THE COMPASS OF HUMAN WILL IN REALISM AND FANTASTY:

A READING OF *SISTER CARRIE* AND *THE KING OF ELFLAND'S DAUGHTER*

by

Tracy Stone

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, Florida

August 2009

THE COMPASS OF HUMAN WILL IN REALISM AND FANTASTY:

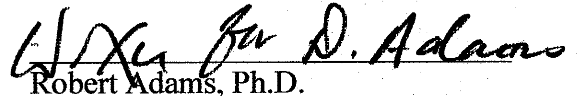
A READING OF *SISTER CARRIE* AND *THE KING OF ELFLAND'S DAUGHTER*

by

Tracy Stone

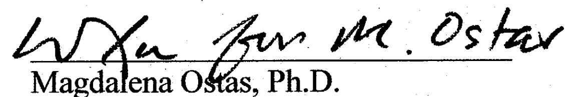
This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Robert Adams, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

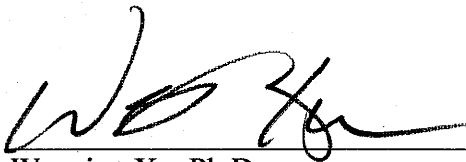


Robert Adams, Ph.D.
Thesis Advisor

Thomas Martin, Ph.D.

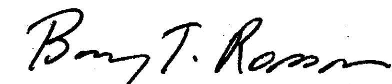


Magdalena Ostas, Ph.D.



Wenying Xu, Ph.D.
Chair, Department of English

Manjunath Pendakur, Ph.D.
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters



Barry T. Rosson, Ph.D.
Dean, Graduate College

July 9, 2009
Date

ABSTRACT

Author: Tracy Stone

Title: The Compass of Human Will in Realism and Fantasy: A Reading of *Sister Carrie* and *The King of Elfland's Daughter*

Institution: Florida Atlantic University

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Robert Adams

Degree: Master of Arts

Year: 2009

As realist and naturalist writers at the turn of the twentieth century adopted a scientific spirit of objectivity, they reflected the emphasis many contemporary scientific studies laid on the forces of the natural world in shaping the character, behavior, and ultimate destiny of man. In this literary mood of "pessimistic determinism," fantasy literature began to experience a resurgence, providing a marked contrast to naturalism's portrayal of the impotence of man to effect change in his circumstances. I examine fantasy's restoration of efficacy to the human will through a study of two representative works of the opposing genres: Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*. As I demonstrate, the former naturalistic novel emphasizes the impotence of its characters in the face of powerful natural world, while the latter contemporary fantasy novel uniquely showcases man's ability to effect change in his world and his destiny.

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to Jacob Henson, one of the most worthwhile human beings I've encountered "in this measureless universe where my adventure takes place." My humble thesis would not have been possible without his kind ministrations and ultimate understanding.

I would also like to heartily thank the long-suffering members of the FAU faculty, who have spent many protracted office hours helping me to reach this point.

THE FANTASTIC BATTLE FOR EFFICACY:

WILL IN *SISTER CARRIE* AND *THE KING OF ELFLAND'S DAUGHTER*

Introduction: A Fallen World ……………………………………………………..1

Chapter 1: *Sister Carrie* …………………………………………………………12

Chapter 2: *The King of Elfland's Daughter* ……………………………………..34

Conclusion: The Reality of Fantasy ……………………………………………..52

Endnotes …………………………………………………………………………57

Works Cited ……………………………………………………………………..59

I. INTRODUCTION:
A FALLEN WORLD

Theodore Dreiser gave a particularly revealing interview to the *New York Sun* newspaper in 1911, the year his second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*, was published. Eleven years had elapsed since *Sister Carrie* was first rejected by Harper publishing house, who told Dreiser in an evaluation that the novel was "a superior piece of reportorial realism" nevertheless (Dowell 146). By 1911, Dreiser's first novel had been in turns published, deemed a failure in the publishing world, republished privately by the author, and finally catapulted to phenomenal popular success. Dreiser was well on his way to becoming a figurehead of American naturalism when he spoke to the *New York Sun* reporter about his fidelity to reality:

> [Reporter:] "How can you be sure then that your viewpoint when writing is the accurate one?"
>
> [Dreiser:] "I don't know, but it is."
>
> "How do you know it is?"
>
> "Because it is. It is."
>
> And there you are.
>
> Anyway, the author says he does not like to explain . . . ("Novels to Reflect Real Life" 22)

This small exchange exhibits one of the fundamental tenants of literary realism, a belief that carefully written prose can portray life as it really is. This includes the idea that we all have the same experience of “reality,” a stable world that we all share and that we can perceive objectively when we eliminate distortions such as emotion and imagination. Can realist authors be sure that their writing contains no subjective interpretation of their own experience? Dreiser is adamant in this interview that his written viewpoint is an “accurate” depiction of reality, but the interviewer seems to challenge Dreiser’s certainty—and the *New York Sun* was neither the first nor the last to question the objectivity aspired to by the realists and naturalists of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

In 1892, eight years before Theodore Dreiser published *Sister Carrie* but long after the realism movement had originated in Europe, social philosopher Max Nordau devoted a chapter of his treatise *Degeneration* to literary realism in which he criticizes the conceit of writers who believe that they can mimetically represent the world in their narratives. Realist authors frequently claim to preserve a sort of scientific fidelity to reality by writing from direct observations of their surroundings, but Nordau argues that they must select from their observations and add them together in ways that are meaningful for them. He reasons that an author incorporates particular observations “because in his opinion they prove something, they express an idea not conceived by things as they are, but which he believes he can deduce from reality,” an idea about the nature of reality that I will term the author’s philosophy. Despite realism’s aspirations toward objectivity, Nordau warns that an author’s “‘realistic’ work always reproduces his

thoughts only, his interpretations of reality, his interest in it, and not reality itself" (478). Although Nordau is specifically addressing the nineteenth century realism movement, Eric Auerbach distinguishes similar "interpretations of reality" throughout literary history in his classic study, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* As critic Kathryn Hume notes, "[m]any of the authors Auerbach discusses thought of themselves as imitating reality, yet their renderings are based on such different assumptions and selection that one man's realistic imitation is another's stilted stylizations" (xii). For instance, Auerbach points to a pessimistic philosophy in the writing of Stendhal, one of the founders of nineteenth century European realism. Auerbach writes, "Stendhal's realistic writing grew out of his discomfort in the post-Napoleonic world and his consciousness that he did not belong to it and had no place in it" (461). He further notes that Stendhal's realism seems linked with the author's disaffection from society, commenting, "[n]ot until success and pleasure began to slip away from him [Stendhal], not until practical circumstances threatened to cut the ground from under his feet, did the society of his time become a problem and a subject to him" (Auerbach 461). Auerbach interprets Stendhal's characters as estranged from their environment, struggling against it instead of belonging to it (464-5).

Literary critics commonly note a feeling of helplessness in the realism movement at the turn of the twentieth century. "Realism was an analysis of quiet desperation," writes Alfred Habegger in his 1982 study *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature* (106). Habegger interprets the American realist movement as a reaction against the accomplishments of the industrial era, which "puffed up the ego with dreams of stunning personal success." The success of industrialization is direct cause for the

pessimism of realist writing, he explains, stipulating, "[r]ealism was a critical response to the simultaneously inflated and privatized ego that was made hungry by contemporary society and fed by the fantasies in popular fiction. That is one of the reasons realism was often 'pessimistic'—it insisted that the self was limited and conditioned and not capable of the apotheosis promised by mass fantasy" (Habegger 109). Envisioning realism (and naturalism) as a reaction against a spirit of hope is also common, since many critics define them against a backdrop of the idealism of the romantic era. Richard Lehan treats the philosophical break between romantics and realists in *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in the Age of Transition* (2005), pointing out that Wordworth, as a standard-bearer of the romantic movement, "never lost confidence in the power of human consciousness to bring about radical social change," despite witnessing the outcome of the French Revolution. Lehan continues, "[i]t is here that literary realism and naturalism break with romanticism. No longer is the individual mind or the power of sentiment enough to undermine the degenerative effects of the industrial revolution. From Balzac to Zola the emphasis will be on depicting a fallen world rather than on a vision of its resurrection" (36). These are but a few of the numerous interpretations of realism that identify a certain feeling of despair and powerlessness. A philosophy of powerlessness is even more evident in naturalism, since naturalistic authors were frequently quite outspoken about the philosophy that drives their narratives—a philosophy that might well engender a feeling of helplessness.

Most literary critics recognize naturalism as an extension of the late nineteenth century realist movement because naturalist authors also aim to represent reality with scientific objectivity.[i] The trait that distinguishes it from realism is naturalism's

insistence on the supremacy of natural forces, forces which received considerable scientific attention during the time period of both movements. Lehan writes, "naturalism represented life as a harsh affair, relying on principles of objectivity based on detailed observation and insisting on the existence of external forces, especially heredity and the environment, which were subject to laws of the natural universe" (6). Naturalists continued the "principles of objectivity based on detailed observation" from the realist movement, but additionally demonstrated "the existence of external forces . . . subject to the laws of the natural universe." Naturalism's representation of a world ruled by natural law elaborated on the pessimistic philosophy of realism. "While realist writers varied in matters of style and literary technique, they all portrayed the individual struggling for identity in a hostile society," Lehan describes, adding, "[l]iterary naturalism deepened this depiction by making the individual less resilient and the environment more hostile" (6). In other words, naturalist writers created environments so innately noisome to human beings that they overwhelm the relatively puny efforts of their inhabitants.

Both realism and naturalism were greatly informed by the tremendous scientific achievements that attended the industrial era, a relationship which has been well documented. In *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1940: Essays on Ideological Conflict and Complicity*, Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche summarize, "when science in the forms of Darwinism and eugenics became part of the intellectual and social fabric of American society, these sciences emerged in works of realism and naturalism . . ." (17). Though Cuddy and Roche limit their scope to America, the writings of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer (among others) affected every culture they reached. The cultural consequences of their theories were facilitated by the

rising credence given to scientific efforts during the nineteenth century. Science became a synonym for dispassionate reason, a sort of foil to the romantic privileging of imagination. Realist and naturalist authors took up the call for an objective examination of the human condition. While Gustave Flaubert worked on Madame Bovary, a novel that many critics consider to be one of the standards of the realist movement, he wrote to his mistress and fellow writer, "[w]hen literature has the precision of results of an exact science, that's going some." Flaubert privileges the "precision" of science for its accurate depiction of the real world, a quality he attributes to its dispassionate objectivity. He recommends, "[l]et us always bear in mind that impersonality is a sign of strength. Let us absorb the objective; let it circulate in us, until it is externalized in such a way that no one can understand this marvelous chemistry" (93). The ideal of objectivity was not the sole result of the look to science, however. Since realist and particularly naturalists admired the scientific mode of discovery, many also absorbed the influential scientific theories of the age.

