



PROJECT MUSE®

The Critique of Journalism in *Sister Carrie*

Mark Canada

American Literary Realism, Volume 42, Number 3, Spring 2010, pp.
227-242 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press
DOI: 10.1353/alr.0.0050



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/alr/summary/v042/42.3.canada.html>

The Critique of Journalism in *Sister Carrie*

Theodore Dreiser's image of the pathetic Hurstwood sitting idly in his rocking chair ranks as one of the most memorable in all of American literature. The image, like others before and since, is one of the seeker. This seeker's gaze, however, is fixed not on a whale or a green light at the end of a dock but on a newspaper. In his obsession with newspapers, Hurstwood resembled his real-life contemporaries, the Americans of the nineteenth century, who were fascinated by the phenomenon of journalism. "A hunger for print journalism has often seemed to set Americans apart from the lands they came from," Thomas Leonard has noted, adding, "This New World was frequently defined by its obsession with a page of news."¹ Such a hunger and the growing means for satiating it would seem to have held great promise for America's literary realists, who had built a movement around their insistence on an authentic representation of reality.² Who could more credibly lay claim to such a representation than journalists, who were—at least in theory—delivering facts about real people and real events to readers? Not surprisingly, many American realist fiction writers—including Mark Twain, W. D. Howells, Stephen Crane, Dreiser, and even Henry James—had, in fact, worked for newspapers or magazines; however, with the exception of Crane, all eventually not only abandoned journalism, but also singled it out for caustic criticism. What went wrong?

One answer lies in *Sister Carrie*, one of the era's major literary statements on journalism. Dreiser's novel, which he wrote after working for various newspapers and magazines for years, contains scores of references to "news," "the papers," "notices," and related terms. Joseph J. Kwiat, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and Nancy Warner Barrineau all have provided useful insights into

the impact of Dreiser's journalistic experience on his knowledge, outlook, and style, but few scholars have examined his treatment of journalism in his first novel with the same care that Deborah Garfield and Barbara Hochman have taken in their studies of its treatment of drama.³ One scholar who has examined the role of newspapers in *Sister Carrie* is Philip Fisher, who has argued that the newspaper serves as a "mediating object," which both Hurstwood and Carrie employ to achieve other ends.⁴ According to Fisher, Hurstwood depends on his beloved papers for comfort, for knowledge of the outside world, and even for a kind of sustenance in a time of starvation, while Carrie turns to the Sunday papers for recognition.

There is, however, another dimension to Dreiser's treatment of newspapers in *Sister Carrie*, one that belongs to a widespread, caustic critique of journalism by nineteenth-century American authors. In the eyes of Dreiser, James, and Howells as well as a host of others stretching back at least to Edgar Allan Poe, American journalism was failing its readers, leaving them with incomplete or inaccurate pictures of reality. In *Sister Carrie*, newspaper stories, ads, and notices continually fail for a variety of reasons, while more reliable news and recognition manage to flow through other media, namely personal letters and human conversation. Journalism in this novel comes across as a potentially powerful but ultimately failed medium, one constrained not only by readers' uses of it but by its conventions and practices. *Sister Carrie* implicitly argues that fiction is the way to truth.

Like Howells and other fellow writers, Dreiser sought to capture reality in words. "The extent of all reality is the realm of the author's pen," he proclaims in "True Art Speaks Plainly," "and a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic whether it offends the conventions or not."⁵ Dreiser's disillusionment with journalism—specifically newspaper journalism—also parallels that of other writers. As he recounted in his autobiography *Newspaper Days*, he regularly read Eugene Field's "Sharps and Flats" column in the *Chicago Daily News* as a young man and came to view newspapers with fascination:

Because the newspapers were always dealing with signs and wonders—great functions, great commercial schemes, great tragedies and pleasures—I began to conceive of them as wonderlands in which all concerned were prosperous and happy. Indeed, so brilliant did this seem—they and the newspaper world, as I thought of it—that I imagined if I could once get in it—if such a thing were possible—that I would be the happiest person imaginable. I painted reporters and newspapermen generally as receiving fabulous salaries, being sent on the most urgent, interesting and distingue missions.⁶

