“Character and Success”: Teaching *Sister Carrie* in the Context of an On-going American Debate

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One of my routine assignments at Wright State University is English 356, “American Texts: 1865-1920.” This junior survey is a core requirement for English majors and strongly recommended for students seeking degrees in English education. Recently I’ve begun grouping sets of texts around cultural debates both specific to the period and characteristically “American” enough to be familiar to present-day students. One successful grouping—thanks in part to current hijinks in our nation’s capital—centers on the relationship between character and success as outlined by Theodore Roosevelt in his 1900 essay “Character and Success”1 and as “debated” by Horatio Alger, Jr., Theodore Dreiser, and Willa Cather in *Ragged Dick* (1867), *Sister Carrie* (1900), and *The Song of the Lark* (1915), respectively. *Sister Carrie*, contemporaneous with “Character and Success,” though partly subversive of Roosevelt and the nation’s more bourgeois values, is the pivotal text. Both in its critique of American materialism and in its treatment of female sexuality, Dreiser’s novel makes intelligible for undergraduates the radical disturbances in American ideology which have marked this century.

The term begins with a rapid overview of the period 1865-1920, concentrating on the era’s industrial and economic growth, demographic shifts and conditions of labor, drawn largely from Howard Zinn’s useful *People’s History of the United States*. The first day closes with a class discussion of national politicians as cultural weather vanes. For the second day of class, students are asked to read “Character and Success,” paying close attention to what Roosevelt identifies as the chief
elements of character and to what constitutes success in the presidential (and presumably mainstream bourgeois) mind. That what they find there seems to most of them natural and true speaks to its continuing ideological force.

Roosevelt begins with a characteristic reference to sports and the upper classes, quoting “a famous Yale professor . . . in every sense of the word a man,” who maintains that “as a rule, the man who is slack in his studies will be slack in his football work; it is character that counts in both.” Roosevelt adds,

Bodily vigor is good, and vigor of intellect is even better, but far above both is character. . . . [I]n the great battle of life, no brilliancy of intellect, no perfection of bodily development, will count when weighed in the balance against that assemblage of virtues, active and passive, of moral qualities, which we group together under the name of character. (113)

More concretely, a person with character

must not steal, he must not be intemperate, he must not be vicious in any way; he must not be mean or brutal; he must not bully the weak. In fact he must refrain from whatever is evil. But besides refraining from evil, he must do good. He must be brave and energetic; he must be resolute and persevering. (118)

Given the emphasis on virility, warfare and sport throughout “Character and Success” and Roosevelt’s implicit assumption that his audience is male, students need no prompting to see that, to the turn-of-the-century mind, character was synonymous with masculinity.

For Roosevelt, however, success is not synonymous with money—and here he differs from many contemporary students’ Bill Gates-ian view of things. Money is important but not for its own sake. Having attained wealth one must “use [it] aright [and] help upbuild that material national prosperity which must underlie national greatness” (116). Simply having character is its own reward. Wealth or fame are not substitutes, nor can they buy what must be inborn.

Having digested “Character and Success,” students turn to the novels. Not surprisingly, Ragged Dick hews most closely to
the line. As I do for each novel, I ask students as they read to take notes on aspects of Ragged Dick’s treatment of character and success that prefigure or challenge Roosevelt’s. Alger mixes his didacticism with an engaging narrative and likeable hero involved in a struggle with which my working-class students can empathize. In broad structural terms Ragged Dick, which concerns the impact of character and capitalism on a young adult’s social and economic rise, resembles Sister Carrie and The Song of the Lark: a young American finds success in the big city via a combination of personal qualities and assistance from older, interested males. Ragged Dick promotes the ideology of “moral capitalism”—a network of influences and cross-influences in which all who are in need, and who are good and industrious enough to help themselves, are given a hand on their way to the top” (Ernest 61)—absorbed and promulgated half a century later by Roosevelt: an ideology Dreiser is at pains to demystify and Cather to revise.

Alger’s eponymous hero rises from homeless bootblack to salaried counting-house clerk because he is energetic, tenacious, brave, honest, persevering, studious, and morally clean from the first page to the last. “You don’t catch me stealin’,” states Dick just before setting out “with energy and industry” to earn his breakfast with shines (3, 8). Roosevelt and his Yale professor require of young men athleticism and scholarship; Dick saves Mr. Rockwell’s child from drowning and so impresses that capitalist with his penmanship and arithmetic that he is rewarded with a job. Dick’s unfailing cheer and ability to laugh at and repair his and others’ misfortunes auger a future both wealthy and wholesome. Sex is not at issue for our fourteen-year-old hero, but waiting in the wings is the future prize of his purity, nine-year-old Ida Greyson. With only a job and a savings account at the novel’s close Dick is by no means wealthy, but he is successful—‘a young gentleman on his way to fame and fortune” (132).