When Charles Darwin published *Origin of the Species* in 1859, his work gave a new perspective on the human condition to more than just the scientific community. In *Darwin in America: The Intellectual Response 1865-1912*, Cynthia Russett explores the enormous effect of Darwinian theory, pointing the widespread availability of his writings to a popular audience: "[t]he *Origin of Species* thus triggered a tremendously varied inquiry into every aspect of the human condition; learned as well as popular articles explored Darwinism and ethics, Darwinism and politics, Darwinism and religion . . ." (7). In brief, Darwin's idea of human progress through adaptation to the environment seemed to reveal the supreme power of the natural world. If a species must adapt to its

environment in order to survive and prosper, as Darwin posits, then the environment could be said to determine the actions of man. Many interpreted Darwin's theory as a recognition of the supreme dominance of the natural world over human action. As Cuddy and Roche explain, "adaptation to environmental and hereditary forces challenged free will and the efficacy of prayer; scientific determinism supplemented (or even supplanted) God as the reason for all things" (11). Darwinian theory did not work alone to promote scientific determinism. Herbert Spencer coined the term "Social Darwinism," interpreting human will as entirely a reaction to natural forces. Spencer writes in his major work, *First Principles*, "[s]ocial changes take directions that are due to the joint actions of citizens, determined as are those of all other changes wrought by composition of forces" (220). Auguste Comte, commonly lauded as the father of Sociology, also linked natural and social law, viewing both as the forces that shaped the human world. Richard Lehan summarizes Comte's point of view: "[r]eason was not more powerful than natural or social laws, which functioned according to their won necessities. While one could discover these laws, one could not change them, just as one could not change the law of gravity" (9). All of these studies reveal man as a relatively powerless figure among the mighty workings of the natural world. I do not intend to offer a comprehensive survey of the deterministic philosophy that arose out of the scientific theories around the turn of the century. Lehan, Cuddy and Roche, Russett, and others, have written admirable studies of scientific determinism during this time period, to which I am indebted for this project. I wish to take a further step and explore the deterministic philosophy in one of the dominant modes of fiction of the early twentieth century: naturalism.

As a literary movement, naturalism seems to be the expression of a cultural mood, a sort of despair over the growing scientific evidence that man, as a part of the natural world, must be subject to its laws. Naturalistic plots depict their characters struggling to direct their lives among overpowering and indifferent forces; characters attempt to alter their circumstances, to exert their will and effect change, only to discover that the world has immutable plans of its own. Lehan explains, "[b]elief in a realm of force added another dimension to literary naturalism: the contention that events extrinsic to the characters rather than their will were determining their fate" (151). Scientific studies which emphasized the influence of the natural world revealed a "realm of force" in what had been considered a passive natural landscape. Suddenly, as Lehan notes, there was another force to be considered, a force that is "other," neither a part of man nor under his control. As science focused more and more on the mechanisms of the natural world, it seemed that the human will, the personal force of a human being to affect the circumstances of his environment, shriveled in significance when compared to the unbendable laws of the natural universe. Realist and naturalist writings reflected this sense of diminution by portraying their characters as engaged in a constant struggle with their environment and circumstance, as Auerbach notes of Stendhal's novels. In some naturalistic writing, characters' personal force receded even from their own wills, echoing a current of scientific thought that sought to understand man as an expression of the natural world. In *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1900, philosopher and scientist Ernst Haeckel proclaims:

> The great struggle between the determinist and the indeterminist, between the opponent and the sustainer of the freedom of will, has ended to-day,

> after more than two thousand years, completely in favor of the determinist. The human will has no more freedom than that of the higher animals . . . We now know that each act of the will is as fatally determined by the organization of the individual and as dependent on the momentary condition of his environment as every other psychic activity. (130-1)

The idea of man-as-animal, determined in his impulses like the lowest form of creature, is reflected in Theodore Dreiser's classic naturalist novel *Sister Carrie*. In my first chapter, I will examine *Sister Carrie*'s portrayal of the human will, understanding the term "will" in the simplest of terms, as an independent force personal to the character. The will that Haeckel laments is the part of the human character that is free to choose and decide independently of outside influence. Since naturalism envisioned man's opponent (in part) as the forces of the natural world, it makes sense to envision man's will as his own personal force. Naturalistic authors at the turn of the twentieth century represent the subjection of the human will, in varying degrees, to the mechanistic forces of the natural world.

In the 1922 foreword to Lord Dunsany's fantasy compilation *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, H.P. Lovecraft expresses despair similar to Haeckel's, a product of his disillusionment by science. He writes, "[m]odern science has, in the end, proved an enemy to art and pleasure: for by revealing to us the whole sordid and prosaic basis of our thoughts, motives, and acts, it has striped the world of glamour, wonder and all those illusions of heroism, nobility, and sacrifice which used to sound so impressive when romantically treated" (Lovecraft xv). Though Lovecraft feels that human action has lost its nobility when it is revealed to be merely a working of our bodies and our brains, he

turns to fantasy literature to restore his sense of wonder of humanity. Despite the pervasiveness of naturalism and other scientific determinism at the turn of the twentieth century, contemporary fantasy literature represents the human will as independent and efficacious.

The turn of the century witnessed a revival of attention to fantasy literature, yielding a wealth of fantasy novels to consider alongside *Sister Carrie*'s treatment of human will. David Pringle charts the twentieth century resurgence of fantastic literature in *Modern Fantasy: The Hundred Best Novels*. He positions fantasy literature against the contemporary absorption in realistic literature at the time, noting that the "appeal of realism proved enormously strong" from its beginning as a movement in the mid-nineteenth century and had become "ever more deeply entrenched as the leading form of fiction" by the turn of the century. But fantasy, which Pringle reminds readers is "at least as old as literature," experienced a revival in public attention at the beginning of the twentieth century: "[b]y the time of Thomas Hardy and Henry James the 'serious' realistic novel stood supreme, with the pseudo-realism of the popular genres to buttress it. But no sooner had this balance been achieved than fantasy began to make a surprising return: it crept out of the nursery, the dime novels and the yellowbacks and into the middlebrow magazines and bestselling hardcovers" (Pringle 14-15). One of the rising stars of fantasy in the beginning of the twentieth century was Lord Dunsany, or Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, who published his first book four years after the first publication of *Sister Carrie* but two years before its first re-publication. Since Dunsany published *The King of Elfland's Daughter* in 1924, it has become one of his best-known novels. I have chosen to examine it in this study as a representative of the fantasy

literature of its time, to the extent that any one work can represent a body of texts united by a common genre or mode. *The King of Elfland's Daughter* dawned upon *Sister Carrie*'s increasing success. Suppressed by its original publishers, critical attention to *Sister Carrie* was much delayed by its initial scarcity. Since Dreiser's first success in republishing it in 1907, it was reissued in increasing quantities by various publishers in 1911, 1917, and 1932—only the beginning of the fame that has proved lasting to this day (Cowley 178).[ii] Besides sharing a relatively small window of time, both *Sister Carrie* and *The King of Elfland's Daughter* also seem to address uniquely the question of the efficacy of human will.

At the conclusion of a close examination of the two novels, I will turn to the long-standing debate about the function of fantasy in literature. Lovecraft, for instance, lauds Lord Dunsany as "the supreme poet of wonder," equivocating, "but of the intelligently assumed wonder to which one turns after experiencing the fullest disillusionment of realism" (viii).[iii] Does fantasy depict the human will as unbound and unlimited in order to provide an escape from the growing disillusionment of scientific determinism, or can we interpret its restoration of will as an actual insistence of the human will's freedom and potency in the real world? In order to throw this question into sharp relief, we must first experience the naturalistic interpretation of the relative insignificance of the human will.

II. CHAPTER 1:

SISTER CARRIE

In 1917, literary critic H. L. Mencken offered an interpretation of Dreiser's philosophy in *A Book of Prefaces*. Mencken writes, "The struggle of man, as he [Dreiser] sees it, is more than impotent; it is gratuitous and purposeless. . . . The waves which batter the cockleshells change their direction at every instant. Their navigation is a vast adventure, but intolerably fortuitous and inept—a voyage without chart, compass, sun or stars" (89). In other words, man's efforts are completely ineffective and irrelevant to his life's course. Man is no better than the helpless cockleshells that are battered by the indifferent and uncontrollable waves of the ocean. In so many words, Dreiser himself communicated this thesis in his novels as well as his magazine and newspaper interviews. In 1902, Dreiser told a reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* of his purpose for *Sister Carrie*: "What I desired to do was to show two little human beings, or more, playing in and out among the giant legs of circumstance" ("Author of 'Sister Carrie' 3). The size of the humans relative to "circumstance," like that of Mencken's cockleshells and ocean waves, illustrates the powerlessness of man against an indifferent world. Five years later, Dreiser spoke more directly about his philosophy of life to the *New York Times Saturday Review of Books*. The article begins, "'The mere living of your daily life,' says Theodore Dreiser, 'is drastic drama. To-day there may be some disease lurking in your veins that will end your life to-morrow. You may have a firm grasp on the opportunity that in a

moment more will slip through your fingers. The banquet of to-night may crumble to the crust of the morning. Life is tragedy.'" When the interviewer asked if the ability to write could make life worthwhile, Dreiser responded, "No, not under all circumstances, because you can't use ability except under certain favorable conditions. The very power of which you speak may, thwarted, only serve to make a man more miserable" (Notman 4). Circumstance, with the power to "thwart" even talent, to make chances "slip through your fingers," to end your life on a whim of biology, is an overwhelmingly powerful force for Dreiser.

Sister Carrie offers the reader a sense of the world's enormous power over the relatively helpless human characters by describing Chicago in terms of one of the largest natural forces on Earth—the ocean. Upon Carrie's first approach to Chicago by train, she envisions herself plunging into the ocean. The narrator communicates her state of mind, as she reviews her situation: "[t]he fact that she was alone, away from home, rushing into a great sea of life and endeavour, began to tell. She could not help but feel a little choked for breath . . ." (*Sister Carrie* 7). When Carrie envisions Chicago as the ocean, she begins to feel short of breath, as if she were drowning in the city. As Carrie actually steps off the train platform and into Chicago for the first time, the narrator pictures her as a young girl treading water in a lonely ocean, at the mercy of the large, uncaring body of water: "With her sister she was much alone, a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea" (8). This forceful, recurrent image provides a metaphor to Carrie's situation in Chicago. The ocean is an absolutely uncontrollable force of nature. As the narrator's description points out, the ocean is "thoughtless" in its character as an inanimate force, which makes it all the more frightening. The sea does not care about the small human girl struggling in its

waters. The narrative's frequent use of oceanic references to describe the city indicates that the reader should attribute to Chicago the same power and inscrutability as the sea, as Carrie apparently does.[iv] During her search for work in the city's business section, she feels even more strongly that she is in the grips of a powerful but unfeeling force. After an entire day of futile search for work, Carrie reflects:

> On every hand, to her fatigued senses, the great business portion grew larger, harder, more stolid in its indifference. It seemed as if all was closed to her, that the struggle was too fierce for her to hope to do anything at all. Men and women hurried by in long, shifting lines. She felt the flow of the tide of effort and interest—felt her own helplessness without quite realizing the wisp on the tide that she was. (*Sister Carrie* 20)

Again the narrator analogizes the city as the ocean to create the feeling of being in the grips of a vast, uncaring force of nature. Carrie struggles against it, but the metaphor suggests that she is as helplessly at the mercy of the city as a piece of flotsam and jetsam on the crest of an ocean wave. The alignment of the ocean and the city is also particularly suited because the natural world all of the power in the deterministic world of *Sister Carrie*.