After working in a menial position with the *Chicago Herald* in 1891, Dreiser landed a job as a reporter with the *Chicago Daily Globe* in 1892. By 1895, he

had worked for several papers in Chicago, St. Louis, Toronto, Pittsburgh, and New York, and his attitude toward newspapers had taken on a new hue. In the women's magazine *Ev'ry Month*, which he edited from 1895 to 1897, Dreiser excoriated both the papers and their editors, taking them to task for mudslinging and other transgressions. In a column published in the October 1895 issue of the magazine, for instance, he blasted some New York papers for their about-face on city reforms, charging them with pandering to readers. "This town called for reform and it got it—by mistake," he explains. "Its press and its pulpit screamed themselves black in the face trying to stop the police from accepting bribes of saloon-keepers, who, with money, bought the privilege of remaining open on Sundays." After police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt enacted reforms, "closing side doors on Sunday and preventing bribe taking and whiskey selling," however, journalists turned on him, apparently because their readers wanted to drink on Sundays. As Dreiser puts it, "The papers fought for their beer-guzzling constituents, and they fought hard." Elsewhere in the same article, he takes another stab at journalistic pandering: "Our local newspapers know the 'purity' of their circulation, and they know they cannot cry out too loudly concerning thieves, without endangering about 75 per cent. of their profit." To this charge of catering to readers, Dreiser adds the accusation that newspapers "began a campaign of mud slinging" and "libeled" Roosevelt. In his concluding paragraph, he adds, "It must be lovely to lave one's face in fragrant mud; to soak in its slimy greenness; to breathe and gurgle and gulp it down. It cannot but bring them peace, to be able to poke their editorial snouts in stagnant cesspools and keep them there."⁷ Acknowledging that personal malice may have been partly responsible for his attacks, Barrineau nevertheless calls Dreiser "an insightful critic of the newspaper world."⁸ The degree of his insight would become even more manifest with the publication of *Sister Carrie*, which captures and critiques the popular American fascination with journalism, the uses readers made of it, and most importantly its ultimate failure as a medium.

News and Newspapers in *Sister Carrie*

Among the many phenomena Dreiser's first novel captures is the prevalence of journalism in the nineteenth century. In its references to newspapers and their readers, the novel shows that journalism was in the air—and on the streets, in homes, and in hotels. Throughout the novel, both the narrator and the characters refer to "the newspapers," or simply "the papers," which provide urbanites with much of their knowledge of the theatrical performances, Carrie and other celebrities, the Wellington hotel, the trol-

ley strike, and more.⁹ The novel's primary newspaper reader, of course, is Hurstwood, who repeatedly feeds on newspapers throughout his slow demise in New York. Dreiser explains that he "read assiduously" the morning papers and went out for papers in the afternoon (249–50). Even the homeless men who congregate to wait for a place to stay have managed to keep up on current events, as they are able to discuss "religion, the state of the government, some newspaper sensations, and the more notorious facts the world over" (332). For these and other readers, the press would seem to serve as an index to the world, as Drouet's exchange with Carrie near the end of the novel suggests:

"A man always makes a mistake when he does anything like that," he observed.

"Like what?" said Carrie, unwitting of what was coming.

"Oh, you know," and Drouet waved her intelligence, as it were, with his hand.

"No, I don't," she answered. "What do you mean?"

"Why that affair in Chicago—the time he left."

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Carrie. Could it be he would refer so rudely to Hurstwood's flight with her?

"Oho!" said Drouet, incredulously. "You knew he took ten thousand dollars with him when he left, didn't you?"

"What!" said Carrie. "You don't mean to say he stole money, do you?"

"Why," said Drouet, puzzled at her tone, "you knew that, didn't you?"

"Why, no," said Carrie. "Of course I didn't."

"Well, that's funny," said Drouet. "He did, you know. It was in all the papers."

(336–37)

So sure is Drouet of the press's reach that he never even considers that Carrie would not have seen the newspapers' coverage of Hurstwood's theft.

This prominence of the press gave it enormous power. Although it reflects none of James Gordon Bennett's or Joseph Pulitzer's enthusiasm for the press's ability to educate the public or report the truth, *Sister Carrie* acknowledges the potency of "news," which the press was in a special position to collect and deliver. Throughout the novel, Dreiser uses the word "news" to mean "information," whether it travels by newspaper, word of mouth, or letter; thus he refers to "the ruffraff of telegraphed murders, accidents, marriages, and other news" that Hurstwood finds in the papers (200), but he also calls Carrie's neighbor "a mischievous newsmonger" (140) and, explaining that Hurstwood found no signs in the mail that his wife would expose his affair, notes that "no news was good news" (163). "News" often means the difference between comfort and distress, freedom and capture, recognition and anonymity, the bliss of ignorance and the curse of knowledge. The capacity of news for moving people, indeed, is

precisely what appeals to the “newsmonger” who, Dreiser explains, “was keenly wondering what the effect of her words would be” (140). For one who has transgressed, as Hurstwood quickly learns, news carries a special potency. First, he fears that news of his affair with Carrie would cause him to lose his position at the tavern in Chicago. “They won’t have me around,” he reflects, “if my name gets in the papers” (163). Later, news of his theft poses a new threat—that of capture and imprisonment. Again, the press, as a vehicle for disseminating news to faraway places, threatens him with exposure. One moment he is safe because a man who has seen him “evidently did not know—he had not read the papers” (198). Still, the press being what it is—quick and far-reaching—Hurstwood knows that exposure is only a matter of time. “All at once the Chicago papers would arrive,” Dreiser explains. “The local papers would have accounts in them this very day” (198). It is not long, in fact, before Hurstwood sees his fears realized (200). The mere threat of news coverage, then, has a powerful effect on this reader and subject, just as it does elsewhere in the novel. Such respect for news may owe something to the similarity of purpose in journalism and literature, as each serves as a medium connecting readers and information. Whatever promise it had shown for delivering news to readers, however, journalism—in the eyes of Dreiser and his fellow writers—ultimately was a failed medium.

