

2008

The moral of that old story

Holly Malm
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2008 Holly Malm

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/swa>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Malm, Holly, "The moral of that old story" (2008). *Student Writing Awards*. 15.
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/swa/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Writing Awards by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

The Moral of that Old Story

When we look at old sitcoms, we often find them to be little caricatures of old didactic tales. A clearly defined lesson is presented in the same formulaic way, dictated by music and time constraints. You always know what is coming, and you always know the transgressor will repent their former ways and be punished or saved. The tale is clear cut as is the moral of the story.

If there is a moral to the story for Sister Carrie by Theodor Dreiser, it is not easily discovered. The story follows no set pattern. There is no music to bring the tale to a neat end. There is no repentance with clear cut reasons why each character failed. The reader must instead ferret out “the moral of the story” themselves. Strangely enough, it seems the only way to do this is to use the old formulaic moral stories themselves. And what formula can we use to evaluate Sister Carrie? At first, it seems apparent that this novel is a story of a fallen woman. However, Dreiser choose to reverse the gender of his fallen character. It might seem that Carrie, seduced by Drouet, would become the fallen woman. In truth, it is not Drouet who truly seduces Carrie. The city of Chicago is actually Carrie’s seductive lover, and because she does not love Drouet, Carrie can easily abandon him for a better man. Rejecting his family and fumbling through irrational acts to gain Carrie, Hurstwood puts himself on the path of the fallen woman. Unemployable in New York, Hurstwood must depend on Carrie for monetary support, which leads to a change in gender roles. As Hurstwood takes on the female role, he seals his fate as a fallen woman. Hurstwood receives the moral retribution for his actions when he commits suicide. Thus, the reader finds the moral of the story.

The story of Carrie seems, at first, to be a seduction tale. Carrie and Drouet’s meeting on

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

the train would lead the reader to believe this. And like the fallen woman, Carrie lets Drouet take her away from a less than ideal situation. She leaves her family, her sister, all on the account of the young man. However, here is where the story takes a different turn. While Carrie is smitten in a shallow way with Drouet, “She conceived a true estimate of Drouet. To her, and indeed to the world, he was nice, good-hearted man. There was nothing evil in the fellow”, she is well aware she does not love him. “She really was not enamored of Drouet” (94). Carrie is not really seduced by Drouet, but it is his money and ability to keep her in the city that is his attraction.

Only when Carrie is about to be forced from her beloved city does she accept monetary help from Drouet. After becoming ill and losing her job, Carrie has no means of support. Her overly frugal brother-in-law refuses to keep her for free. Carrie faces a grim fate. “She knew it could not last much longer. Shortly she would have to give up and go home” (56). Unable to find a job to appease the Hansons, Carrie became susceptible to Drouet’s charms. She is not about to be cast into the cold world. She is not escaping a horribly abusive family. She is merely escaping boredom of her former life. “Columbia City, what was there for her? She knew its dull little round by heart. Here was the great, mysterious city which was still a magnet for her. What she had seen only suggested its possibilities. Now to turn back on it and live the little old life out there – she almost exclaimed against the thought” (65). As Carrie is thinking this, she is contemplating giving her new acquired twenty dollars back to Drouet. But the idea of doing so, greatly upsets her because it would mean leaving the city. She has no other alternative to stay without his help. Either she accepts Drouet’s help and the implications there in, or she is to be separated from the new city that she loves.

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

The fallen women according to Margaret Wyman “was, typically, a poor country girl lost in the city wilderness or an underprivileged slum-dweller” (168). While Carrie is a poor country girl, she is by no means lost in the city wilderness. More likely, the “mysterious city” is actually seducing her. Drouet is a means by which Carrie can stay with her lover. After acquiring her own room through Drouet, Carrie is further influenced by the city to connect herself sexually with Drouet. “Under the influence of the varied occurrences, the fine, invisible passion which was emanating from Drouet, the food, the still unusual luxury, she relaxed and heard with open ears. She was again the victim of the city’s hypnotic influence” (79). In this passage, we see all the strange and exotic things the city has to offer: finery, luxury, handsome men, and good food. Notice it is not Drouet that hypnotizes Carrie; it is the city. Drouet just benefits by happenstance, as is implied at the end of the chapter. Becoming a victim for the first time, to sexual desires, Carrie is truly a victim of the city.