If we understand human will as something entirely personal to the character, something that is in its very nature free and separate from external forces of determination, then the characters of *Sister Carrie* have little to none. The novel's frequent mention of the "forces" that act upon its human characters sets up an opposition between nature (the forces) and man (the characters) seems to allow the characters an

independent force of will, as there cannot be an opposition between a force and a non-entity. However, the narrative repeatedly demonstrates the influence of the natural forces upon the characters, indicating that the human will is, as Haeckel lamented, "fatally determined by the organization of the individual and . . . dependent on the momentary condition of his [man's] environment" (131).

Sister Carrie's first chapter title reads: "The Magnet Attracting: A Waif Amid Forces." Since Carrie is immediately introduced and treated as the protagonist in this first chapter, the reader can assume that Carrie is the waif, a characterization of weakness. Further describing her as a "waif amid forces" impresses upon the reader the power the forces have over Carrie. The narrator outlines only two scenarios for her:

> When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standards of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility. The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. (*Sister Carrie* 1)

Notice that the girl's own will, her personal expression of force, plays no role at all in these two options. The determining action comes from another agency than herself: either someone saves her, or she succumbs to the wiles of the city "and becomes worse." The attractive lure of the city emerges in the first chapter as one of the main "forces" that acts upon Carrie. The above passage continues, "half the undoing of the unsophisticated

and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman. A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives, appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms" (*Sister Carrie* 1-2). The last sentence describes the city as perceived by the senses of the "natural mind," visual and auditory, which are "astonished." The city appeals to the viscerally-oriented, "natural" part of a human, the part that might be characterized as "animal."

Dreiser had described the city's magnetic force of attraction four years prior to the first publication of *Sister Carrie*. In an 1896 article for *Ev'ry Month*, Dreiser describes man's attraction to large cities as something like a biological imperative. He writes, "To go to the city is the changeless desire of the mind. . . . To join in the great, hurrying throng; to see the endless lights, the great shops and stores, the towering structures and palatial mansions, becomes a desire which the mind can scarcely resist. Mansions and palaces, libraries, museums, the many theatres and resorts of wealth and pleasure all attract, just as a great cataract attracts." The appeal to the senses prefigures that of Dreiser's later description of Chicago in *Sister Carrie*. The city seems to appeal to the part of a human that most clearly belongs to the natural world: the body. Accordingly, Dreiser elevates the attraction between humans and cities to the status of a natural law:

> There is a magnetism in nature that gives more to the many . . . It is a magnetism which no one understands, which philosophers call the law of segregation, and which simply means that there is something in nature to make the many wish to be where the many are. From that law there is no escape and both men and planets obey it. It makes towns, cities, nations

> and worlds, and does nothing perhaps, except show what mites we are in the stream and current of nature. (Dreiser, "Reflections" 397-8)

In this passage, Dreiser sets up an unmistakable power paradigm in which nature commands the order of all things from humans to planets. In comparison with the force of nature, even a world is but a mite being helplessly carried along by a rushing stream. In 1909, Dreiser depicted the same model in an article entitled "The Man on the Sidewalk," in which he wrote, "[n]ature is so grim. The city, which represents it so effectively, is also grim. It does not care at all. It is not conscious. The passing of so small an organism as that of a man or a woman is nothing to it" (413). Notice that Dreiser identifies the city as nature, a further hint that we can understand the forces of the city in *Sister Carrie* as the forces of nature. This passage is similar to the expression of philosophy in *Sister Carrie* and "Reflections," which both emphasize the utter insignificance of man to nature and evoke the sort of pathos that *Sister Carrie*'s sea/city metaphor might elicit. Man's activity is "nothing" to nature. In other words, nothing that man can do can affect the inevitable, insensible course of the natural order.

Into the natural order comes Carrie, a young, naïve girl who hopes to bend the exciting city of Chicago to her will. The narrator describes Carrie as "quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things. A half-equipped little knight she was, venturing to reconnoiter the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy, which should make it prey and subject" (*Sister Carrie* 2). In other words, she intends to master the city and force from it the happiness (in material gains) she desires. After she has been promised a job, Carrie finds a renewed strength in her resolve to "live in Chicago. . . She would have a better time

than she had ever had before—she would be happy" (21). This resolution seems to belong entirely to Carrie, an intention that she forms out of her personal will. At the very least, the narrative does not link this desire to a biological impulse, as it does with her attraction to the stimulus of the city, for instance. At the beginning of the novel, Carrie believes that they key to this goal is to find a good job that will allow her to earn her a right to belong to the city and take part in its pleasures, and she attempts to effect change in her circumstances to this end.

As Carrie experiences the city, its forces of attraction begin to direct her will. In chapter seven, "The Lure of the Material: Beauty Speaks for Itself," Carrie browses through a department store and feels a powerful pull of consumerism as she surveys the store's goods: "[h]er woman's heart was warm with desire for them. How would she look in this, how charming that would make her! . . . What would she not have given if she could have had them all! She would look fine too, if only she had some of these things" (51). The desire for beauty speaks "for itself," as the chapter title proclaims, which indicates that "itself" is something separate from Carrie's own will. Desire is a force that acts upon Carrie, one of the attractive forces of the city. Critic Blanch Gelfant observes that Dreiser's characters are "subject to ineluctable drives that characters experience as desire. Desire is a natural force in the novel" (179). Gelfant reads Carrie's desire for material things in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a theory not developed until the 1950s, but one which undeniably participates in the same turn to natural causation evinced by Darwin and Spencer. As Gelfant explains, Maslow proposed that human behavior was motivated by an ever-constant, successive chain of needs, in which "each satisfied need released a new and higher need, making desire

insatiable" (Gelfant 179). Similarly, *Sister Carrie*'s characters seem to be physically affected by their impulses and feelings, beset by their own biologically determined needs. Gelfant compares the two philosophies: "Maslow, like Dreiser, considered desire genetic, a biologically determined component of a self driven to seek satisfaction" (179). It is possible to interpret desire as a manifestation of will, since both are internal to the person. However, Dreiser's novel portrays the desire as something separate to human will, something which acts as an other by commanding the will to action. In *Sister Carrie*'s world, man's wants and needs are the internal representation of the natural world, a force stronger than the relatively impotent human will.

The otherness of the natural side of human nature is a product of its animal character. The narrator identifies "self-interest" as Carrie's "guiding characteristic" (*Sister Carrie* 2). This description recalls Herbert Spencer's concept of "survival of the fittest," a theory based on Darwin's work in which each creature must take care of itself in a battle for existence. At the point of this description, Carrie is literally battling for survival in Chicago. The narrator again indicates that Carrie is part animal, a creature of nature, when she accepts money from Drouet for the first time. Her acceptance signals Drouet's guileless intentions, since

> [t]he unintellectual are not so helpless. Nature has taught the beasts of the field to fly when unheralded danger threatens. She has put into the small, unwise head of the chipmunk the untutored fear of poisons. 'He keepeth His creatures whole,' was not written of beasts alone. Carrie was unwise, and, therefore, like the sheep in its unwisdom, strong in feeling. The

> instinct of self-protection, strong in all such natures, was roused but feebly, if at all, by the overtures of Drouet. (*Sister Carrie* 49)

Notice the emphasis in this passage on nature and instinct, and the clear portrayal of Carrie as another type of "creature." This characterization recalls both Darwin's description of an animal's struggle for survival, part of which is avoiding predators, and Spencer's overlay of Darwin's principles on human society. By invoking the scientific studies of which the contemporary reader of *Sister Carrie* likely would have been aware, the narrator presents Carrie's animal nature as another force that acts upon her: sometimes it keeps her safe, in a manner, but it is important to note that her animal-like impulses are under the control of the natural world, not her human will.

Throughout the novel, the compulsions of Carrie's human nature override her relatively feeble assertion of will. When she first arrives, Carrie is met at the train station by her sister, who "carried with her most of the grimness of shift and toil" (*Sister Carrie* 8). In her sister's apartment, Carrie feels "the drag of a lean and narrow life" (9). Her sister's life provides a discouraging contrast to the appearance of the well-dressed women of the city that she observes while looking for a job. As Carrie experiences more of Chicago, a "flame of envy lighted in her heart. She realized in a dim way how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart" (17). The attractions of the city, those superhuman forces, are at work on Carrie, kindling a desire that will soon prove powerful enough to override her intentions. In the meantime, Carrie reasserts her will by continuing to pursue a job, which is the change that she intends to effect in her circumstances. She begins work in a shoe factory, convinces her sister to take less for rent, and "[t]he new

arrangement might have worked if sickness had not intervened" (43). Chance, perhaps the most universally recognized force at work in the world, "intervenes" in Carrie's plans. Because of Carrie's illness, she loses her job. Recovering from illness, unemployed, forced to search through the city for work again, Carrie is more vulnerable to the forces at work inside of her, primarily her natural (animalistic) desire for comfort. At this point, Drouet offers to give her twenty dollars. At first, Carrie refuses the money, since her intention to make her own way does not accord with accepting unearned help. However, Drouet soon inflames the force of her desire for beauty:

> "Come on" he said, "I'll see you through all right. Get yourself some clothes."
>
> It was the first reference he had made to that subject, and now she realized how bad off she was. In his crude way he had struck a key-note. Her lips trembled a little. . .
>
> He pressed her hand gently and she tried to withdraw it. At this he held it fast, and she no longer protested. Then he slipped the greenbacks he had into her palm, and when she began to protest, he whispered:
>
> "I'll loan it to you—that's all right. I'll loan it to you."
>
> He made her take it. She felt bound to him by a strange tie of affection now. (47)

This passage is a description of a struggle, a much more powerful and prolonged struggled than the small incident on the train. Carrie's will strains to make choices that will lead her toward the course she has set for herself, to earn a place in Chicago on her own. But the forces at work upon her are greater than the strength of her will. Drouet

fulfills his role as the "human tempter" that Dreiser mentioned in his description of the city's forces, and Carrie's nature, her desire for beauty, rises at Drouet's mention of clothes to press her from within. As Carrie's will crumbles under the double pressure of these internal and external forces, the language is unequivocally divests Carrie of agency: "[h]e made her take it."

