

Discussion Questions for “Sister Carrie” by Theodore Dreiser

June 26, 2021

1. Each chapter's title is expressed in what was known as the “magazine style.” Did the titles affect your reading of the novel? Did they fit in with the novel? Why do you suppose Dreiser chose this style of titling chapters?
2. Did Carrie's relationship with her parents and sister seem realistic for the turn of the century?
3. Dreiser had a difficult time publishing “Sister Carrie,” which was later banned and panned for the frank representation of Carrie's relationships with men. Do you think the narrator or the author have an opinion about Carrie's morality, or lack thereof?
4. Carrie goes by multiple names including Caroline Meeber, (the titular) Sister Carrie, Carrie Drouet, Carrie Wheeler, and Carrie Madenda. Is there any significance to these different names? What about Drouet's nickname of “Cad?” Why do you think Dreiser titled the book “Sister Carrie?”
5. Certain symbols reoccur, such as the train, the rocking chair, and the mirror. What is meaning of these symbols? Do the symbols change meaning as the novel progresses?
6. Do any of the major characters, such as Carrie, Hurstwood, Drouet, or Mrs. Hurstwood, change over the course of the novel? Do any of the changes the characters experience have a positive impact on others around them?
7. Who do you think the main character of the novel is? Are there any heroes in this novel, and, if so, who?
8. What do each of the major characters believe is the “American Dream?” Do any of them attain the American Dream? And in what ways does Dreiser demarcate class (and success) in the novel?
9. Naturalism was a literary movement popular at the end of the 1800's; this offshoot of realism focuses on themes of determinism, detachment, and scientific objectivism, and often includes social commentary. How does “Sister Carrie” fit the definition of a naturalistic novel?
10. How do seasons play a role in the action of the novel?
11. The large American cities of Chicago and New York play an important role in “Sister Carrie.” How does Dreiser use these two urban landscapes, as well as Carrie's origin in small-town Wisconsin, to explore themes about industrialization, human nature, and the interaction between the environment and the individual? Why does Dreiser use water and sea imagery throughout the novel in relation to the characters' life in big cities? Ultimately, does human corruption in “Sister Carrie” originate from people or from urban environments or something else?