If we believe that Carrie was seduced by the city and not Drouet, then it is no surprising that Carrie’s fallen woman story takes a different turn entirely. Instead of being cast away, like most fallen women, Carrie casts away Drouet for a better man, Hurstwood.

Such things [easy conversation] had never been between her and Drouet. As a matter of fact, they could never be. She had been dominated by distress and the enthusiastic forces of relief which Drouet represented at an opportune moment when she yielded to him.

Now she was persuaded by secret current feelings which Drouet never understood.

Hurstwood’s glance was as effective as the spoken words of a lover, and more (116).

The reader see here that it is Carrie who is evaluating Drouet against Hurstwood. In this evaluation, Carrie proves her ability to see Drouet faults (unlike most fallen women), and she

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

realizes she can tire of her lover. Thus, though she finds it difficult to leave the kind hearted Drouet, Carrie sets out to abandon him for another.

Typically, casting away his lover is the role of the male seducer. Dreiser champions this traditional form in his other novel Jennie Gerhardt, in which the loving fallen woman is left by her richer seducer Lester (Walcott 276). Subsequently, there could be no fallen women story without abandonment, because, as Wyman puts it, “The seduction novel won sanction in a moralistic America by a strict balancing of sin and retribution that left no room for personal salvation of the sinner” (167-168). If the fallen woman is not abandoned, but instead abandons, how can she be forced into prostitution and shame? How can she get her comeuppance if she is only shown moving up in the world? The story, we will see, twists back on itself, and someone is abandoned, shamed, and punished for their sins.

Hurstwood is introduced in the traditional role of the seducer. He seduced Carrie because his life has become dull, and her youth is appealing. Compared to his wife, Carrie is shining ray of hope. “For years he [Hurstwood] had been steadily modifying his matrimonial devotion, and found her [Mrs. Hurstwood] company dull. Now that a new light shone upon the horizon, this older luminary paled in the west. He was satisfied to turn his face away entirely, and any call to look back was irksome” (112). This becomes a constant theme with Hurstwood, his “miserable” family life. His wife is cold and demanding. His children are equally distant, giving his home a cold and unwelcoming feel.

So, it is an easy decision for Hurstwood to seduce Carrie, especially when he holds his low estimation of his rival. “There was no disputing that, whenever he [Hurstwood] might think of him [Drouet] as a good fellow, he felt a certain amount of contempt for him as a lover. He

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

could hoodwink him all right. Why, if he would just let Carrie see one such little incident as that of Thursday, it would settle the matter” (106). Not only is Carrie his shining hope, she is an easily won prize in a competition. Hurstwood is jealous of what someone else has as their pretty little pet. Drouet introduces Carrie to Hurstwood to flaunt what he has acquired. And being an object, an ideal, she can be taken. So, he sets out to seduce his prize, because Hurstwood is bored with his emotionally distant family, and he can gain in a competition.

With Hurstwood originally in control, Carrie, as the object, is a victim like most women of seduction stories. This is proven by Hurstwood deceiving Carrie of his marital status which allows her to fall in love with him. This makes Carrie the victim of his lie. But this deception is not the worst. Hurstwood virtually kidnaps Carrie when he is fleeing the city after the theft. But, one cannot dismiss Hurstwood’s desperation and uncharacteristic behavior. What prompts Hurstwood to leave his family? What leads him to steal and then lie to Carrie to take her far away from her home? Is Carrie the only victim?

Though originally in control, Hurstwood quickly becomes a victim to his feeling for Carrie. We see this in a poignant interaction between Hurstwood and Carrie. Hurstwood implores Carrie to leave Drouet for him. Carrie says that she will do so only if he marries her. She is denying his affection on a condition, making the relationship run on her demands. Hurstwood acquiesces. The reader gets a glimpse of the already married-Hurstwood’s frame of mind:

“Well, if you will marry me then,” she said, “I’ll go.”