But the larger struggle is not over yet. Back at her sister's apartment, away from the active force that is Drouet's temptation, Carrie's will reasserts itself and she resolves to give back the money. She considers going back home, where she could presumably follow part of her intention and support herself, but again the internal forces of her nature come to bear on her as the thought of going back to Columbia City "aroused all the antagonism of her nature. . . . Here was the great, mysterious city which was still a magnet for her" (*Sister Carrie* 50). We can see the force of attraction working on Carrie's "nature," the part of her that is biologically determined. Carrie's attraction to the city persuades her to stay in the city, but she still intends to return the money. However, when she meets with Drouet and tells him that she couldn't take the money, the persuasions of Drouet and her own nature conspire against her. Ignoring her refusal of the money, Drouet offers to rent her a flat and take care of her for a while. As she hears his offer, "Carrie looked out through the window into the busy street. There it was, the admirable, great city, so fine when you were not poor. An elegant coach, with a prancing pair of bays, passed by, carrying in its upholstered depths a young lady" (53). Carrie feels the attractive forces of the city pleading with her to stay by any means possible and offering her the promise of taking the place of the young lady in her elegant coach. Her desires begin to assert themselves over her will. As she begins to be convinced, the

narrator mentions another, more obviously animalistic force of persuasion: a full belly. He writes, "[u]nder the influence of a good dinner and Drouet's radiating presence, the scheme proposed seemed feasible" (54). In this scene, Carrie is also in a department store looking at warm jackets, which adds another force luring her away from the course she has set for herself. Carrie's will, which the narrator will later align with her reason, makes a final attempt to regain control by surfacing doubts about the suitability of Drouet's offer: "[i]n all of Carrie's actions there was a touch of misgiving. The deeper she sank into the entanglement, the more she imagined that the thing hung upon the few remaining things she had not done. Since she had not done these, there was a way out" (54). The language of bondage in this passage portrays Carrie being wrapped up by forces beyond her control. She imagines that the decision rests on her actions, but the wording makes it clear that this is an illusion. She is already "sinking" among these forces, recalling the earlier image of the city as a great, powerful ocean surrounding and controlling Carrie. In the image of "entanglement," we can also see a reference to Drouet's hold on her after he lends her the money, "[s]he felt bound to him by a strange tie of affection now" (47). Drouet's actions, something she cannot control, has "bound" and "tied" her to him. Drouet's further persuasions overcome even her misgivings, her will's last gasp as it drowns: "[s]he listened until her misgivings vanished" (55). Carrie moves into the apartment Drouet pays for and lets him buy her a new wardrobe. The old intention of making her way independently is lost, as is her will's first significant battle against the city's "cunning wiles" (1).

Despite Carrie's submission to the compulsions of her nature, she does have an independent will that struggles against these compulsions. The narrator points to her an

inner struggle, musing, “[i]n Carrie—as in how many of our worldlings do they not?—instinct and reason, desire and understanding, were at war for the mastery” (*Sister Carrie* 57). This passage also identifies reason and understanding as “free-will,” which is presumably “free” from natural instinct and desire. Carrie does posses an individual will, a part of her character which is not determined by the impulses of the natural world, but it is much weaker than the forces of nature. The narrator continues, “She [Carrie] followed whither her cravings led. She was as yet more drawn than she drew” (57). The final two sentences of this reflection make it clear that Carrie’s will lost the war. As yet, she is “drawn” against her will by her animal desires. As in this passage, the narrator’s choice of language and metaphor throughout the novel communicates that the characters are forced into action by external compulsions.

After being a metaphoric prisoner of war, Carrie becomes more simply a victim a few pages later. In her first evening as Drouet’s kept woman, Carrie is uneasy about her action, possibly due to a restless stirring of her own will. But soon, “[u]nder 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” (*Sister Carrie* 60). The nature of the victim metaphor implies the subject’s submission to a greater force similar to the previous metaphor of a defeated party of war. As a “victim,” Carrie is “under the influence” of hypnotism, a method widely understood to eliminate the will and produce an absolutely passive subject. In this metaphor, Carrie’s will is completely subjugated by the hypnotist, which is here jointly the city and Drouet. These metaphors contribute to

the reader's sense of human will as weak in the face of the sorts of "forces" mentioned in the first chapter title.

The narrator's strong verbs also communicate the forcible constriction of the characters' wills. Notice the language of force, for instance, as the narrator relates Carrie's growing involvement with Hurstwood, reflecting that Carrie "had been *dominated* by distress and the enthusiastic *forces* of relief which Drouet represented at the opportune moment when she *yielded* to him" (*Sister Carrie* 88; emphasis here and throughout the rest of the paragraph my own). Her feelings, which spring from her animal nature, dominate her as actual forces and she yields under their weight. Hurstwood agrees with the narrator, as we hear him think that "some difficult conditions had *pushed* this troubled creature into his presence," and later Carrie is "*bound up completely* in the man's atmosphere" (91, 95). The thought of being an actress "had taken a *mighty hold* upon her" and the glamour of the acting life "*seized* her completely," even while in Hurstwood's decline all his wealth "was all *wrested* from him" (129, 246, 247). As the last instance demonstrates, this language is not exclusive to the description of Carrie, although they naturally focus on her as the novel's protagonist. Outside influences explicitly force themselves on Carrie: she sympathetically gives way to Hurstwood ". . . as the value of the look upon his face *forced itself upon her*," and when she speaks to Ames, a friend of a friend, his conversation gives rise to a "new attitude *forcing itself distinctly upon her* for the first time" (211, 237). Even Carrie's rise is couched in the language of force, as the narrator reasons that Carrie "seemed ever capable of getting herself into the tide of change where she would be easily *borne along*" (225). The multitude of instances in which the narrator attributes the agency to outside

forces and casts the characters in the light of helpless victim of these forces creates a cumulative effect. As characters are drawn, dominated, pushed, bound up, held, forced, and borne along, the reader can agree with the narrator that "man is but a wisp in the wind" (56).

And what of the two men who act upon Carrie as part of the city's forces? Although they become forces of attraction for Carrie, they are themselves driven by other compulsions. Drouet is not fundamentally different from Carrie, but by chance he has not come against some of the more malignant forces at play in the world. The narrator emphasizes the precariousness of Drouet's position: "[i]n his good clothes and fine health, he was a merry, unthinking moth of the lamp. Deprived of his position, and struck by a few of the involved and baffling forces which sometimes play upon man he would have been as helpless as Carrie—as helpless, as non-understanding, as pitiable, if you will, as she" (*Sister Carrie* 48). Drouet's description here as a moth fluttering around a lamp is similar to Carrie's as "a waif among forces": they are both helpless, as Drouet's description mentions, and both at the mercy of larger powers. A moth, after all, is literally at the mercy of air current, and in the situation described above, is at the mercy of the overpowering attractions of the light. It is only chance that Drouet has not been shredded by the wind or burnt by the flame. And yet, as an "unthinking" creature, Drouet is ruled at least as much as Carrie by the forces of his nature. Recall the narrator's description of Carrie as "unwise, and, therefore, like the sheep in its unwisdom, strong in feeling" (49). So too is Drouet "strong in feeling," and the urges of his nature dictate his action. The narrator explains that "[f]emininity affected his feelings. He was the creature of an inborn desire" (48). The appellation "creature" reminds the reader again of Darwin,

as does Drouet's attraction to the opposite sex. Part of survival in the animal kingdom is procreation, and the narrator reveals Drouet's animal urges: "[h]e loved to make advances to women, to have them succumb to his charms, not because he was a cold-blooded, dark, scheming villain, but because his inborn desire urged him to that as a chief delight" (49). Drouet pursues Carrie because he is warm-blooded, an animal, and part of the "inborn desire" of an animal is for the opposite sex. In this way we can see that although Drouet is a force that acts upon Carrie, he is himself driven by the force of his own nature.

Hurstwood is a more complicated character than Drouet; Hurstwood's greater capacity for reflection and more sensitive emotional life leaves him prey to the forces to which Drouet is oblivious. The great turning point of Hurstwood's life, his theft of his employers' money, is a cause and effect train of influences and circumstance which overcome him. The novel elaborately builds up his dissatisfaction with his home life, in which he is beginning to feel irrelevant and without power, an interesting microcosm of the novel's greater theme of inefficacy of will. This dissatisfaction pushes his interest toward undemanding Carrie. His attentions toward Carrie further irritate his wife and alert her to the advisability of divorcing him and seizing his assets. Hurstwood's worry about the letters from his wife's lawyers sets the stage for the night of his theft. A cause and effect chain such as this is basically a flow chart of forces, in which each action has an equal and opposite reaction. When he arrived at his post (in the bar) on the evening of his theft and flight, "disturbed as was his state, he was rather relieved to find company," and he begins to drink more than he is accustomed to. His inebriated state, attributed as an effect of his home troubles, affects his decision-making. Another element of chance

comes into play as Hurstwood discovers the safe uncharacteristically open. Parenthetically, the narrator notes that the safe is open because of the absentmindedness of an employee preoccupied by his own problems (*Sister Carrie* 190). When the narrator remarks that Hurstwood "was no fool to led blindly away by such an errant proposition as this, but his situation was peculiar," the "situation" indicated is a confluence of influences and chance: Hurstwood's discontent with his home life, his uncharacteristic drinking, the employee's lapse (due to his own "problem") (191).

From here, Hurswood's own inner desires take control. In the long passage portraying Hurstwood's wavering between returning the money and stealing it, the narrator highlights the otherness of Hurstwood's desire. As he looks at the bills,

> "Count them," said a voice in his ear.
>
> He put his hand into the first of the boxes and lifted the stack . . .
>
> "Why don't I shut the safe?" his mind said to itself, lingering. "What makes me pause here?"
>
> For answer there came the strangest words:
>
> "Did you ever have ten thousand dollars in ready money?" . . .
>
> He also opened his desk, sitting down before it, only to think strange thoughts.
>
> "The safe is open," said a voice. "There is just the least little crack in it. The lock has not been sprung."
>
> The manager floundered among a jumble of thoughts. Now all the entanglement of the day came back. Also, the thought that here was a solution. (191)

In this passage, Hurstwood's desires speak as if from outside him, as "a voice in his ear," "the strangest words." This language identifies Hurstwood's desires as internal forces separate from himself. In contrast, his reason is identified as a part of himself, as when "Why don't I shut the safe?" is attributed to "his mind." The dichotomy set up by this passage between Hurstwood's mind (as a representative of himself) and his desires identify the situation as a battle between Hurstwood's will and the forces of animal desire. As he wages his battle, the force of chance decides the outcome as the safe door swings closed: "[w]hile the money was in his hand the lock clicked. It had sprung! Did he do it? He grabbed the knob and pulled vigorously. It had closed. Heavens! He was in for it now, sure enough" (193). The narrator attributes the agency to the safe, not Hurstwood: "the lock clicked. It had sprung. . . It had closed." Led as Hurstwood is to this situation by a unique confluences of circumstances, the fact that the deciding factor is the safe's action instead of his own is the final blow to Hurstwood's will. As Hurstwood himself realizes, "he was in for it now, sure enough."

