pretty gold-hued skirts which came only to a line about an inch above the knee. Carrie happened to be one of the twelve. (283)

The scene takes place in the 1890s when most women were still forced to conceal their flesh under thick corsets and long skirts. Naturally, Carrie could not have exposed her legs to "an inch above the knee" had Dreiser not given her

opportunities to stand on the stage where, according to Hapke, "the theater world and demimonde intersected" (80). Some feminist critics might argue, therefore, that Dreiser makes use of Carrie's being an actress not only as a way to depict an independent female but as an ultimate opportunity to stress on her sexuality. Yet, another interpretation of her sexually involved career and costume is also available if we are allowed to cite the idea of Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen, who remarkably rank courtesans and demimondaines "among most visible models of a liberated womanhood" (140) in Victorian convention. In the discussion as to "Fashion and Democracy," they argue that while most women were immobilized by complicated heavy dresses as a symbol of their helplessness and dependency, morally suspect women such as demimondaines were free to wear; for example, underpants usually considered as men's clothing at that time. As these women emphasized their exposed self to please the male observers by wearing men's underpants erotically trimmed with lace, paradoxically it was the very underpants that enabled the women to move and act as quickly as men. Moreover, their innovative fashion, of which lace underwear and silk stockings were part, later contributed to the general change of female apparel trend prevalent in the early twentieth century, the change that gradually allowed women to pursue their own physical comfortableness and practical mobility, setting their observers' preference aside. In this respect, demimondaines' garments, though they seemingly symbolized female ultimate objectified sexuality, were actually "the trappings of a more active and less self-effacing womanhood" (152).

In *Sister Carrie*, demimondaines' erotic underpants are replaced with the chorus girls' transvestic costume. Carrie's "soldier friend" (315) Laura "seem [s] so experienced and self-

relian in her tinsel helmet and military accoutrements" (287). And Carrie, who was initially described as "a half-equipped little knight" (2), is now bravely successful in her costume "with epaulets and a belt of silver, with a short sword dangling at one side" (290). Noteworthy is her actual performance on stage, in which she "ha[s] a chic way of tossing her head to one side, and holding her arms as if for *action* — not listlessly" (290 italics added). The erotic, exposed costume eventually allows her greater mobility, making her movement look "as if for *action*," just as a demimondaine's costume made the wearer "a more active and less self-effacing womanhood". It might not be a coincidence then, that Dreiser named her "Carrie," suggesting an active verb, "carry." Shortly after the scene in question, the stage manager appreciates Carrie's movement as "[t]hat girl knows how to *carry* herself" (290 italics added). Her performance being limited to an arena of sexuality, she evidently manages to "carry" herself, much practicing what the name "Carrie" implies. Phillip Fisher interestingly related Carrie's name with urban transportation "in which one is 'Carried' along" (155). Indeed, as Fisher notes, carriages carry people to Broadway, and these passengers might include Carrie herself. What distinguishes her from others, however, is that she is involved in theatrical world as an active entertainer on stage rather than a passive entertainer who is merely "Carried along" to see the play.

Published on the threshold of the twentieth century, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* provides us with a chance to speculate on its validity as a novel of a New Woman freed from genteel tradition. If not a feminist himself, Dreiser at least manages to foresee the coming movement of women's social and sexual liberation as he presented a female protagonist Carrie Meeber,

whose life results neither in a traditional happy marriage nor tragic defeat. What is described instead, is the lonely heroine who sits in her rocking-chair "singing and dreaming" (368). The unsettled ending possibly suggests further development of the story if it were allowed to continue. Indeed, at the end of the novel, Dreiser himself offered her future possibility as follows:

Though often disillusioned, she was still waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real. Ames had pointed out a further step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her. (369)

The reader notices, after all, that the steps provided for Carrie so far are not enough: "if accomplished, would lie others for her." Thus, her rocking chair keeps swaying between one step to another, between the old tradition and the new, and between the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. Although Hurstwood dies, befitting "hearsed wood" in the end, Carrie's story is not complete. Making its ending uncertain, the novel leaves much room for the readers to contemplate Carrie's future role as a woman, besides wife and mother, inside and outside the theatrical stage. In this respect, not only Carrie but the novel *Sister Carrie* was also stepping out of the old literary tradition, so as to cross the boundary of the nineteenth century in America.

Notes

1. There is little chance to expect the term "awakens" to be Dreiser's intertextual use of *The Awakening*, for Per Seyersted has already remarked that "the work of Kate Chopin was apparently

unknown to Dreiser" (196) when he was writing *Sister Carrie*. Nevertheless, Seyersted admits that Carrie and Edna resemble one another in several ways. See his *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (1969).

2. The citation is from *A Dictionary of Americanisms* (Ed. by Mathews) which identifies "step out" as "to take part in social activities, go into company or society."

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