The man looked at his lovely prize, so beautiful, so winsome, so difficult to be won, and made strange resolutions. His passion had gotten to that stage now where it was no longer colored with reason. 197

Hurstwood is no longer thinking logically. He must have Carrie no matter what. He is no longer making rational decisions. He really does mean to marry Carrie whether it is legal or not. So we can see that Hurstwood has fallen victim to the unwitting Carrie. By falling victim, not only to Carrie but to his own impulses, Hurstwood takes the steps towards his own death. By losing control of himself, the situation, his family, Hurstwood becomes the Fallen Wo-Man. But how does Hurstwood fall, and how can it be said that he follows the tract of the fallen woman instead of Carrie?

First, we must explore how Hurstwood could fall into the female role, and to do this, we must look at the issue of employment. Two important factors are wrapped up in this one issue. It is Hurstwood's greatest struggle, and it is the struggle of the fallen woman. A woman, once separated from her family and not supported by a husband, could not support herself during the 19th century. But Hurstwood is a man. Separated from his family, a man should be able to support himself. However, like a woman, Hurstwood is crippled in the job market. Dreiser makes this clear:

A man's fortune or material progress is very much the same as his bodily growth. Either he is growing stronger, healthier, wiser, as the youth approaching manhood, or he is growing weaker, older, less incisive mentally, as a man approaching old age. There are no other states. Frequently there is a period between the cessation of youthful accretion and the setting in, in the case of the middle-aged man, of the tendency toward decay when the two processes are almost perfectly balanced and there is little doing in either direction. Given time enough, however, the balance becomes a sagging to the grave side.

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

In this interesting interjection, we find the root of Hurstwood's problem. Hurstwood is no longer a young man when he leaves Chicago, and his age is a major factor his inability to acquire employment. In this passage, Dreiser seems to say that Hurstwood's end is evitable.

Had Hurstwood stayed in Chicago, his fortune and status might have been preserved, but not by his own action. "It [one's fortune] may be conserved by the growth of a community or of a state. It may be involved in providing something for which there is a growing demand. This removes it at once beyond the special care of the founder. It needs not so much foresight now as direction. The man wanes, the need continues or grows, and the fortune, fallen into whose hands it may, continues"(316). If Hurstwood's decline is inevitable, Dreiser stresses that his fortune need not have declined with him. Hurstwood had a son and others to take over his place. By the end of the book, it is evident that his fortune is continued by his wife, daughter, and son. But separated from his fortune, alone with no one to care for him save Carrie, Hurstwood is bound to decline.

Hurstwood does get on well in the employment market when he first arrives in New York. Dreiser explains this as well: "Hurstwood set down under new conditions, was in a position to see that he was no longer young. If he did not, it was due wholly to the fact that his state was so well balanced that an absolute change for the worse did not show" (316).

Hurstwood is declining, though he does not know it or cannot perceive it. Plus, This self-deception cripples him and eventually bars Hurstwood from employment.

Throughout his trial in New York, Hurstwood is searching for his next Fitzgerald and Moy. He is constantly looking for his former place in the social world, but he cannot find it. Only in this does he see himself in decline. "Constant comparisons between his old state and his

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

new showed a balance for the worse, which produced a constant state of gloom or, at least, depression”(317). This gloom and the inability to rectify himself to his current state prevent him from becoming employed. As Hurstwood applies for a position, at this point any position, his frame of mind is easily read. “He [an employer] wanted someone who wasn’t thinking a choice or something better. Especially not an old man. He wanted some one young, active, and glad to work actively for a moderate sum. Hurstwood did not please him at all. He had more of an air than his employers” (335). Hurstwood’s carriage and dress tells the interviewer that he is above the job he is applying for. His age is also a detraction to the employer who feels Hurstwood should be applying for a different job, a better job. This is a constant reoccurrence that keeps Hurstwood unemployed.