It is easy for a reader of *Sister Carrie* to criticize the main characters, Carrie, Drouet, and Hurstwood, for their perceived weaknesses of will. However, the narrator makes it clear that human will is weak as a result of incomplete social evolution: "Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason" (*Sister Carrie* 56). This echoes Comte's three stages of human society, which charts the progress of human reason in understanding and harnessing the laws that govern the universe.[v] The narrator further elaborates on the animal side of human nature and how this affects our will: "On the tiger no responsibility rests. We see him aligned by nature with the forces

of life—he is born into their keeping and without thought he is protected. We see man far removed from the lairs of the jungles, his innate instincts dulled by a too near approach to free-will, his free-will not sufficiently developed to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance" (56). In this intermediate stage of evolution, man's own natural urges work as a force against him because he is no longer completely aligned with the natural world. The element that keeps him from belonging to nature, his will, has not developed and strengthened enough to take over and rule the natural forces. The result is a constant internal battle in each person between the natural impulses and the human reason. The narrator aligns the reason with will, which he calls "free-will," even though it is clear that the will is not entirely free yet from the control of natural instincts and urges such as those the tiger feels. The narrator is explicit about this conflict:

> He [man] is becoming too wise to hearken always to instincts and desires; he is still too weak to always prevail against them. As a beast, the forces of life aligned him with them; as a man, he has not yet wholly learned to align himself with the forces. In this intermediate stage he wavers—neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free-will. He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts. . . . (56-57)

Although the will always may assert itself, it is overpowered by the combined power of the inner and outer forces. Thus we see Carrie, Drouet, and Hurstwood being controlled by their inner natures, even in conflict with their wills.

We can use this paradigm, the struggle of the will against animal nature, to understand each of the novel's three main characters: Carrie's "instincts and desires" draw her interminably toward the prospect of material success offered in turn by Drouet, Hurstwood, and the stage, while her reason and will struggle weakly to protest in the form of Carrie's "misgivings" that her actions are neither appropriate nor designed to be fruitful.[vi] Drouet's reason seems to be the least developed of the three, as he moves through the world almost entirely on instinct. According to the paradigm, Drouet has the least problems because his will puts up the least struggle against his animalism, and so he is the most in harmony with his world. However, it is important to note that this means that he has the least free-will. The paradigm also reveals Hurstwood's long wavering over the theft of the money as a clear cut struggle between his desires and his will. As the narrator predicts, his will is the weaker and loses out against the more powerful forces of animal nature, circumstance, and chance. The sentences that conclude the narrator's description of the evolution of will do offer some hope for the eventual strengthening and triumph of the human will: further evolution. "We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action," the narrator reminds us, indicating that we will eventually evolve a better balance between our animal instinct and our human will. There is irony, however, in trusting to evolution, a force beyond our control, to grant us power of will (57).

In *Sister Carrie*, happy endings only seem possible in fairy tales. The novel makes two references to Elfland, a place which apparently represents a world of possibilities closed to the inhabitants of the naturalistic world for whom "life is tragedy." The chapter in which Carrie takes her first chorus role on a professional stage is entitled

"In Elf Land Disporting: The Grim World Without" (*Sister Carrie* 276). In this chapter, Carrie's home life falls apart, while in the theatre "she saw a large, empty, shadowy play-house, still redolent of the perfumes and blazonry of the night, and notable for its rich, oriental appearance. The wonder of it awed and delighted her. Blessed be its wondrous reality" (280). Given the title of the chapter, as well as the opposition between Carrie's reality at home and the "wondrous reality" she takes part in on the stage, Dreiser seems to comment on what is possible in the real world and what is possible only in an "empty, shadowy" world of make-believe. In fact, Carrie learns that happiness exists solely in story-book tales in the chapter entitled "And This is Not Elf Land: What Gold Will Not Buy" (328). At this point in the novel, Carrie has been roused from her lengthy dependence on men who have kept her as a mistress and begins to try again to make choices that might steer her towards fulfillment. She has an idea of what she wants to be, a leading lady on the stage, and she works assiduously to obtain her goal. She wins progressively larger roles, but unfortunately, since "this is not Elf Land," as the narrator insists, Carrie finds out that even fame and fortune cannot make her happy.

Sister Carrie ends exactly as it begins, with Carrie sitting alone, looking unhappily out of a window for a better life. The closing passage describes Carrie: "often disillusioned, she was still waiting for the halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real." It concludes by addressing Carrie directly, "Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel" (369). The narrator may also be talking directly to the reader, who comes away with a feeling of hopelessness. All of Carrie's strivings

have come to nothing. The final scene's exact mirroring of the first scene, both of which portray Carrie looking anxiously out of a window for her happiness, suggests that she has been unable to effect a significant change in her situation. She might be looking in the right direction, ironically; if we can read the scenery at which she gazes as a representation of the natural world, Carrie is looking to the force that has the only power to effect change in her situation. However, this scene was not Dreiser's first ending for the novel. Dreiser originally meant Hurstwood's suicide scene to conclude the narrative (Dowell 144), ending the novel with this: "'What's the use?' he [Hurstwood] said, weakly, as he stretched himself to rest" (Sister Carrie 367). Hurstwood's decision to stop fighting the natural order is the crescendo of the novel's theme of the human will's inefficacy. Even his final surrender is said "weakly," indicating Hurstwood's ultimate impotence in a world of overpowering forces. This world is not Elfland. Efficacy and sovereignty of will, *Sister Carrie* moralizes, are only found in fantasy.

III. CHAPTER TWO:

THE KING OF ELFLAND'S DAUGHTER

In contrast to the determinism of *Sister Carrie*, *The King of Elfland's Daughter* portrays a world of ever-renewing possibility—but both novels describe the same world. The first words of *The King of Elfland's Daughter* declare it to describe the condition of the real world in the same way expected of a realist novel. In a short, to-the-point preface Dunsany writes,

> I hope that no suggestion of any strange land that may be conveyed by the title will scare readers away from this book; for, though some chapters do indeed tell of Elfland, in the greater part of them there is no more to be shown than the face of the fields we know, and ordinary English woods and a common village and valley, a good twenty or twenty-five miles from the border of Elfland. (*Elfland's Daughter* vii)

This assurance is signed "LORD DUNSANY," lending it the good authority of the author. It is a bold statement to begin a novel, distancing *The King of Elfland's Daughter* from alternate world fantasies like Barrie's 1901 *Peter Pan*, and dream fantasies like Eddison's 1922 *The Worm Ouroboros*. By claiming that the novel describes the ordinary world, "ordinary English woods," and "a common village," Dunsany effectively classifies it as realistic fiction.

The narrative repeatedly emphasizes the reality of Erl, as in the chapter titles "Alvaric Comes Back to Earth After Many Years" and "On the Verge of Earth" (*Elfland's Daughter* 25, 139). The use of the scientific name "Earth" as the context of Erl lends the novel a feeling of scientific veracity and furthers Dunsany's claim that its primary setting is the same real-world setting of the reader, the same real-world setting as realistic novels like *Sister Carrie*. The narrative situates the events of the novel in real-world time as well as place when the narrator claims that Orion's unicorn horn is the same one that the Pope gave to King Francis, as recorded by Benvenuto Cellini (133). The passage's name-dropping lends the anecdote the air of "A Historical Fact" (the name of the chapter), which is strengthened by the narrator's attempt to give a specific date: "[t]he year of the gift to King Francis would be about 1530, the horn being mounted in gold; and the contract went to Tobbia and not to Benvenuto Cellini." Description of mundane details like taxidermy techniques and contracts for services aligns the novel's events with the ordinary world in which such practical details matter. The narrator continues in what might be a tongue-in-cheek jibe at serious realists: "I mention the date because there are those who care little for a tale if it be not here and there supported by history, and who even in history care more for fact than philosophy. If any such reader have (sic) followed the fortunes of Orion so far he will be hungry by now for a date or a historical fact. As for the date, I give him 1530" (134). This comment might be a sly poke at realism, which had been charged with tirelessly compiling dry details in order to communicate a sense of the real. The narrator's aside about the historical record of the unicorn horn accomplishes the same goal as realism's inundation of detailed description:

both identify the writing as a portrayal of the real world, the familiar world of the reader. Like the preface and the repeated use of the scientific term "Earth," the "Historical Fact" chapter is a blunt assertion that *The King of Elfland's Daughter* describes the real world.

Dunsany's straddling of fantasy and realism broaches the question of fantasy's relationship to the real world: can fantasy literature reveal the conditions of reality in the same fashion aspired to by realist novels? Fantasy author and critic Neil Gaiman answers this question in his 1998 preface to *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, writing, "for those who feel that they need historical accuracy in their fictions, this novel contains one historically verifiable date. It is in Chapter 20. But there are, I suspect, few who will need a date to establish the veracity of the story. It is a true story, as these things go, in every way that matters" (xiii). The equivocation "in every way that matters" suggests the obvious conflict in Dunsany's claim that Erl is in the real world despite its proximity to Elfland: the story's inclusion of a magical realm classifies it as fantasy, and so its relationship to the real world is not precisely that of realist fiction. However, when Gaiman describes the novel as "a true story" he indicates that it does render the real world. Dunsany's insistence that *The King of Elfland's Daughter* takes place in no "strange land," no purely fantastic setting, but in "ordinary English fields" declares that the novel does describe the real world, as do realist texts, even though it is not a wholly mimetic representation (vii). With each repetition of the phrase "the fields we know," we are reminded that *The King of Elfland's Daughter* describes what is possible in our own fields, our own familiar world, in the same way that *Sister Carrie* describes what is not possible in our world.

Some theorists consider fantasy to be uniquely suited for revealing the circumstances of the real world. In “The Ethics of Elfland” (1908), for instance, G.K. Chesterton explains that fantasy literature can offer a clear perspective on reality because it inspires a wonder in readers that they no longer attach to their normal, everyday reality. Chesterton writes that tales of Elfland “say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green” (Chesterton). Having become overly familiar with our world (in which apples are green), we no longer clearly perceive it. Fantasy, with its golden apples, restores our sense of wonder and thus causes us to refocus our attention on our own reality. Since realist novels aim to describe reality with scientific exactitude, their mimetic worlds will be obscured by the same blinders of over-familiarity. Chesterton writes, “Boys like romantic tales; but babies like realistic tales—because they find them romantic. In fact, a baby is about the only person, I should think, to whom a modern realistic novel could be read without boring him.” Fantastic elements restore the readers’ wonder of the world, leading to a better, clearer perspective on reality. Chesterton’s theory addresses the assumption that only realist novels can represent the real world, while fantasy literature’s inaccuracy consigns it the irrelevant realm of pure make-believe. Dunsany’s assertion that *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* is realistic, despite its obvious participation in the fantastic mode, is made for the benefit of those who privilege realism’s accuracy, “who care little for a tale if it be not here and there supported by history” (*Elfland’s Daughter* vii, 134). If this is the sort of audience that Dunsany anticipates for his novel, then proclaiming the novel to be realistic, concerned with the real world of the reader, is the only way in which he can make it clear that the novel offers a perspective of the same world as do realist texts.