Even Dick’s flaws indicate character. His extravagance—squandering his earnings at the Old Bowery Theatre and Tony Pastor’s and treating less fortunate boys to “spreads”—points to an innate generosity which will later permit him to “use his wealth aright.” He smokes, gambles and drinks “sometimes” but
once he finds the first of his wealthy role models in Mr. Whitney, Dick learns to prefer putting his money in a savings bank to minor debauchery. Despite a poor upbringing, Dick’s “nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults” (7). When role model number two, Mr. Greyson, asks Dick, “Who taught you to be honest?” Dick replies, “Nobody. But it’s mean to cheat or steal, I’ve always known that” (71-2, italics added).

If manliness, vigor and resolve are essential components of character and success, Carrie Meeber would appear to be doomed from the start of her adventures—an expectation Dreiser deliberately toys with by adopting the “fallen woman” as his apparent focus. But Dreiser is less concerned with exploring the possibility of women’s having character, or with redefining character in less gendered terms, than with demolishing the ideology of moral capitalism. To do so, however, he relies on existing discourses about character.

Before the class begins reading *Sister Carrie* I like to point out that Dreiser terms her “a fair example of the American middle class”(4), implying that her character is more real than ideal. I also give them Dreiser’s appraisal of H. L. Mencken’s essay on Roosevelt: “You have that big Rhinoceros measured exactly” (Letters 1: 297). Mencken’s essay is optional reading for my students, but “Rhinoceros” is generally enough to suggest to even the least perceptive that Dreiser and Roosevelt may not agree on essentials. Dreiser has so liberally salted the text with comments on Carrie’s character that my students have no difficulty noting her difference from the ideal: she is “drifting” and “yielding,” hardly a scholar, and more attuned to the “moral significance” of her clothes than of her actions (7). Before she meets Ames, books are “beyond her interest—knowledge a sealed book” (4). Where Ragged Dick learns to look for respectability in his savings book, Carrie finds what satisfaction she can in consuming, answering the siren call of shoes and laces, jackets and skirts, moving to ever more posh quarters as her means permit. When at the last students find her at the Waldorf reading Balzac and “sorry for the people who haven’t got anything,” they also find her yawning and inert rather than energetically using her wealth aright (495). The
chameleon quality which makes her so successful a stage presence would, for Roosevelt, mark her as having no character at all.

Dreiser makes clear that character is not innate, but learned. Not active virtue but “the drag of habit” runs the person of character:

The victim of habit, when he has neglected the thing which was customary with him to do, feels a little scratching in the brain, a little irritating something which comes of being out of the rut, and imagines it to be the prick of conscience, the still small voice that is urging him ever to righteousness. (77-78)

When we first approach this passage, my students tend to agree with Dreiser, even though his dismissal of virtue is at odds with the truths they found in “Character and Success.” In their writing and discussion I encourage them not to resolve the contradiction but to try to understand the social mechanisms which might produce or even require holding both views. Often we can derive some first principles for materialist or feminist critique which can make future encounters with critical theory less overwhelming.² Dreiser’s subsequent reflections on “Carrie’s mental state” let students see the author working with those same first principles, as he delineates the arbitrariness, the meretriciousness of society’s judgments of men and women and the formative pressure economics has on character.

As Lawrence E. Hussman has pointed out, the Generation X student finds it difficult to construe Carrie’s sex life as a fall into vice. What they do find vicious, however, is her refusal to share her early theatrical earnings with Hurstwood. “After all,” the post-feminist in the room pipes up, “he supported her when she wasn’t working.” While this take on her character lacks historical nuance, it does bring to light the emphasis on monetary transactions as a measure of worth in American culture then and now. One cannot have moral capitalism without capitalism. And capitalism means amassing and spending money. Roosevelt and Alger may argue that merely having character is a kind of success, but Dreiser makes explicit what is implicit in the previous texts: having capital is the only mark of success that counts in a capitalist society and how one
uses capital is an index of character. As Carrie’s fiscal comfort increases so does her respectability—in this she is exactly like Ragged Dick—though she cannot be said to have changed much in character. No less didactic than Alger, Dreiser offers students several sermons on “the true meaning of money.” The opening pages of chapters six and seven are particularly suited to group discussion of this theme.