This lack of employment, this lack of financial support, gives way to a gender role switching in Carrie and Hurstwood’s relationship. Carrie goes to look for a stage position and receives one within a short time. Soon, they are living off of Carrie’s income. This cements the shift. “He seemed to get nothing to do, and yet he made bold to inquire how she was getting along. The regularity with which he did this smacked of someone who was waiting to live upon her labor. Now that she had a visible means of support, this irritated her. He seemed to be depending upon her little twelve dollars” (372). Carrie notes the shift, and she does not like it. Carrie wants Hurstwood to get a job for himself as is implied in the first sentence. Previously, it had been Carrie asking for money for food and clothing. However, back then it was not a bold request for Carrie to ask for money. She notes, with great disdain, that he is planning to live off her though she had never questioned living off of Hurstwood. However, in the beginning she grudgingly accepts this.

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

What was once Hurstwood's place is now Carrie's. The reader can also notice the slight shifts in domestic roles to understand the larger picture. At one point and time, it was Hurstwood who was able to give excuses to Carrie for not showing up to dinner. "He convinced himself that his home life was very precious to him, but allowed that he could occasionally stay away from dinner. The first time he did this he sent a message saying that he would be detained. Carrie ate alone, and wished that it might not happen again. The second time, also, he sent word, but at the last moment. The third time he forgot entirely and explained afterward" (292). Hurstwood, in his busy employment with his bar, sometimes carelessly put off dinner. When it is Carrie employed and Hurstwood is at home, the reverse happens. "Carrie began neglecting her dinner hours. Hurstwood noticed it, but felt in no position to quarrel with her" (381). This domestic and gender shift hinges on employment. Each can use their job as an excuse to become independent from the other. And just as Carrie did not feel she could rebuke Hurstwood, Hurstwood does not feel "in a position" to rebuke her. He is no longer the dominant male.

But this is not the only employment/gender related shift. Where Hurstwood would buy himself a shave, go gambling, or other activities, now Carrie withholds money to buy herself little things. "He had seen the new things she was buying; the way she was neglecting household duties; the readiness with which she was slipping out afternoons . . ." (384). This quote encompasses Carrie's new purchase and her spending time out, but it also has the another element of the gender shift. Carrie begins to neglect her household duty, and being unemployed, Hurstwood takes on the task of purchasing the goods for domestic life. Hurstwood, again, cannot make mention of Carrie's laxity or her actions.

The gender role shift is an important part of understanding Sister Carrie as a fallen wo-

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

Man story. There are other traits of Carrie's that Hurstwood begins to take up. Hurstwood adapts one of the story's major symbols from Carrie, the rocking chair. William L. Phillips attaches a great significance to the rocking chair when interpreted against the outward world as the sea. "Life is a sea; life is a jungle; reality is outside wet, cold, snarling, swarming, and dark (much of the action takes place at night, and time is marked off by the passing winters). What is inside, dry, warm, comforting, and light, is only illusion" (574). The city can be a tough place that buffets a person about with an indifferent state of stability. But at home, Carrie can watch this dangerous world through her window and rock in her chair. ". . . and within his rooms she sits in her rocking-chair, endlessly rocking, in an ironic likeness to the sea she thinks she has escaped" (575). So the rocking chair, where Carrie dreams of success and happiness, is just a delusion of living in the thick of the city, a vicarious existence.

As a whole man, Hurstwood confidently moves throughout the real world. However, in New York Hurstwood's confident identity fades away. The unemployed Hurstwood spends all his time reading his paper in the rocking chair. The greatest example of this is when Hurstwood returns from the cold, violent position as Scab. When returning home:

. . . his hunger gone, sat down in his comfortable rocking chair. It was a wonderful relief.

He put his hand to his chin, forgetting, for the moment, the papers.

"Well," he said, after a time, his nature recovering itself, "that's a pretty tough game over there."

Then he turned and saw the papers. With half a sigh he picked up the *World*.

"Strike Spreading in Brooklyn," he read "Rioting Breaks Out in all Parts of the City."