The King of Elfland's Daughter quite literally presents a new way to see our world through the foreign perspective of Elfland. The magical realm of Elfland coexists in the novel with the real world, which is primarily represented by the village of Erl. The crossover between realms occurs when the parliament of Erl approaches their ruler to request that the village be ruled by a magic lord in the future. To this end, the son of the current lord crosses the border between worlds to seek the King of Elfland's daughter, Princess Lirazel. A life-long denizen of a foreign world, Lirazel experiences the common, every-day sights of Earth for the first time when she flees from her home with Alvaric and enters "the fields we know." The narrator recounts her wonder at our world:

> When Lirazel looked upon the fields we know, as strange to her as once they have been to us, their beauty delighted her. She laughed to see the haystacks and loved their quaintness. A lark was singing and Lirazel spoke to it, and the lark seemed not to understand, but she turned to other glories of our fields, for all were new to her . . . It was early morning and the sun was shining, giving soft colours to our fields, and Lirazel rejoiced in those fields of ours at more common things than one might believe there were amongst the familiar sights of Earth's every day. (*Elfland's Daughter* 26).

The "common things" and "familiar sights of Earth's every day" delight Lirazel because, being new to her, she is able to experience full "quaintness" and beauty of the things of our Earth, instead of being hampered by the blinders of long-familiarity like Alvaric and the reader. The narrator reminds readers, as does Chesterton, that we too have once perceived the world as Lirazel does, noting that the reality of Earth is "as strange to her as

once they have been to us." The emphasis on "common" and "familiar" and the designation "Earth's" echoes Dunsany's assertion in the preface that the countryside of Erl belongs to the reader's every day world, as does the narrator's inclusion of the reader in the pronoun "us." Lirazel's first reaction to Earthly objects affects an answering wonder in Alvaric. As Lirazel first discovers sights that are common to Alvaric (and the reader), "[s]o glad was she, so gay, with her cries of surprise and her laughter, that there seemed thenceforth to Alvaric a beauty that he had never dreamed of in buttercups, and a humour in carts that he never had thought of before. Each moment she found with a cry of joyous discovery some treasure of Earth's that he had not known to be fair" (26-27). Lirazel's wonder allows Alvaric to gain a clearer perspective "that he had never thought of before" on his world. *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, as a whole, communicates a sense of wonder to the reader by demonstrating a renewed perspective on reality.

Lirazel's fascination with Earth springs from more than just the novelty of a foreign land. A small incident during Lirazel's first experience of Earth hints at the most important difference between Elfland and Earth. As Alvaric observes Lirazel's delight with his homeland, "he saw that her crown of ice had melted away. And thus she came from the palace that may only be told of in song, over the fields of which I need not tell, for they were the familiar fields of Earth. . ." (*Elfland's Daughter* 27). Lirazel's crown of ice, preserved for so long in the realm of Elfland, cannot remain intact in the fields we know because our Earth is a realm in which things change.

The possibility of change constitutes Earth's crowning glory. It is one of Lirazel's primary temptations to cross to Earth with Alvaric. As Alvaric names his home to her on the eternal lawn of her father's castle, Lirazel "sighed for a moment for those

fields, for she had heard how life beautifully passes there, and how there are always in those fields young generations, and she thought of the changing seasons and children and age, of which elfin minstrels had sung when they told of Earth" (*Elfland's Daughter* 21). The ever-renewing movement on Earth, "the changing seasons" and the changing generations, fascinate Lirazel, to whom Alvaric tells "tales and fables of the ways of beasts and men, that the folk of Erl had drawn out of the ages, and which their elders told by the fire at evening," as well as realistic tales "of the simple wisdom of old men and old women, telling of harvests and the blossoming of roses and may, of when to plant in gardens, of what wild animals knew; how to heal, how to sow, how to thatch, and of which of the winds in what seasons blow over the fields we know" (22). The theme in Alvaric's tales of Earth is change. Seasonal change allows the winds and the seasons to constantly appear new; both spring and harvest occur, allowing an ever-changing variety, which also allows for a lot of activity: planting, reaping, healing, and so on. In *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, action is not only possible on Earth, it is also effective.

The magical land of Elfland does double duty in the novel as both a fantastic element to provide wonder, in the manner outlined by Chesterton, and as a foil for the movement and change possible on Earth. Change allows action, something which is denied in the timeless, immutable region of magic. Elfland is a static realm, held still by the will of the King. Readers learn that change is somewhere between difficult and impossible in Elfland in Alvaric's first foray across the magic border to rescue Lirazel from "the palace that may be only told of in song" (*Elfland's Daughter* 27). The palace guards attack Alvaric, the interloper, while "Lirazel looked at them sorrowfully, yet could not halt them, for they came by command of her father which she could not avert; and

well she knew that her father might not recall his command, for he had uttered it ages ago at the bidding of Fate" (22). This is an important bit of background that establishes what is possible in Elfland, or rather, what is no longer possible: significant change. At a point in time long past, the King has exerted his will to order the circumstances of Elfland and then hold time still throughout the realm. Now, neither his will nor Lirazel's can have any effect on these original dictates. But Alvaric is from Earth, a place where people can and must act from their own individual wills. He is able to defeat the magic guards, who had "waited for this occasion through all the ages of Elfland," unchanged, and would presumably have remained preserved in their static existence had Alvaric not come. The background of timeless inaction of Elfland, emphasized throughout this scene, provides a perfect foil for the exuberant efficacy of Alvaric who single-handedly effects change in a nearly immutable realm.

Throughout the novel, Elfland is referenced in terms that communicate beauty but also stagnation: Alvaric and Lirazel flee "through the blue everlasting elfin day," leaving behind "the calm in which Elfland forever dreams" (*Elfland's Daughter* 26, 28). "Calm" is, at first glance, an attractive word, but Lirazel makes it clear that too much of it, as in Elfland, is something to escape as she asks rhetorically "[h]ad not a lover come at last to those lawns that shone by the palace only told of in song, and rescued her from that perpetual calm?" (36). The calm of a dream is wonderful if it lasts the space of a dream, but "perpetual calm" sounds like death, in which we might say colloquially that a person "forever dreams." A passage mentioning Lurulu's time away from Earth alludes to "the listless apathy of unchanging ages in Elfland," revealing serious consequences of the

realm's incapacitation of movement and change (148). At one point, the narrator pauses to explain how some action does take place in Elfland despite its timelessness:

> I have said that no time passed at all in Elfland. Yet the happening of events is in itself a manifestation of time, and no event can occur unless time pass. Now it is thus with time in Elfland: in the eternal beauty that dreams in that honied air nothing stirs or fades or dies, *nothing seeks its happiness in movement or change or a new thing*, but has its ecstasy in the perpetual contemplation of all the beauty that has ever been, and which always glows over those enchanted lawns as intense as when first created by incantation or song**.** (40; emphasis added)

The entire magic realm is held without movement by the unwavering motionlessness of its king. Eternal ecstasy is an attractive prospect, but it comes at a price in Elfland, rendering all the inhabitants immobile and their will utterly ineffective. Alavaric's deeds in Elfland causes a ripple of reciprocal action, but when it is spent, "[t]hen nothing moved in Elfland any more and motionless on that splendid throne of which only songs may speak sat the old King mourning in silence" (42). Nothing moves in Elfland, and therefore nothing can change. It is a situation as inflexible as the world of *Sister Carrie* in which natural "forces" act upon helpless people. In Elfland, the inhabitants have as little efficacy of will as those in Dreiser's cities: the timeless immobility of Elfland in *The King of Elfland's Daughter* determines the characters' fate as surely as the natural forces in *Sister Carrie*.

Alvaric, on the other hand, is a member of Earth, a realm of motion and action, and he is able to effect change in either world. Because of Alvaric's actions, the castle's

guards are dead, the princess begins a new life on Earth, and the King stirs, sending a ripple of motion over the kingdom. In other words, Alvaric's actions significantly affect an entire world. By the conclusion of the novel, Alvaric's actions will have literally redrawn the borders of Earth and Elfland. Had Alvaric heeded the veiled hint of the witch, whose wisdom is sought out and respected by other characters in the novel, he might have foreseen the far-reaching consequences of his actions. When he returns to Earth with Lirazel, Alvaric discovers that "quite ten years must have passed away during that one blue day he had spent in Elfland" (*Elfland's Daughter* 27). This is a testament not only to the temporal difference between the two worlds, but also to the relative activity of Earth. Feeling the weight of those lost years, Alvaric speaks with the witch in a moment of uncharacteristic pessimism, expressing frustration that he cannot know the precise effect of his actions:

> "Well," said the witch, "did the sword bring you fortune?"
>
> "Who knows," said Alveric, "what bring fortune, since we cannot see the end?"
>
> . . . .
>
> "Aye," said the witch. "Who knows the end but we?" (32)

The witch counters Alvaric's fatalistic attitude by reminding him, and the reader, that human beings determine their own fate. "Who knows the end but we?" implies that our actions are responsible for our outcome, that humans have the ability to steer their own course through the world.

This is not to say that Dunsany has created a world in which everything goes according to plan. Grave obstacles arise. After Alvaric and Lirazel bear their son, Orion,

it becomes clear to Alvaric that Lirazel will never adapt to the sort of dull familiarity to the things of Earth as those native to it. She continues to act and react in strange ways and cannot understand the common customs of her new home, part of which may be due to her participation in the unchanging nature of Elfland. Lirazel's crown of ice melts when she crosses the border, but she, herself, is not so changeable or adaptable as the people from the fields we know. Because the misunderstanding between Lirazel and Alvaric loosens Earth's hold on Lirazel, the King of Elfland is able to spirit his daughter back home using one of his potent magic runes. In Lirazel's absence from Earth, her son Orion grows up to be a capable man and a strong hunter, though he often thinks of her across the border in "the utter silence of Elfland," where he envisions her "dwelling in lonely ease beyond the rage of Time" (*Elfland's Daughter* 142). In this respect, Dunsany's portrayal of Earth is indeed realistic: nothing is perfect, nothing is easy, and things do not always go according to plan.

Alvaric is wise to worry about unforeseen consequences of his actions. Although action can affect his circumstances, the effect is not guaranteed. This is demonstrated in miniature in the humorous incident of the jam roll. When Lurulu the troll first wanders through the haunts of men, he encounters a little girl passing along her way. He asks her to come to Elfland, but:

> "N-no," said the child.
>
> "Why not?" said the troll.
>
> "Mother made a jam roll this morning," said the child. And she walked on gravely home. Had it not been for that chance jam roll she had gone to Elfland. (*Elfland's Daughter* 48)

This enormous consequence of one sweet could not have been foreseen, and yet it single-handedly changes the course of this child's entire life. Cause and effect chains like this one can be found in any narrative by an active reader, but here the narrator actually pauses to emphasize the important effect of the mother's actions. In *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, human action can effect significant change in the world.