The Failure of the Press

The power of the press is but an unfulfilled promise in *Sister Carrie*. For all of the lofty pronouncements about the pursuit of truth issued by Pulitzer and others, journalism—particularly with its hearty doses of gossip and sensationalism—in this novel more often leads readers away from reality than toward it. Even potentially useful material turns out to be incomplete or inaccurate. As a result, newspapers, despite their capacity for delivering potent and useful information, repeatedly fail to improve or even affect the lives of those who use them. Let down by newspapers, Carrie, Hurstwood, and Drouet obtain the most meaningful news through other means, such as firsthand experience and personal communication.

In one of his attacks on contemporary journalism in *Ev’ry Month*, Dreiser complains of New York editors’ practice of filling their papers with material of little or no value and thus failing the American reader, who is “a rapid man”:

If they had not been the most irrational of blockheads they would have realized that he has little more than an hour before breakfast to devote to the

news of the day, and they would have seen to it that it was presented to him in such form as might easily be read in that time. They would have long since abandoned their loosely-written and fake sensationalism and given us the news, and nothing but the news.¹⁰

Sister Carrie issues a similar critique of newspaper content. Dreiser takes a stab at sensationalism, for instance, when he notes that the newspapers, covering a snowstorm, “played up the distress of the poor in large type” (246). Furthermore, newspaper coverage, as represented here, is self-serving and vacuous. Perhaps drawing on his own experience as a drama critic, Dreiser writes, “The critic of the ‘Evening World,’ seeking as usual to establish a catch phrase which should ‘go’ with the town, wound up by advising: ‘If you wish to be merry, see Carrie frown’” (314). Similarly, commenting on the coverage of Carrie in one paper, Dreiser says, “Now a critic called to get up one of those tinsel interviews which shine with clever observations, show up the wit of critics, display the folly of celebrities, and divert the public” (321). Few readers, real or fictional, have spent more time with newspapers than Hurstwood, but the catalogs of the articles he encounters consist primarily of gossip, sensationalism, and other lightweight material:

Here was a young, handsome woman, if you might believe the newspaper drawing, suing a rich, fat, candy-making husband in Brooklyn for divorce. Here was another item detailing the wrecking of a vessel in ice and snow off Prince’s Bay on Staten Island. A long, bright column told of the doings in the theatrical world—the plays produced, the actors appearing, the managers making announcements. Fannie Davenport was just opening at the Fifth Avenue. Daly was producing ‘King Lear.’ He read of the early departure for the season of a party composed of the Vanderbilts and their friends for Florida. An interesting shooting affray was on in the mountains of Kentucky. (243)

In contrast to Dreiser’s ideal of delivering “the news, and nothing but the news,” the papers in *Sister Carrie* are purveyors of “tinsel interviews” and other lightweight material designed to “divert the public.”

In publishing such material, journalists were observing news criteria that had come to shape news coverage by that time and that are still in place today. “Novelty,” “prominence,” and “human interest” are all common elements in what modern journalistic theorists and practitioners call “news values.”¹¹ For Dreiser, however, such values were the wrong ones. Instead of putting readers in touch with reality, they were enabling them to escape from it. The first signs of this ironic role of journalism come in the scenes featuring Carrie’s brother-in-law, Sven Hanson, whose after-work routine involves both his favorite slippers and “his evening paper” (21). At important moments, Hanson is portrayed as more interested in his newspaper than the world around him. Upon Carrie’s arrival, he “asked a few ques-

tions and sat down to read the evening paper” (8). Later, when his wife tells him that Carrie seems unsatisfied with her job, he makes a few brief remarks and returns to his paper (37). The image of a man relaxing with a newspaper or “walled off by the news” was common in the nineteenth century, as Leonard has observed, noting that paintings of the era depicted men holding newspapers, sometimes in relaxed positions or detached from their home lives.¹²

The most striking case of a man retreating into newspapers, of course, is that of Hurstwood. Even before his life begins to deteriorate in New York, he uses them in much the same way Hanson does. Entering a room at his home in Chicago and encountering his wife there, he says nothing to her, in spite of or because of the tension between them, and instead escapes into his paper:

He came lightly in, thinking to smooth over any feeling that might still exist by a kindly word and a ready promise, but Mrs. Hurstwood said nothing. He seated himself in the large chair, stirred lightly in making himself comfortable, opened his paper, and began to read. In a few moments he was smiling merrily over a very comical account of a baseball game which had taken place between the Chicago and Detroit teams. (150)

This scene repeats itself in New York, where Hurstwood constantly plants himself in a rocker and reads his beloved papers. Like Hanson in an earlier scene, he sometimes pays more attention to his newspaper than he does to Carrie—or, for that matter, to the outside world or even to “his doom” (246, 250, 252, 305). “He buried himself in his papers and read,” Dreiser writes. “Oh, the rest of it—the relief from walking and thinking! What Lethean waters were these floods of telegraphed intelligence! He forgot his troubles, in part” (243). For the serious literary artist, as Dreiser clearly fashioned himself, providing readers with “relief from . . . thinking” was worthy of ridicule, if not condemnation. Instead of putting Hurstwood in touch with reality, newspapers—associated here with the mythical river whose waters induce forgetfulness—take him away from it. Tellingly, Hurstwood reads his papers in a rocking chair next to a radiator, all three providing sources of comfort in a cold world. As Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr., explains, “The newspaper becomes his passport to a fantasy world providing reverie and release from his problems.”¹³ In some cases, as Fisher has shown, newspapers also provide a specific form of escape for Hurstwood. Fisher explains: “The newspaper becomes a way of not quite dying to a life that he no longer lives.”¹⁴ His semi-illustrious past as manager of an upscale bar now only a memory, he can gather an occasional glimpse of his old life from his newspapers, where he can follow the

doings of “celebrities whom he knew—whom he had drunk a glass with many a time,” even though “he knew that he would never see them down here” (209). “Each day,” Dreiser explains, “he could read in the evening papers of the doings within this walled city” (232). In her study of drama in *Sister Carrie*, Deborah Garfield has argued that Hurstwood stops being a spectator when he no longer attends plays in New York;¹⁵ however, as these passages reveal, newspapers continue to allow him to play the role of a spectator to the city’s human drama. In any case, whether he uses them to relive a lost past or to play voyeur to the real life he is missing, Hurstwood treats his newspapers as a kind of sustenance. He goes out for them when he goes out for food and, when money is tight, he continues purchasing his newspapers, as if he cannot live without them. At one point, Dreiser notes, “It had been days since Hurstwood had done more than go to the grocery or to the news-stand” (306). One day, he notifies Carrie that he has cut back on steak, but he brings home his papers nonetheless (250). Even in this role, however, journalism turns out to be a failure. Turning to it for life, Hurstwood finds only death.

The newspaper also is a “mediating object” for Carrie, though she too is ultimately disappointed by them. Again, the lightweight material in the journalism of the era is a factor. Dreiser explains that newspapers and magazines were publishing elaborate coverage of theatrical celebrities and notes that Carrie paid attention to it “with growing interest” (309). As she follows “the newspaper notices,” Dreiser writes, “the desire for notice took hold of her” (308–09). The diction here underlines Carrie’s use of journalism: reading the “notices” helps drive her to seek “notice.” When she begins to receive such notice, the effect is initially intoxicating. Seeing “a wee notice” of her performance in *The Wives of Abdul*, Carrie “hugged herself with delight.” Dreiser continues, “Oh, wasn’t it just fine! At last! The first, the long-hoped for, the delightful notice!” (309). The newspaper publicity seems at first to work; that is, recognition seems to bring fulfillment. When her friend Lola responds with “sympathy and praise,” Carrie is “deeply grateful” (310). In the absence of human interaction, however, the newspaper coverage soon proves unsatisfying; when her picture appears in a paper, Carrie “thought of going down and buying a few copies of the paper, but remembered that there was no one she knew well enough to send them to” (311). With “no warm, sympathetic friendship back of the easy merriment with which many approached her,” Carrie finds little satisfaction in the publicity supplied by the papers.¹⁶

Even when newspapers carry potentially useful news for the characters in *Sister Carrie*, this news sometimes turns out to be incomplete or inaccurate. One striking example is the coverage of Hurstwood’s theft of the money

from the bar where he worked in Chicago. After his arrival in Montreal with Carrie, he heads out to “scan the dailies” and discovers only meager mention of his crime, leaving him disappointed:

What hurt him most was the fact that he was being pursued as a thief. He began to see the nature of that social injustice which sees but one side—often but a single point in a long tragedy. All the newspapers noted but one thing, his taking the money. How and wherefore were but indifferently dealt with. All the complications which led up to it were unknown. He was accused without being understood. (201)

Ads, too, fail to present complete pictures of reality, as Hurstwood learns in his job-hunting in New York. On more than one occasion, he sees a notice of a job at a saloon but is disappointed when he confronts the “real thing”: “Everything he discovered in his line advertised as an opportunity was either too expensive or too wretched for him” (237). One venue “was such a cheap looking place he felt that he could not abide it” (238) and another “was slightly worse than the thoughts of it had been” (295). The implication is not that the ads were inaccurate, merely that they did not contain the whole truth about the opportunities Hurstwood was exploring.