Though Dreiser’s own class awareness gives him perspective on the ideology of American capitalism, he is less successful at escaping common notions of gender. Women are “peculiarly sensitive to the personal adornment or equipment of their person”(22), their celebrated intuition limited to perceptions about dress and household furnishings. Carrie’s success on stage is the product of her “sensitive, receptive nature, her barometric feelings and almost hopeless lack of logic” (158) combined with her beauty, rather than her skill or training. The women in Sister Carrie exhibit varying levels of self-absorption, consumerism, display, passivity, and avarice. But if the average American’s conscience is simply habit enforced by environment (those “excellent home principles” [78]), surely the average woman’s sensitivity to clothing and awareness of her physical attractions are similarly the product of environmental forces. In a male-dominated market culture, women fill the dual role of consumer commodity and commodity consumer. But while Dreiser knows man is the product of his material conditions, and Sister Carrie in part illustrates that Marxian chestnut, Dreiser seems incapable of making the step to imagining woman as the product of her material conditions. To debunk moral capitalism, Dreiser needs a passive, irresolute and morally ambiguous young American, one without manly qualities. What could be less manly than a female?3 Whatever the virtues of his oeuvre, on the topic of gender, Dreiser is as much a man of his generation as Roosevelt.

Students comparing structural elements of Sister Carrie, Ragged Dick, and The Song of the Lark will notice that tales of moral capitalism, like other fairy tales, feature helpers—in the case of capital the better term might be “backers.” Carrie succeeds neither despite her liabilities nor because of her virtues but because she makes the right connections. Like Ragged Dick
before her, and Thea Kronborg after her, Carrie benefits from older men who, well, take an interest in her. That Drouet’s and Hurstwood’s intentions are more frolicsome than philanthropic makes no difference in terms of outcomes, but does serve to underscore gender and sexuality as powerful, if excluded, terms in the rhetoric of moral capitalism. Students will note that Drouet’s “assistance” is a virtual parody of the help given Ragged Dick: timely gifts of clothing, cash tips, and a professional entrée. The nature of Hurstwood’s assistance is more problematic—Carrie’s efforts toward success seem to increase in direct proportion to her contempt for him.

Because Dreiser relies so heavily on existing discourses about character and success to demystify moral capitalism, certain discordances arise. Carrie’s rags to riches story both reverses and depends upon Hurstwood’s fall from riches to rags. The only character to fail utterly in *Sister Carrie*, Hurstwood as first introduced appears to be an exemplar of “Character and Success,” having “risen by perseverance and industry through long years of service . . . to his present altitude” (43). Likewise in the details of his fall Hurstwood appears exemplary. Applying the Roosevelt rubric, students may locate the origins of Hurstwood’s failure in lust, dishonesty, irresolution, and enervation. But in each case, Dreiser is careful to point out the workings of accident: his marriage is stale, the safe clicks shut, he loses the lease on the Warren Street Resort, his age wears on him.

Dreiser would have Carrie’s rise equally the result of accident, but as Hurstwood crumbles she increasingly displays signs of character, exhibiting “genial good nature” (313) over the challenges of New York housekeeping, energy in her search for theatrical work (and in her chorus line head-tossing), and resolution in shedding herself of Hurstwood. Carrie’s career prospers as she exhibits quick thinking (“I am yours truly” [431]) and willingness to learn, and, apparently, adopts celibacy (“it incited her to coolness and indifference” [456]).

With the late entry of Bob Ames, another discordance arises. Ames joins a long line of inventors real and imaginary who signify American ingenuity and character in novels of moral capitalism. My more structurally-inclined students
recognize that, as in *Ragged Dick*, the successful inventor speaks for the author. But Ames employs distinctly Rooseveltian terms when he says, “If you have powers, cultivate them,” and he advises Carrie to work for the sake of working well. Ames values learning, does not drink, and is frank and wholesomely manly. Dreiser echoes Roosevelt and Alger both, making Ames “innocent and clean,” which Carrie finds “exceedingly pleasant” (335). Thus, with Ames, as with Hurstwood’s fall and Carrie’s theatrical success, Dreiser appears to embrace some of the very terms he set out to destabilize.

Alerting students to these discordances helps to introduce or refine the concept of the novel as product of unique material conditions and common ideological positions. *Sister Carrie* embodies contradictions already present in American culture at the turn of the century, contradictions which Cather will not entirely escape either and students may recognize in themselves. If Dreiser wishes to critique bourgeois notions of morality, his “immoral” woman must somehow succeed recognizably. If he wishes to emphasize how crass and empty the values of the marketplace are, he must adopt moral terms. Dreiser cannot exclude one half of the ideological equation and remain intelligible. In *Sister Carrie*’s instability lies its quintessential Americanness.