He adjusted his paper very comfortably and continued. It was the one thing he

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

read with absorbing interest. 413

In his rocking chair, with his paper, Hurstwood is living vicariously what he had just participated in. And like Carrie's safe perceptions through her window, the world viewed through Hurstwood's newspapers is not nearly as harsh. But there is a distinct difference between Hurstwood and Carrie. Hurstwood eventually moves from his rocking chair (safely living life through observing others' lives) to the stationary chairs of hotels and boarding house lobbies. If we follow this symbols significance, then this movement from a rocking chair to a stationary chair symbolizes a withdrawing from life completely. This withdrawal and stationary position leads Hurstwood to his last act of suicide.

But what leads Hurstwood to this great downfall? What brings him from a well established manger to poverty stricken man who is driven to suicide?

After losing his saloon, Hurstwood travels down the traditional arch of the fallen woman. Hurstwood begins to depend on Carrie, and he could not support himself on his own. Carrie loses interest in Hurstwood, like the seducing man loses interest in his seduced woman. "Then she began to feel as if she must be free. She thought of leaving Hurstwood and thus making him act for himself, but he had developed such peculiar traits she feared he might resist any effort to throw him off. He might hunt her out at the show and hound her in that way" (417). Tiring of her now unworthy companion, Carrie thinks of ways to rid herself of Hurstwood. Instead of abandoning Hurstwood on the streets or in a house of ill repute, Carrie abandons Hurstwood in an apartment whose rent he cannot pay. This is soon an equally deplorable.

With no money and little ability to work, Hurstwood is forced out into the world of the cold streets. But unlike Carrie had hope, this is not a motivating factor for Hurstwood. Illness

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

and poverty take a great toll on Hurstwood, and he is brought low to prostitution. Well, it is a form of prostitution in its own right: begging nickels and dimes on the street. In “The Rise of the Fallen Woman” author Wyman, “. . . forces pushing a fallen girl toward prostitution as her only means of support” (172). Like the fallen woman, Hurstwood is pushed to pan handling on the street. His age, his illness, and his lonely, cut off existence force him to this point.

Before her fall, prostitution would have been unfathomable to the fallen woman. Hurstwood originally felt this way about begging. “He wondered how all these other lodging-house people around him got along. They didn’t seem to do anything. Perhaps they begged – unquestionably they did. Many was the dime he had given to such as they in his day. He had seen other men asking for money on the street. Maybe he could get some that way. There was horror in this thought” (445). In this thought, Hurstwood both thinks of his past and present situation and wonders if he could beg. But, there is horror in this thought because it would be admitting how far he has fallen. After all, he was once the one who gave the dimes.

Such was Hurstwood’s situation that the unfathomable became fathomable. Like the fallen women, he has to submit to this undesirable situation. After a grave illness, Hurstwood is left destitute and worse for wear. He has to resort to charities for clothing and food. Not finding work, Hurstwood has no choice. “Again he resorted to the Bowery lodging house, brooding over where to look. From this it was but a step to beggary. “What can a man do?” he said. “I can’t starve” (448). Like a fallen woman, pushed into the harsh street, Hurstwood must stoop to the lowest depth of humiliation. Hurstwood must wander through the streets like a street walker and implore men for money. “Satisfied with his success and yet ashamed of his situation, he decided that he would only ask for twenty five cents more, since that would be sufficient. He strolled

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

about sizing up people, but it was long before just the right face and situation arrived. When he asked, he was refused. Shocked by this result, he took an hour to recover and then asked again. This time a nickel was give him. By the most watchful effort he did got twenty cents more, but it was painful” (449). This passage cannot help but echo the last frightful chapter from Crane’s Maggie in which the reader follows an unnamed prostitute. She looks for the right man, the right face, and after so many rejection she reaches her end, killing herself. This, too, is to be Hurstwood’s end.

Forsaking his family, living in sin with his lover, Hurstwood started himself down the path of the fallen woman. Being rejected by his selfsame lover and with no way to support himself, Hurstwood is forced to beg. And unable to bear the humiliation any longer, Hurstwood finally fulfills the last step in the traditional fallen woman story. He commits suicide. In Wyman’s article on the fallen woman, the author points out: “Once a girl fell, she invariably faced dishonor and death, unless, indeed, she evaded public shame by prompt suicide” (167). It is a prescribed fate for the fallen woman, because the fallen woman is a sinner and must be punished for their sins. If one reads Hurstwood’s story as that of a fallen woman, then his story and life have little chance of ending another way. By abandoning his family, lying, and living in sin with Carrie, Hurstwood must be punished.

