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# George Hurstwood's Artificial Self

by Richard L. Campbell

One of the most intriguing aspects of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) is the way in which the main characters, Carrie Meeber and George Hurstwood, struggle with their identities. In a deterministic fictional world where many are simply blown about like so many wisps in the wind, both these characters seek to establish new identities. Of further interest is the fact that they do so in nearly opposite ways — Carrie by attempting to acquire status (whether through clothes, roles, or men) and Hurstwood by escaping his social roles and attempting to establish a more "authentic" self.

Hurstwood's attempt to create a "new" self apart from his social roles makes him, at least for this reader, a very intriguing figure. Nor am I alone in this interest in Hurstwood, for many critics, including F. O. Matthiessen have regarded him as "the central vitality of the novel . . ." (177). Indeed Dreiser's portrait of Hurstwood is intriguing because it is a picture of the intertwining of social roles and identity. Through the character of Hurstwood, Dreiser seems to question the extent to which identity is influenced and/or controlled by the social roles individuals play. Unfortunately for Hurstwood, his attempt to create a "new" self is doomed as a result of his failure to realize the importance of his social roles to his identity.

In introducing Hurstwood to the reader, Dreiser's narrator notes that he was "pointed out [to Drouet] as a very successful and well-known man about town" (43). Hurstwood, we learn, is a man with a "stout constitution . . . and, above all, a sense of his own importance" (43). Moreover, Hurstwood is "a very acceptable individual of our great American upper class" (44) and "the picture of fastidious comfort" (45). Indeed, it is very important to Hurstwood to present himself as being comfortable and in control. He is introduced as a "shrewd and clever" man who is "capable of creating a good impression" (43). He has been "schooled in winning" people over and is able to give "the impression that he wished to be of service only . . ." (93). Not only is he able to create good impressions, but at work "his grace, tact, and ornate appearance gave the place an air which was most essential . . ." (124). Even in his social life, Hurstwood "knew the need" of main-

taining "a dignified manner, a clean record, and a respectable home anchorage" (85).

What is clear from this initial presentation is that Hurstwood is working to fulfill the demands of his upper middle class role. Like an actor he affects for his audience the appearance of the secure manager. It is also apparent that Hurstwood plays this role excellently; indeed, this is his main talent.

Unfortunately, while he has a high level of expertise in managing outward appearances, behind these images Hurstwood's life is not as fulfilling as he would have others believe. Ellen Moers notes that "under the surface dignity, there is the hired toady; under the show of leisurely lounging, the hustling manager; under the apparent friendships with men of power, there is no real power, and no real friends" (103).

It is in the character of Carrie Meeber that Hurstwood confronts the emptiness behind his social mask. Although previously he would occasionally "meet a woman whose youth, sprightliness, and humor would make his wife seem rather deficient by contrast, . . ." he has failed to act upon such attractions because of his desire to avoid scandal (85). But only a short time after meeting Carrie, the possibility of scandal aside, Hurstwood decides "that he must succeed with her, and that speedily" (121). The fact that Hurstwood suddenly desires "something better" and is willing to risk his position as manager to get it, establishes him as a character who wants more than the bland artificiality that makes up his life. As Donald Pizer asserts, at this point Hurstwood's "reaching out for happiness becomes the dominate force in his life . . ." (73). But more than merely groping about for happiness, Hurstwood seems to be moving toward establishing a new identity for himself – a re-definition of self which will replace the emptiness and artificiality of his life with his own version of contentment and inner peace.

In this way, Hurstwood is not unlike a romantic figure. He is a man desiring to get away from the artificial social world and to attempt to locate a more real or authentic self. He comes to believe that only through attainment of Carrie can he break away from his role in an artificial world and establish a more authentic, and more fulfilling, identity.