Sister Carrie also questions the accuracy of the information found in contemporary newspapers. When Carrie tells Hurstwood of a report of injuries in the trolley strike, he dismisses the report, noting that “you can’t go by what the papers say” (287). He may be simply trying to allay her concerns, but elsewhere in the novel the narrator expresses similar doubt about the accuracy of the press. In one instance, Dreiser recounts Hurstwood’s reading of news about “hard times”: “No item about a firm failing, a family starving, or a man dying upon the streets, supposedly of starvation, but arrested his eye as he scanned the morning papers” (237). On one level, this description seems a rare endorsement of newspapers’ ability to deliver meaningful information. The phrase “supposedly of starvation,” however, casts doubt on the veracity of the account. The aside in the middle of the sentence implies that images—and, by extension, other information found in newspapers—may not be true representations of reality.

Passages such as these may seem to point to the unreliability of language in general. Dreiser, in fact, seems to have doubted the reliability of language, as Deborah Garfield and Stanley Corkin have noted.¹⁷ Indeed, the narrator of *Sister Carrie* says, “How true it is that words are but the vague shadows of the volumes we mean” (6). Still, the message that emerges from the novel is that the link between language and meaning is especially tenuous when it comes to newspaper representations of reality, particularly since other forms

of communication prove more reliable and effective. Indeed, virtually all of the most meaningful “news” in *Sister Carrie* travels not by newspaper but by other means. Hurstwood learns of his wife’s plans for a divorce and of his former employer’s reaction to his theft by letter (169, 203). The implicit indictment of journalism is especially striking when Dreiser juxtaposes it with other forms of communication. Carrie, for instance, becomes aware of her neighbor Mrs. Vance when she steps outside her apartment to get the newspaper. Whereas the paper offers no information about Carrie, Mrs. Vance ultimately will be her friend as well as her means of discovering the glamour of the city. Later in the novel, conversation serves Hurstwood better than newspaper ads. After following up on these ads only to find the saloons “disagreeable,” Hurstwood “did, however, gain considerable knowledge by talking, for he discovered the influence of Tammany Hall and the value of standing in with the police” (207). That this particular kind of revelation should come from a person, rather than from a newspaper, is especially significant in light of the press’s ostensible commitment to public service.¹⁸ These numerous references to the failures of journalism, when viewed against the successes of conversation and correspondence, suggest that Hurstwood is speaking for Dreiser when he notes that “you can’t go by what the papers say.”

As one who had seen the backside of journalism, Dreiser could speak authoritatively on this subject. While working for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* in the 1890s, he fabricated interviews and reviewed plays he had not seen.¹⁹ In New York, he dressed up the story of a neighborhood fight and wound up impressing a city editor.²⁰ Recalling another assignment that he received as a result of this achievement, Dreiser explains that “as a conscientious newspaper man” he realized that he should try to dig up some details or “to create some new phases of it out of whole cloth.” He continues: “That *Accuracy, Accuracy, Accuracy* stuff did not apply, I was sure. In fact I had been told so by others and shown how and where.”²¹ Although he did not follow through on this “fakery” on this occasion, his earlier experiences clearly indicate that Dreiser was not exactly fastidious when it came to journalistic ethics. In light of this experience, the critique of journalism in his first novel might strike some readers as odd. One simple explanation is that Dreiser was simply a hypocrite, one who was capable of criticizing transgressions that he had committed. Perhaps a better explanation of this apparent contradiction, however, has to do with Dreiser’s conception of “truth,” which, for him, was not entirely a matter of facts and thus could be captured more effectively in literature.

The Superiority of Literature

Dreiser's critique of journalism in *Sister Carrie* invites comparison with his praise for another means of communication, artistic expression. Like Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Davis' "Life in the Iron-Mills," *Sister Carrie* presents two versions of events it narrates: a journalistic account (depicted within the literary work) and a fictional version (the work itself). Hurstwood complains of the incomplete newspaper coverage of his theft but Dreiser's novel provides a much more thorough account. The novel itself, then, is an argument for the superiority of literature in capturing truth. This argument becomes especially obvious in light of Dreiser's comments on artistic expression inside and outside the novel as well as the way he handled his source material in writing the novel.