Hurstwood’s form of death is even in the mode of the fallen woman:

It seemed as if he thought a while, for now he arose and turned the gas out, standing calmly in the blackness, hidden from view. After a few moments, in which he reviewed nothing, but merely hesitated, he turned the gas on again, but applied no match. Even then he stood there, hidden wholly in the that kindness which is night, while the

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

uprising fumes filled the room. When the odor reached his nostrils, he quit his attitude and fumbled for the bed.

“What’s the use?” he said, weakly, as he stretched himself to rest. 484

The favorite form of suicide for the fallen woman is drowning, than death by suffocation is not far off. When carbon monoxide fills the air, it pushes out the oxygen, and the victim dies of lack of asphyxiation. Dreiser could not have picked a more fitting end for his fallen wo-Man.

But why is Hurstwood the focus of Dreiser moral ire? After all, Carrie, traditionally, should have been the one to suffer this untimely end?

This novel is called *Sister Carrie*. There can only be speculation on an author’s rationale, but as many have written, this novel is based off of Dreiser’s sister. “In fact, one of Dreiser’s sisters, who was living in Chicago with an architect whom she did not love very much, met one L.A. Hopkins, a trusted clerk of Chapin and Gore. Hopkins, stealing money from the company deserting his wife and children, eloped with her to New York by way of Canada. Like Hurstwood, Hopkins was successful clerk at a wholesale drug company in Chicago, but when he went to New York he was out of work. When Dreiser came to visit them in New York, he says, Hopkins “[now], having fallen from his success . . . was tractable” (Hakutani 13). Basing his plots on his observations of his sister, the reader can see where Dreiser came up with his ideas. Still, the reader must wonder if his sister’s new husband did not commit suicide, why did he bring Hurstwood to that end? It would hardly seem fitting that he should punish his sister in character form, especially when she really did reach great heights of stardom, like Carrie. So if Dreiser was to give a moral judgement upon a character, it had to be Hurstwood.

Secondly, if Dreiser is exploring why his sister’s husband failed to bloom in the city of

Holly Malm, Critical Essay

New York, the reader can better understand Hurstwood's down fall. The reason why Hurstwood spirals down into poverty could be linked to the weakness in his personality. "Hurstwood's own inner failings have given rise to his weakness of character. Since Hurstwood is morally weak, he does not have the character to meet his own problems . . . Hurstwood brings himself to be tempted, thereby allowing chance to work against his will. Hurstwood's weakness in this incident is, therefore, due to his own personality" (Hakutani 10). Seeing his brother-in-law weakened in New York, Dreiser no doubt saw it as a weakness of character. Following the theory of naturalism as a great experiment, Dreiser might have used Hurstwood to explore how this real life man might have fared in New York once abandoned. In either case, Dreiser's path for Hurstwood in his fall is very much like that of the fallen woman.

From the begin, the reader is expecting Sister Carrie to follow the traditional fallen woman story. Though the first part is just that, the reader quickly senses a change. Carrie's abandoning Drouet for Hurstwood and Hurstwood abandoning his family for Carrie, gives way for this change. With the slow and subtle gender switch, the reader will not be disappointed in their original assumption. Now in the female role, Hurstwood is bound to the fate of the fallen woman in which suicide is inevitable.

Works Cited

Dreiser, Theodore. Sister Carrie. New York: Signet Classics, 2000.

Hakutani, Yoshinobu. "Sister Carrie and the Problem of Literary Naturalism." Twentieth Century Literature. 13.1 (1967): 3-17

Philips, William L. "The Imagery of Dreiser's Novel." PMLA. 78.5 (1963) 572-585

Wyman, Margaret. "The Rise of the Fallen Woman." American Quarterly. 3.2 (1951) 167-177