Initially, we are told that Hurstwood's attraction to Carrie "was the ancient attraction of the stale to the fresh" (105). The attraction of her youth goes much beyond this, however, to the point that Hurstwood seems to believe a relationship with Carrie will allow him to be a "youth

again in feeling – a cavalier in action" (124). No longer an aging master of appearances, Hurstwood, with Carrie in his life, now sees himself as a youthful man of heroic action. Further, after convincing Carrie to go away with him, Hurstwood views himself as having been restored to a lost sense of self. He hopes to ". . . live in the atmosphere of youth and pleasure which had been restored to him" (217) and it seems to him that the whole world is "in sympathy with youth and beauty . . ." (217-18). At this point, Hurstwood undoubtedly sees himself and his world in a new light. He no longer feels the artificiality of his former self, but views himself as a "new" man in greater harmony with his environment.

The second way which the attainment of Carrie helps Hurstwood to re-define himself is by giving him a new purpose in his life. To Hurstwood, Carrie is an object of sympathy (an innocent in need of protection), and he makes it his purpose to try to save her from the realities of the world around her. This is most evident during Carrie's performance in the play. Here, Hurstwood, seeing that she "had the air of one who was weary and in need of protection, . . . was ready, in spirit, to go to her and ease her of her misery by adding to his own delight" (190). Thus, not only is Carrie a source of youth to Hurstwood, but she is a distressed maiden whom he can rescue from the superficial world with chivalrous action. Even more, Carrie "was something to struggle for, and that was everything" (149). And when he meets Carrie the following day, his mind still "dwelling on her attractiveness as he had felt it the night before . . ." (204), he convinces her to go away with him and be married. At this point, the reader is told that Hurstwood "would make a try for Paradise, whatever might be the result. He would be happy, by the Lord, if it cost all honesty of statement, all abandonment of truth" (210).

This scene is particularly noteworthy because of the twofold irony it contains in relation to Hurstwood. First, Hurstwood's commitment to "try for Paradise" (synonymous with his desire to re-define himself) is based upon the appearance that Carrie affects during her performance, not upon reality. But this irony is intensified by the knowledge that it is from such artificiality that Hurstwood had hoped to escape. A second irony, however, is that this decision does cost Hurstwood "all honesty of statement, all abandonment of truth," when he absconds with the money from the safe in order to try to make a life for himself with Carrie.

Although one could easily argue that Hurstwood's theft of the money was forced by the chance closing of the safe, it is important to

remember, as Donald Pizer points out, that "he had decided much earlier that any action would be justified if it would win Carrie" (74). Further, Hurstwood doesn't consider any other options upon the closing of the safe. Instead, "he looked about him and decided instantly. There was no delaying now" (271).

Unfortunately for Hurstwood, when he flees on the train with Carrie, he is destined not for a "new" self in harmony with the world, but disillusion and artificiality. He has abandoned truth in his desire to re-define himself. Hoping to escape the world of artificiality, he has become the victim of his own illusions. Hurstwood quickly realizes "his own error" (287). The money he has taken "could not give him back his host of friends, his name, his house and family, nor Carrie, as he had meant to have her" (287) because the Carrie he desired was nothing more than a fiction.

Having failed to re-define himself, Hurstwood attempts to fall back on his old identity as "the manager." His glory days are gone, however, for while he might have been a big fish in Chicago, in New York "the sea was already full of whales" (305). Unable to be the man he once was, Hurstwood becomes the "ex-manager" – a man completely bereft of identity. Paradoxically, before his eventual demise, Hurstwood begins to dream of being "back in Chicago . . . in his own comfortable home" (420). And at another point he lapses into a memory of a driving club party he had attended (431-2). Ironically, the world of artificiality which he had longed to get away from now represents self-contentment and inner peace to Hurstwood.

In the final analysis, Hurstwood is an example of what Richard LeHan has termed the "displaced hero." "Dreiser's characters," he argues, "were victims of the romantic dilemma; they yearned after the infinite while they were restrained by the physical . . ." (141). The infinite which Hurstwood yearns for is an authentic self in harmony with the world around him, rather than a self based on artificial roles. This yearning is restrained not by the physical, however, but by the reality that the roles individuals play are the very fabric of identity. Thus, led astray by the illusion of a self separated from artificial roles, Hurstwood finds that the notion of an identity without artificiality is itself artificial, and, as a result, spends the rest of his life lamenting his loss.

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