Alvaric holds tenaciously in his belief of the power of his own agency when the King of Elfland spirits his daughter back across the magic border with a powerful rune. Upon discovering where she'd gone, Alvaric sets off to cross into Elfland and win her back. Unfortunately, his task proves neither easy nor uncomplicated. The King has drawn back the borders of his kingdom ahead of Alvaric, who "determined to travel eastward till he found the lost land" (*Elfland's Daughter* 82). His determination carries him through twelve long years of searching, demonstrating Alvaric's ultimate understanding of the witch's reminder that humans must be responsible for determining their own fate. As emphasis, the narrator makes frequent mention of Alvaric's hope that he can obtain his goal through his own action. After his first discovery of Elfland's shift, Alvaric "followed one idea, one inspiration, one hope," and even after traveling far with no success, "yet his fiery hope still shone," and so he "sat by his fire and thought of Lirazel and would not give up hope" (83, 84, 85). Even after the difficulty of his quest becomes clear to Alvaric, in the abandoned wastelands that magic's absence has left, a lone window "shone into his dreams and made forms of hope as fair as any that came from Elfland," which is "whither Alvaric's hopes still turned" (87, 89). Recalling the witch's advice to the reader, Alvaric's tenacious hope is a sign of his faith in his own

agency, his own ability to create change in the world, especially when read against the eternal inflexibility of Elfland.

Eventually, Alvaric does indeed succeed in finding Lirazel, in a manner of speaking. After twelve years of Alvaric's search, "Lirazel stirred where she sat on her father's knee, who, grave and calm on his throne of mist and ice had hardly moved for twelve of our earthly years" (*Elfland's Daughter* 168). Back in Elfland, Lirazel finds now that she can't be wholly content without Earth and her family, Alvaric and Orion. Her dissatisfaction with the relative stagnation of Elfland causes an answering ripple of unrest throughout the realm, alerting her father. The King attempts to hold her interest in Elfland by creating marvels that mimic the natural phenomena of Earth. As she contemplates her father's work, Lirazel is stirred with love for him. When the King appeals to her, Lirazel begins to say that she will stay with him forever: "[h]er lips were parted to say it and love was shining in the blue of her elfin eyes; she was stretching her fair hands out towards her father; when they heard the sound of the horn of a tired hunter, wearily blowing by the border of Earth" (176). The sound which stops Lirazel from forsaking her family of the fields we know is from Alvaric, who is trying to call to her despite being physically prevented from fully crossing the border by one of his mad henchmen. Like the little village girl's jam roll, this lone sound has an enormous consequence; it will cause an entire kingdom to move and grow. Lirazel recalls her desire to see her family and Earth and pleads with her father to do something. After much persuasion, he relents and uses his final, most powerful piece of magic to expand the border of Elfland to encompass Erl. Elfland has changed, because it has annexed a bit of Earth, and Erl has left Earth forever, because it has been absorbed across the border

into Elfland.[vii] When Alvaric first came to Elfland, he had an effect that would never have been possible without some Earthly agency; after twelve years, the mere reminder of him will literally reconfigure the borders of a magic kingdom and an entire world. The novel concludes with the family reunited and the village of Erl changed forever.

The end of the novel is a fulfillment of its first event, the parliament's request that Erl be ruled by a magic lord. Since Erl has been absorbed into Elfland, the village is now ruled by its magic king, accomplishing the original will of the men in the parliament of Erl. Ironically, the men's request for a change reveals their inability to perceive or appreciate the constant change and newness of their own Earth. The spokesman says to Alvaric's father, the lord of Erl, that the parliament wants to be ruled by a magic lord because, "[f]or seven hundred years the chiefs of your race have ruled us well; and their deeds are remembered by the minor minstrels, living on yet in their little tinkling songs. And yet the generations stream away, and there is no new thing" (*Elfland's Daughter* 1). With this statement, the men of the parliament reveal the sort of jaded inability to perceive the wonder of their world that Alvaric will later unlearn by observing Lirazel's appreciation of Earthly things. The very words of the spokesman belie his assertion that there has been "no new thing" in Erl for seven hundred years: the actions of the rulers have apparently been novel enough to be preserved and retold in the minstrel's songs, an oral tradition that concerns itself with notable historical events. Furthermore, the spokesman's reference to the passing generations, supposedly an expression of boredom with sameness, anticipates Lirazel's delight in the constant change on Earth when she "sighed for a moment for those fields [of Earth], for she had heard how life beautifully passes there, and how there are always in those fields young generations, and she thought

of the changing seasons and children and age, of which elfin minstrels had sung when they told of Earth" (21). Lirazel prizes the passing of generations because she sees it as constant change, constant newness. Whereas Earthly minstrels sing of great acts and unusual wonders, as we know from our own oral tradition, Elfland's minstrels understand and laud the novelty of the ordinary changes like the seasons. The men of the parliament have grown over-accustomed to their world in the manner described by Chesterton. The entire novel is a repudiation of the parliament's claim that "there has been no new thing" in the village for generations. *The King of Elfland's Daughter* not only insists that every moment on Earth witnesses new things, but it also demonstrates that man himself can be the cause of change.

The parliament's request to be ruled by a magic lord provides a useful frame for the philosophy of the novel also because it demonstrates the efficacy of human will on Earth. When the lord of Erl first hears their request, he responds, "[s]o be it . . . It is five hundred years since my people have spoken thus in parliament, and it shall always be as your parliament saith. You have spoken. So be it" (*Elfland's Daughter* 1). These words are an unequivocal statement about the power of the human will, emphasized especially by the repetition of "so be it." The parliament is a vehicle for change in Erl, and their assertion of will in the first chapter initiates the ultimate change in the novel, the merging of Erl and Elfland. Because of their desire to be ruled by a magic lord, something they feel will create more change in their land (an ironic belief given Elfland's relative stagnation), Alvaric begins his quest to marry the King of Elfland's daughter. The lord of Erl proves his wisdom again by recognizing the enormity of the consequences, warning "only the Dark Ones that show not their faces know all that this will bring" (3). This

warning does double duty as foreshadowing of the events to come and as an indication of the novel's underlying philosophy of the power of human agency. The wise old lord knows that human action can effect significant change in the world, just as he knows that the change will be for worse in this case. He tells Alvaric, "[m]y people demand a magic lord to rule over them. They have chosen foolishly" (3). The parliament's decision is imprudent because it ignores that newness is already part of the fabric of Earth, and it will cause the village of Erl to lose the ability to change as the village is absorbed into the timeless immobility of Elfland.

It is the supreme irony of the novel that the parliament's yearning for change will eventually cut them off from the possibility of change altogether. The novel's conclusion is paradoxically a triumph their will (and Alvaric's) as well as a defeat of the efficacy of will in Erl altogether. It cannot be denied that Elfland is a realm of beauty, even eternal bliss, and so the ending of the novel is a happy one, especially for Alvaric, Lirazel, and Orion, who will presumably be happy in their togetherness for the rest of the eternity of Elfland's one day. Yet nothing moves or changes or grows while the King holds his entire realm still in his own contentedness, and so belonging to Elfland necessarily means giving up human efficacy of will, or at least the will of all denizens of that realm other than the king. The last sentence of the novel provides a troubling hint to the reader:

> And with the last of his world-disturbing runes sent forth, and his daughter happy once more, the elfin King on his tremendous throne breathed and drew in the calm in which Elfland basks; and all his realms dreamed on in that ageless repose, of which deep green pools in summer can barely

> guess; and Erl dreamed too with all the rest of Elfland and so passed out of all remembrance of men. (*Elfland's Daughter* 240)

These final words should remind the reader that the action of the novel has been initiated by the parliament's desire to bring Erl to the attention of the rest of the world. In this, they have failed—which is not in itself a tragedy, since the novel has revealed the foolishness of the parliament's reasoning in this matter. The real melancholy in the resolution lies in Erl's necessary forgoing of the joys particular to Earth, action and change. In a novel that showcases the wonderful possibilities of Earthly life, a passing out of the human realm must be a bit bittersweet; no longer will the seasons bring ever-renewing growth to the fields of Erl or great deeds be wrought and sung of by Earthly minstrels. Even Elfland's minstrels will cease to sing of Erl, since it no longer offers the ever-revolving activity that those minstrels prize. Erl has passed out of the realm of action, thereby losing all possibility of creating its own future. It will remain forever preserved in the stillness of Elfland, forever a thing of beauty, but forever the same, caught in one eternal moment of rest, forgoing the possibilities of Earth.

The King of Elfland's Daughter presents a reversal of the interpretation of Elfland in *Sister Carrie*. Recall Dreiser's use of "Elf land" to signify an impossible realm where dreams come true. In *Sister Carrie*, Elf land serves as a foil to the real world, in which human action is impotent in the wake of natural forces (Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 276, 328). The roles of Elfland and the real world are completely reversed by Dunsany, who creates Elfland as a realm in which non-human forces (the elfin King) hold sway and render human will impotent like the forces of nature in Dreiser's novel. In *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, change is possible and humans have the ability to steer their own courses *only*

in the real world of Earth. Dunsany's fantasy insists upon the efficacy of human will that Dreiser's naturalism denies.

IV. CONCLUSION:

THE REALITY OF FANTASY

Ten years before Dreiser wrote *Sister Carrie*, fantasy author George MacDonald responded to the question: must fairy tales have meaning? In other words, can fantasy literature portray an interpretation of the real world in the same way as realist fiction? MacDonald answers that fantasy "cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has vitality, and vitality is truth" (66). Fantasy and science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin demonstrates a similar view of fantasy literature in her essay, "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie." She perceives fantasy as sort of "alternate technique" for understanding the real world, writing that fantasy literature "is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not antirational but pararational; not realistic, but superrealistic, a heightening of reality" (Le Guin 145). Le Guin, like MacDonald and Chesterton, believes that fantasy's twists of reality provide a unique access to that very reality. However, fantasy literature has long been charged with escapism. In *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, Kathryn Hume notes, "[m]ost fantasy is dismissed by hostile critics as 'escapist', and most escape literature is dismissed as 'fantasy'" (59). Hume recognizes that fantasy and escapism are not synonyms, and her study helps to identify why the escapist label can be so insulting of fantasy's relevance to the real world, the "everyday reality" of the reader. She defines "literature of illusion," which "is generally known as

escape literature," as a set of assumptions made by the author, who "assumes our agreement that everyday reality is boring, unromantic—even depressing. Furthermore, the author believes nothing can be done to change that reality, so he offers to disengage us from its grey unpleasantness and to enfold us in comforting illusions" (Hume 55). Escapist literature only presents readers with "comforting illusions" of what is not possible in their real world. If we read *The King of Elfland's Daughter* as escapism, it cannot be read as the same sort of representation of reality as realist and naturalist literature, and its insistence of the efficacy of human will amounts to mere wishful thinking.