As noted above, language of any sort—literary, journalistic, or otherwise—is an imprecise representation of reality, one that can never perfectly reproduce an event or evoke exactly the same response as the event. Crane alludes to this fact in "The Open Boat," in which the correspondent recalls a poem about a soldier who "lay dying in Algiers," but notes that the poem had had no impact on him. Facing the real possibility of his own death, he has a greater appreciation of the subject. Dreiser presents a parallel passage in *Sister Carrie*, in which Hurstwood, working as a scab, encounters verbal assaults and violence. "He had read of such things," Dreiser explains, "but the reality seemed something altogether new" (297). Since Hurstwood apparently reads only newspapers, one can assume that this statement is pointing out the shortcomings of journalism, not of fictional representations.

The distinction is significant, as the novel's commentary on art reveals. Whereas the novel likens the newspaper material that Hurstwood favors to "Lethian waters," a means of escaping the truth, it compares Ames to an "oracle," a means of delivering the truth. Both Hussman and Paul A. Orlov have argued that Ames is Dreiser's "spokesman" in the novel.²² If so, his comments on artistic expression deserve special attention. Referring to Ames, Dreiser says, "As a matter of fact, [Carrie's] little newspaper fame was nothing at all to him. He thought she could have done better, by far" (339). Journalism, this passage implies, provides mere publicity. The arts, on the other hand, might allow her to touch wide audiences in meaningful ways. Through art, Ames explains, "genius" expresses others' "desires" (341). Even before she meets Ames, Carrie shows in her performance in *Under the Gaslight* that she can, as Orlov explains, serve as a "medium that powerfully conveys a mood of beauty, a mood of sad yearning for an unattainable happiness."²³ Art benefits the artist as well. As Hochman notes in her study of artistic ex-

pression in *Sister Carrie*, “The expressive gift (musical, poetic, or dramatic) seems to expand the self by allowing it to represent and even merge with otherness, while simultaneously defending it against the vulnerability such a merger might imply.”²⁴ In making Carrie an actress, Dreiser bestows on her the power to rise above reality, as Fisher has argued, noting that Carrie’s “acting is a protest on the part of the wider possibilities of the self.” Constrained by its emphasis on facts, journalism is less capable—perhaps incapable—of projecting what Fisher calls “anticipatory states of the self.”²⁵

For Dreiser and other authors of the nineteenth century, fiction could reveal truths that journalists were not telling. As Dan Schiller and others have noted, journalists may be beholden to advertisers who steer away from newspapers that publish unfavorable coverage of their ventures. Journalists may also be manipulated by corporate and governmental efforts to control the release of information or otherwise “manage” news coverage.²⁶ As one who had worked as both a reporter and an editor for years, Dreiser surely encountered such constraints on truth-telling. While he was editing *Ev’ry Month*, he noted the corruptive influence of the business side of journalism when he wrote that newspapers “stand for justice or injustice, truth or falsehood, wealth or the poor, according as the business office dictates and they aim to cater to as many elements as may be without conflicting them or injuring their own prestige and income.”²⁷ Independent writers, on the other hand, are largely free from such influences. Of course, some readers might recoil at material they considered immoral, as Dreiser knew all too well, but he was not easily discouraged. “It matters not how the tongues of the critics may wag, or the voices of a partially developed and highly conventionalized society may complain,” he explains in “True Art Speaks Plainly,” “the business of the author, as well as of other workers upon this earth, is to say what he knows to be true, and, having said as much, to abide the result with patience.”²⁸

The genre of the novel, furthermore, lends itself to a thorough treatment of its subject matter in a way that the short news item does not. *Sister Carrie* makes this point by implicitly contrasting the coverage of Hurstwood’s theft in newspapers with its own coverage of the man and his actions. Whereas newspaper accounts focus on the theft, omitting “the complications which led up to it,” Dreiser’s novel recounts in many thousands of words the office manager’s loveless marriage, the allure of Carrie, the psychological turmoil and vicissitudes that plague him after he encounters the unlocked safe, and most importantly the deep yearning that haunts Hurstwood, Carrie, and Drouet. The capaciousness of the novel, then, allows for a kind of substantial treatment of the human experience impossible in brief news stories. If some of this material is not exactly factual, in the sense of apply-

ing to the named individuals in Chicago and Montreal and New York at some specific point in time, it nevertheless is true because it captures the deeper principles that drive human actions and emotions.

What was true for his fictional characters, Dreiser believed, was also true for millions of real beings who did not happen to be named Hurstwood or Carrie or Drouet. One of those human beings was named Theodore Dreiser. As Donald Pizer has observed, Carrie Meeber resembles her creator in some notable respects.²⁹ The fictional genre, Dreiser demonstrates, allows the novelist to relate not merely the facts about a human but the truth of humanity. It is this “deeper reality” that fiction and other forms of artistic expression capture and convey for readers. In “Temperaments, Artistic and Otherwise,” Dreiser explains:

It was Oscar Wilde who once said very daringly, and to a degree shrewdly, “Life imitates art.” What he was fumbling with was the truth that the artist, being more sensitive to and subtle in the matter of those mysterious ways in which creative energy expresses itself, is the first to detect and indicate those new ways in which Nature or creative energy is likely to shadow itself forth, to which the so-called realist or practical man of business is a little obtuse. But the artist (the creator with this gift of “imagination” so-called) senses and shadows forth in what he does a deeper reality than your man of practical affairs ever dreams of. . . . The only beauty in the world is in the minds and hearts of these dreamers and thinkers, however meager their reward.³⁰

Dreiser’s “practical man of business” resembles the journalist, who deals with “practical” facts instead of the fruits of imagination and might seem “obtuse” to an artist such as Dreiser. The artist, however, “shadows forth . . . a deeper reality” than the journalist conveys because he can perceive it—and because he is not confined to reporting verifiable fact. Perhaps because art may disclose a different kind of truth, Dreiser argues elsewhere, “Life is to be learned as much from books and art as from life itself.”³¹ Even when he was dreaming of becoming a journalist, in fact, Dreiser apparently was thinking like a poet, as his recollections in *Newspaper Days* suggest. Reveling in the sensations of Chicago, he thought that he “might like to write of these things.” He recalls, “As I walked from place to place collecting, I used to improvise strange, vaguely formulated word-hashes or rhapsodies—free verse I suppose we would call it now—which concerned everything and nothing, but somehow expressed the seething poetry of my soul.” Even after he landed a job as a reporter, he admits, his “mind was too much concerned with the poetry of life to busy itself with such minor things as politics.”³²

Dreiser’s approach to writing his novel betrays his determination to transcend the facts and capture another form of truth. On the one hand,

Sister Carrie is a curious pastiche of literature and journalism. In composing this work of fiction, Dreiser included substantial passages from his own news writing, as well as text from advertisements that had appeared in the *New York Journal*. As James West has shown, Dreiser did not even bother to rewrite the material; instead, he inserted pages from "Curious Shifts of the Poor," an article he had written for *Demorest's*, and clippings of the ads into the manuscript of *Sister Carrie*.³³ Kiyohiko Murayama has likened the novel's "heterogeneous style" to "the jumble seen in the pages of newspapers."³⁴ Furthermore, since he based the novel loosely on the experience of his sister Emma and her married lover, *Sister Carrie* has a basis in fact. Dreiser's transformation of factual reporting and fact into fiction, however, reveals his belief in the power of fiction to tell the truth. As F. O. Matthiessen has noted, for example, Dreiser changed the effect of his article "Curious Shifts of the Poor" simply by framing it within the fictional Hurstwood's experience as a derelict. "By introducing Hurstwood into his picture," Matthiessen writes, "he has given it a dynamic emotional center such as none of his articles could have."³⁵ He made more dramatic changes to Emma's real-life story, as Pizer has noted.³⁶ The result is a different but a nonetheless truthful story. As Richard Lehan puts it, Dreiser drew on his sister's experience but "used this event to tell the story of America."³⁷ Pizer, in fact, argues that Dreiser's creative method amounted to a "process of reshaping his sources."³⁸ While this "reshaping" took him away from the facts, it may have brought him closer to the truth. Indeed, at certain moments in the novel Dreiser calls attention to the truth that it is imparting. In his description of Hurstwood's deliberations over the unlocked safe, he writes, "To those who have never experienced such a mental dilemma, the following will appeal on the simple ground of revelation" (184). In the same scene, he justifies the suspicious material he is presenting: "The wavering of a mind under such circumstances is an almost inexplicable thing, and yet it is absolutely true" (185).

For Dreiser, "facts" were merely a starting point, supplying building blocks but not the entire substance of the writer's attempt to capture reality in words. As H. L. Mencken wrote of his friend, "His aim is not merely to record, but to translate and understand; the thing he exposes is not the empty event and act, but the endless mystery out of which it springs; his pictures have a passionate compassion in them that it is hard to separate from poetry."³⁹ This stance on reality and language helps to explain the critique of journalism in *Sister Carrie*. Like his predecessors and contemporaries, Dreiser doubted that journalism, constrained by an emphasis on facts as well as other criteria and conventions, could accurately and completely capture truth.

Just as it was not the first literary response to journalism, *Sister Carrie* was not the last. A quarter-century later, Dreiser took a sensational story covered by the press and rewrote it in *An American Tragedy*. Still later, Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe merged journalism and literature to form a “non-fiction novel” and “New Journalism,” and less forthright “experimenters” such as Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass, and Jayson Blair have attempted to pass off fiction as journalism. Significantly, many of the issues that underlie these complex interactions of journalism and literature—among them the popularity and potency of journalism, readers’ uses of newspapers, and the competition over who is telling the “truth”—all found expression in *Sister Carrie*, one of the major literary critiques of journalism in the longstanding sibling rivalry in American letters.