By the time students open *The Song of the Lark* they should be able to recognize its structural and conceptual similarity to the two previous novels. Like Ragged Dick, Thea Kronborg succeeds because she is frank, energetic, ambitious, resolute. Like Carrie, she succeeds despite poor parenting and pre-marital sex. Thea’s disinterested helpers are four—Doctor Archie and Ray Kennedy provide capital and fatherly affection, and Professor Wunsch and Andor Harsanyi offer training, advice and inspiration. A fifth helper, Fred Ottenberg, is motivated by sexual desire as well as admiration for Thea’s character and abilities. He is also, like Archie, trapped in an unhappy marriage which his position and respectability will not allow him to leave, introducing elements of Hurstwood into the mix.

Cather is more interested in the problems she has set herself in writing an American *künstlerroman* than in Dreiserian social criticism or Algerian affirmation. Central to
apprenticeship novels is character, and students find Cather using familiar terms. The martial imagery used to describe Thea’s struggle to master her art particularly evokes the imagery in “Character and Success.” Thea has a “way of charging at difficulties. She ran to meet them as if they were foes she had long been seeking, seized them as if they were destined for her and she for them” (159). The “fortunate accidents” (xxx) aiding Thea’s rise, while less implausible than those befalling Ragged Dick, still partake of that “pattern of influences and cross-influences” by which moral capitalism assists the deserving and industrious.

For Cather, here and elsewhere, the pursuit of the dollar is precisely what makes American culture smug, domestic, self-satisfied, provincial and ignorant. Cather attempts to replace moral capitalism with something more like moral craftsmanship—that attention to one’s art which raises the individual above the overall pettiness of American life. Thea has the moral advantage of early religious instruction over both Dick and Carrie. But the religious (Dick) or ethical (Carrie) instruction so important to helping one swallow whole the inconsistencies of moral capitalism is not what Cather is after. What the artist achieves through character and effort is nothing less than being born again.

But The Song of the Lark takes place in essentially the same world as Sister Carrie and Ragged Dick. Money counts. And, since Thea, too, comes from small means, Cather gives the same attention to nickel-and-dime accounting, the frustrations of poor and inadequate clothing and cramped quarters, and the temptations of easy money. The freight carried by gifts of money in all three novels and the mixed motives of the male helpers invite comparison. Gifts of money do not carry sexual overtones in Ragged Dick, students will notice. That they do in Sister Carrie and Song of the Lark not only points to quaint historical reality—“that’s how things were back then,” says a student, ignoring the daily patronage-and-sex reports out of Washington—but also to how gender continues to be a destabilizing factor in discourses on character and success.

Keeping gender’s destabilizing force in mind while comparing Thea and Carrie as characters can help students
refine their feminist or materialist first principles. Novice feminists, for example, may be tempted to essentialize: Dreiser can’t imagine a woman with character because he’s a man; Cather can because she’s a woman. But in the cash and commodity culture Dreiser delineates, sex is simply another transaction. Dreiser’s achievement is to bracket Carrie’s sexuality off from bourgeois morality, while presenting the bourgeois marketplace as itself of questionable morality. Cather may dismiss Thea’s brief affair with Fred as inconsequential but is either unwilling or unable to resist bourgeois convention by “redeeming” her with marriage to Fred in the Epilogue.

Finally, like Dreiser, Cather confronts the emptiness of success—even artistic success—in market culture. For Dreiser both struggle and success are empty signifiers. Cather is less overt, because she does subscribe to the elements of “character and success” even as she modifies them, but there is more than a suggestion in the Epilogue that Cather believes the rewards offered the artist by American culture are paltry. Returning to Roosevelt at the end of the term, we ask ourselves whether success as our culture understands it is worth the effort.

In English 356 I try to present the novels as complex rather than flawed—as texts at war with themselves just as culture and ideology are complex and at war with one another. The other texts on my syllabus change frequently; those changes often bring more diverse attitudes toward character and success into the debate or even change our understanding of elements of the core texts. My students surprise me each term with their passion and their growth, and I believe they are surprised that century-old texts aren’t necessarily yesterday’s news.

Notes

1 Published in the *Outlook*, March 31, and collected in *The Strenuous Life* in 1901.
2 As I also teach our upper division and graduate theory courses I like to smooth the way as much as possible.
3 It is sometimes useful to ask students to imagine the novel as *Brother Ted*.
4 Even if that sexuality is sublimated, as appears to have been the case with Alger and his street Arabs.
Dreiser does not add, though the historian might, that the national economy is still recovering from the crash of ‘93 during Hurstwood’s New York period.

This criticism motivates The Professor’s House, A Lost Lady, and the stories collected in Youth and the Bright Medusa, as well as The Song of the Lark, and underlies her sympathetic portrayal of immigrants and Indians—who can imagine a life beyond money—almost throughout her oeuvre.

Works Cited