Lord Dunsany's texts did not avoid being charged with escapism, even by one of his most ardent admirers. In the same foreword that proclaims Dunsany as a "poet of wonder," H.P. Lovecraft writes that Dunsany's "main work belongs to what modern critics have called the 'literature of escape'; the literature of conscious unreality created out of an intelligent and sophisticated conviction that analyzed reality has no heritage save of chaos, pain, and disappointment" (viii). We can see a bit of Lovecraft's own philosophy as he congratulates Dunsany for being clever enough to realize that reality offers only "chaos, pain, and disappointment," a sentiment that closely echoes Dreiser's philosophy, "[l]ife is tragedy" ("Author of 'Sister Carrie' 5). Recall that Lovecraft admits in the same preface that "modern science" has revealed to him the "sordid and prosaic" nature of reality, which seems to be a part of "disillusionment of realism" that turns him to Dunsany's fantasy (viii). Lovecraft is candid about the philosophy of reality that he is eager to escape by reading what he terms Dunsany's "arbitrarily selected fancy" (viii), but escapist literature, even according to Lovecraft's own definition, is not

arbitrary—it provides something that the author (and the audience) find lacking in the real world. So if *The King of Elfland's Daughter* is escapist literature, the novel's insistence on the efficacy of the human will at least indicates a desire for agency in the real world, precisely what is denied by naturalistic writing.

Dunsany gives a few clues about his opinion of the difference between fantasy and realism in his 1938 auto-biography, *Patches of Sunlight*. In the concluding chapter, Dunsany writes,

> I feel that I have written enough of myself, and should soon get back to my work. My work is far hence with fancies. If the things I have seen and done up to the point at which I am about to lay down the pen that has been busy for more than four months, have awakened any interest, as I hope perchance they may have done with a few, those things have been only like flowers or weeds on the way, that delay a traveler bound for a far country. Or they are like the blackened circles on the ground where a spirit has camped and gone on.

By describing the realistic details of his life as "flowers or weeds" encountered on a journey to something else, Dunsany indicates that they are somehow beside the point. If we assume, like Lovecraft, that Dunsany is disillusioned with the real world, then this statement can be taken as a confirmation that Dunsany indeed finds reality as uninspiring as roadside weeds, and he must turn to "fancies" in order to escape. But when we ignore Lovecraft's assumption about Dunsany's disaffection from the real world, a question emerges: if the details are only distractions along the road, what is the destination of the journey? For Dunsany, there seems to be something beyond realistic representation, a

perception of reality that is not conveyed by mimetic detail alone. He addresses the barrenness of realism directly in *Patches of Sunlight*:

> The source of all imagination is here in our fields, and Creation is beautiful enough for the furthest flights of the poets. What is called realism only falls far behind these flights because it is too meticulously concerned with the detail of material; mere inventories of rocks are not poetry; but all the memories of crags and hills and meadows and woods and sky that lie in a sensitive spirit are materials for poetry, only waiting to be taken out, and to be laid before the eyes of such as care to perceive them" (21)

This echoes Princess Lirazel's delight in Earthly things; like the "sensitive spirit," mentioned here, Lirazel sees the world more clearly than those who mistake the details for the totality. *The King of Elfland's Daughter* demonstrates an alternate perspective of reality, "to be laid before the eyes of such as care to perceive" it.

If we heed Dunsany's claims for fantasy in his auto-biography and for *The King of Elfland's Daughter* in the novel's preface, then both fantasy and naturalism have a common purpose: to portray the real world as accurately as possible. While naturalist writers attempt to do so through strict mimesis, their philosophies inform their texts. Conversely, fantasy writers like Dunsany and MacDonald use fantastic elements to achieve a clear perspective on reality, though their perspectives are as vulnerable to their philosophies as naturalistic authors. When we consider naturalism's celebration of objectivity in literature, it seems odd that authors like Dreiser would be able to discuss the philosophy that drives their novels. For instance, Dreiser speaks of a "moral" that he

intends in his work to the *New York Times* on the occasion of his first private publishing of *Sister Carrie*. The interviewer asked, "[w]hat are you trying to show in what you write? Do you point out a moral?" Dreiser replied, "I simply want to tell about life as it is… I said I was pointing out no moral. Well, I am not, unless this is a moral- that all humanity must stand together and war against the forces of nature" (Notman 6). What makes this exchange even more confusing (or possibly just ironic) is the dissonance between this moral and *Sister Carrie*'s representation of the inefficacy of the human will. It's hard to imagine Carrie and Hurstwood, for instance, battling the forces of nature, since they failed at every step to do precisely that in the novel. Perhaps Dreiser resembles one of his characters, striving to change a world that he would have us believe fatally diminishes our will. Only in the world portrayed by *The King of Elfland's Daughter* could we have the ability to effect such change.

ENDNOTES

[i] See Lee Clark Mitchell's survey of the connection between realism and naturalism in literary criticism. *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism.* New York: Columbia UP, 1989. 131-2, 135-6.

[ii] For a more detailed description of Sister Carrie's uneven publishing history, see Malcom Cowley's essay "*Sister Carrie*: Her Fall and Rise" in *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser: a Critical Survey of the Man and His Work.* Eds. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1955. 171-181.

[iii] See also William Beebe's foreword a year earlier to Dunsany's publication of *If*, which reads in part: "Humanity overwhelmingly prefers photography to painting . . My own life as a scientist, I find is a never-ending attempt to turn painting into photography—fairy tales into drab reality—to interpret in terms of physics, chemistry, interaction, or some sort of understandable truth, such miracles as the change from caterpillar to butterfly . . . While the enthusiasm of the study of bird and beast, of feeble inquiry into the evolution of life, while the joy of all this is beyond words, yet the ultimate solution, the resolving of the miracle, automatically denudes the problem of its greatest attraction, and we throw it aside and turn to the next. Two and two must surely hold more of unconscious fascination for a child, than the eternal certainty of their known sum . . ." (ix)

[iv] Perhaps this feeling aligns is also Dreiser's personal feelings toward big cities. In his autobiographical A Book About Myself, Dreiser uses the same imagery to describe an encounter with New York: "Wall Street was a sea of financial trickery and legerdemain, a realm so crowded with sharklike geniuses of finance that one's poor litter arithmetic intelligence was entirely discounted and made ridiculous. . . . A crushing sense of incompetence and general inefficiency seemed to settle upon me . . . Whenever I went out on an assignment . . . I carried with me this sense of my unimportance" (480-481).

[v] See *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte.* Trans. Harriet Martineau. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1896.

[vi] See page 90 for a good example.

[vii] This interpretation of what happens to Erl seems reasonable to me, since the border expands in the form of "a shining line" to encompass Erl (*Elfland's Daughter* 230). Elfland clearly overlays and changes Erl, as described in several passages: " . . . he [Lurulu] saw the shining line coming down on Erl. . . . it came with all manner of memories, old music and lost voices, sweeping back again to our old fields what time had driven from Earth" and "With all these wonders Lirazel came for her son, and brought Elfland with her that never had moved before the width of a harebell over the earthly border," to name a couple (235, 239). It is also possible that Elfland and Erl somehow merge, each affecting the other, but since the final chapter's description of this phenomenon emphasizes the characteristics of Elfland coming to Erl, I interpret Erl to be absorbed into the magic realm.

WORKS CITED

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* New Jersey: Princton UP, 1974. Print.

Beebe, William. Forward. *If.* By Lord Dunsany. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922. Print.

Comte, Auguste. *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte.* Trans. Harriet Martineau. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1896. Print.

Cowley, Malcolm. "Sister Carrie: Her Fall and Rise." *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser: a Critical Survey of the Man and His Work.* Eds. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1955. 171-181. Print.

Cuddy, Lois A., and Claire M. Roche. Introduction. *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1940.* Eds. Lois Cuddy and Claire Roche. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2003. Print.

Dowell, Richard W. "'There Was Something Mystic about It': The Composition of *Sister Carrie* by Dreiser et al." *Biographies of Books: The Compositional Histories of Notable American Writings.* Eds. James Barbour and Tom Quirk. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1996. 131-159. Print.

Dreiser, Theodore. *A Book About Myself*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922.

Dreiser, Theodore. "Reflections." *Sister Carrie*. 1900. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: Norton, 1970. 395-401. Print.

Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. 1900. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: Norton, 1970. Print.

Dreiser, Theodore. "The Man on the Sidewalk." *Sister Carrie*. 1900. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: Norton, 1970. 413-15. Print.

Dunsany, Lord. *Patches of Sunlight*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1938. Print.

Dunsany, Lord. *The King of Elfland's Daughter.* New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999. Print.

Flaubert, Gustave. "On Realism." *Documents of Modern Literary Realism.* Ed. George J. Becker. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1963. 89-96. Print.

Gaiman, Neil. Introduction. *The King of Elfland's Daughter.* By Lord Dunsany. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999. Print.

Gelfant, Blanche H. "What More Can Carrie Want? Naturalistic Ways of Consuming Women." *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. 178-210. Print.

Habegger, Alfred. *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.

Haeckel, Ernst. *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*. Trans. Joseph McCabe. New York: Harper, 1900. Print.

Le Guin, Ursula. "From Elfland to Poughkeepsi." 1973. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Ed. David Sandner. Westport: Praeger, 2004. 144-155. Print.

Lehan, Richard. *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition*. Wisconsin: The U of Wisconsin P, 2005. Print.

Lovecraft, H. P. Forward. *Tales of Three Hemispheres.* Philidelphia: Owlswick Press, 1976. Print.

MacDonald, George. “The Fantastic Imagination.” 1890. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Ed. David Sandner. Westport: Praeger, 2004. 64-69. Print.

Mitchell, Lee Clark. *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989. Print.

Mencken, H. L. *A Book of Prefaces*. 1917. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924. Print.

Nordau, Max. *Degeneration.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1993. Print.

“Novels to Reflect Real Life That is What Theodore Dreiser Would Have The American Temperament Not Expressed Properly in Present Day Fiction Thinks the Author of ‘Jennie Gerhardt’—New Literary Standards.” *Theodore Dreiser: Interviews*. Eds. Frederic E. Rusch and Donald Pizer. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004. 19-23. Print.

Notman, Otis. “Talks with Four Novelists: Mr. Dreiser.” *Theodore Dreiser: Interviews*. Eds. Frederic E. Rusch and Donald Pizer. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004. 5-6. Print.

Pizer, Donald. *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1982. Print.

Pringle, David. *Modern Fantasy: The Hundred Best Novels*. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1989. Print.

Russett, Cynthia Eagle. *Darwin in America*. San Fransisco: W.H. Freeman and Co., 1976. Print.

Spencer, Herbert. *First Principles*. 1862. 6th ed., New York: D. Appleton, 1907. Print.