—University of North Carolina, Pembroke

Notes

1. Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming-of-Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), p. xi.
2. See, for instance, Karen Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction* (Kent: Kent State Univ. Press, 2005), p. xvi.
3. Joseph J. Kwiat, “The Newspaper Experience: Crane, Norris, and Dreiser,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 8 (September 1953), 99–117; Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 85–134; Nancy Warner Barrineau, “Introduction” to *Theodore Dreiser's Ev'ry Month* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. xv–xl; Deborah M. Garfield, “Taking a Part: Actor and Audience in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*,” *American Literary Realism*, 16 (Autumn 1983), 223–39; Barbara Hochman, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Actress: The Rewards of Representation in *Sister Carrie*,” in *New Essays on Sister Carrie*, ed. Donald Pizer (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 43–64.
4. Philip Fisher, “The Life History of Objects: The Naturalist Novel and the City,” in *Sister Carrie*, ed. Pizer (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 507.
5. Dreiser, “True Art Speaks Plainly,” in *Sister Carrie*, p. 470.
6. Dreiser, *Newspaper Days* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 3–5. In an interview with the *New York Sun* in 1911 (*Theodore Dreiser: Interviews*, ed. Frederic E. Rusch and Pizer [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2004], pp. 19–23), Dreiser again praised newspapers, suggesting that they were more realistic than realistic fiction of the era. Dreiser may have been catering to his newspaper interviewer or the paper's readers, or he may have been reflecting on the best news reporting. Perhaps he felt that the press had improved since the zenith of yellow journalism in the previous century. In any case, his brief praise of journalism in this interview contrasts sharply with his more extensive comments in *Ev'ry Month* and the elaborate critique in *Sister Carrie*.
7. *Theodore Dreiser's Ev'ry Month*, pp. 15–17.
8. Barrineau, p. xxvii. Barrineau has argued that Dreiser, although he blasted newspapers in *Ev'ry Month*, felt that his magazine—itself a form of journalism—could serve women by helping them to adjust to changes in income and family life.
9. Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Norton, 2006), pp. 175, 313–14, 322, 316, 284–87, 150–51, 109–10. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically.

10. *Theodore Dreiser's Ev'ry Month*, p. 27.
11. See, for example, Carole Rich, *Writing and Reporting the News: A Coaching Method* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2003), pp. 25–30.
12. Leonard, pp. 10–11, 22.
13. Hussman, *Dreiser and His Fiction: A Twentieth-Century Quest* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 23.
14. Fisher, p. 508.
15. Garfield, p. 237.
16. Hochman has noted that Carrie depends on human interaction to derive satisfaction from artistic expression: “As her isolation increases, the rewards of the dramatic enterprise progressively diminish. By the time Carrie resides in the Waldorf, at the end of the book, the vibrant image of Drouet backstage, buoying Carrie up, has been replaced by a barrage of letters from strangers, more or less bidding to ‘buy’ her. Only her final encounter with Robert Ames recalls the responsive support that once allowed her to realize the full power and pleasure of her gift” (45).
17. Garfield, p. 235; Stanley Corkin, “*Sister Carrie* and Industrial Life: Objects and the New American Self,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33 (Winter 1987), 617.
18. See Dreiser’s column for the October 1895 issue of *Ev'ry Month* in Barrineau, pp. 14–17.
19. Fishkin, pp. 88, 96.
20. Dreiser, *Newspaper Days*, pp. 643–44.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 645.
22. Hussman, p. 24; Paul A. Orlov, “An Emersonian Perspective on Dreiser’s Characterization of Carrie,” *Dreiser Studies*, 32 (Fall 2001), 27.
23. Orlov, p. 26.
24. Hochman, p. 54.
25. Fisher, pp. 502–03.
26. Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 185–93. Focusing on the early decades of the twentieth century, Schiller writes: “From the vantage point of concerned journalists, advertiser control and the rise of public relations, set against the contrary notions of an often indignant and even militant public, were nothing short of catastrophic” (186–87).
27. *Theodore Dreiser's Ev'ry Month*, p. 89.
28. Dreiser, “True Art Speaks Plainly,” p. 469.
29. Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser: A Critical Study* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1976), p. 36.
30. Quoted in Orlov, p. 21.
31. Dreiser, *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1920), p. 276.
32. Dreiser, *Newspaper Days*, pp. 4, 57.
33. West, *A Sister Carrie Portfolio* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1985), pp. 24, 26.
34. Murayama, “The Hidden Polemics in *Sister Carrie*,” *Dreiser Studies*, 33 (Spring 2002), 61–62.
35. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (1951; rpt. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1973), p. 80.
36. Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 33.
37. Lehan, *Literary Masterpieces: Sister Carrie* (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2001), p. 60.
38. Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 44.
39. Mencken, “The Dreiser Bugaboo,” in *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Pizer (Boston: Hall, 1981), p. 21.