

WHY IS HURSTWOOD THE MAIN CHARACTER IN SISTER CARRIE?

WOULD THE TITLE HURSTWOOD BE BETTER FOR THE NOVEL?

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You certainly need to limit discussion.
You can assume reader knows story and
that your task is to convince as you
have done near the end. (-10)

PAUL ELLING OUTLINE

TITLE: Why is Hurstwood the main character in *Sister Carrie*?
Would the title *Hurstwood* be better for the novel?

THESIS: By looking more closely at what happens, it appears as though Hurstwood is the main character by his personality and actions, and in the end, the title *Hurstwood* seems more suitable for the story.

- OUTLINE:
- I. Hurstwood's personality affects people
 - A. Charming and intelligent
 - B. Hurstwood household
 - C. Carrie
 - D. Drouet
 - E. New York
 - F. Laziness
 - II. Hurstwood's actions affect people
 - A. Himself
 - B. Carrie
 - C. Drouet
 - D. Julia Hurstwood
 - III. Giving the book the title *Hurstwood*
 - A. In comparison with Carrie
 - B. Images of Hurstwood
 - C. For success

Introducing the main character of a novel to its readers can be done in several ways. For *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser brings the central figure of the novel, Hurstwood, into the story after acquainting the two people Hurstwood interacts with the most often. They are Carrie and Drouet. On the surface, it seems correct in naming the book *Sister Carrie*. By looking more closely at what happens, it appears as though Hurstwood is the chief character, by his personality, actions, and in the end, the title *Hurstwood* seems more suitable for the story.

The first thing that stands out about George Hurstwood is his personality and how it affects and makes people look at him. Hurstwood is an attractive character in personality. In the beginning of *Sister Carrie*, Hurstwood appears as a very charming, wealthy, and self-important man. "Hurstwood...had a good stout constitution, an active manner, and a solid, substantial air, which was composed in part of his fine clothes, his clean linen, his jewels, and, above all, his own sense of his importance." (p. 45) Hurstwood is the manager of a bar with the name of Fitzgerald and Moy's, which gives him prestige in the town of Chicago. Hurstwood has connections with the upper crust of society and is "worth knowing," according to Drouet. Hurstwood is a clever individual. He knows how to "play the game" of the high society. "There was a class...too rich...with whom he could not attempt any familiarity of address...and he was professionally tactful, assuming a grave and dignified attitude,

✓ maintains parallel structure

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paying them the deference which would win their good feeling
without in the least compromising his own bearings and opinions." (p. 46) What Hurstwood really likes is becoming friends with men like Charles Drouet. He is pleasant towards these men, who are successful in their own right, without being among the high society. Here is where Hurstwood moves in as the main character. Up until the time Dreiser interposes Hurstwood into the novel, he has the reader following Carrie in her ventures. Carrie is the important person in this early part, but the image and personality of Hurstwood are strong enough to move him in as the main character. Hurstwood's personage and attitude affects the other figures in the story. In the growth of the Hurstwood family, there is love, but that turns to jealousy. The family shows a great indifference towards Hurstwood. He returns the uncaring feeling. It entails the family to make the atmosphere at home harsh and cold. "It lacked that toleration and regard without which the home is nothing." (p. 82) There is not much of a cheerful spirit at the Hurstwood household. The children become independent, and Hurstwood lives a separate existence from his wife. The boredom Hurstwood has with his family leads him to seek outside enjoyments. Then, he stumbles upon Carrie, the "little peach," Drouet mentions to Hurstwood. Hurstwood is not immediately in love with Carrie, but as time goes on, Hurstwood recognizes how special Carrie is to him. When Carrie first meets Hurstwood, his gripping appeal deeply tugs at her. Drouet is not

the sharpest person on human emotion and feeling. He is kind, but lacks the cleverness of Carrie and the powerful individuality of Hurstwood. "She really was not enamored of Drouet." (p. 94) Hurstwood totally impresses Carrie. "He paid that peculiar deference to women which every member of the sex appreciates. He was not overawed, he was not overbold." (p. 94) Hurstwood is considerate to Carrie, and he compels Carrie to sense that he is only there to please her. Hurstwood's dignity shows itself through the clothes he wears. Carrie takes note of this. The confident Hurstwood looks prominent and in good form with certain apparel. Again, Hurstwood is better than Drouet. This time in dress. If Hurstwood is Einstein, then Drouet is a lab monkey. If Hurstwood is a mile, Drouet is a foot. In other words, Drouet lacks in everything comparing with Hurstwood, especially style. Hurstwood's personality leads to his doom. He has too much pride. Hurstwood's ego says to let Mrs. Hurstwood have the money. He can do without it. Hurstwood and Carrie come to New York City. Hurstwood does not have much money. It hurts his self-esteem to not possess money to burn in New York. Hurstwood wants his money and to live like the rich do. "He could not fail to notice the signs of affluence and luxury on every hand." (p. 274) Hurstwood purchases a third interest in a tavern. It is a washout. This is the beginning of the end for Hurstwood. His image is dwindling by both his and Carrie's standards. "The lines at the sides of the eyes were deepened. Naturally dark of

skin, gloom made him look slightly sinister. He was quite a disagreeable figure." (p. 316) It is fascinating what money can do for the human spirit. Hurstwood has no employment and possibly nothing but a dead-end life. Hurstwood seeks further undertakings, but his expectations are too high. Again, his pride will not permit him to accept any "lesser job."

"Everything he discovered in this line advertised as an opportunity was either too expensive or too wretched for him." (p. 314) Hurstwood is royalty. He shouldn't have to work. If he doesn't find an investment soon, then he might actually have to work! Imagine that! King Hurstwood might have to get off his duff and work his butt off a little. He might even have to find employment as a clerk of all things! What is the world coming to when the King has to lift a finger? Hurstwood's arrogance escorts him to a lazy disposition. Hurstwood does try to find a place to work, but winter approaches. It gets more unbearable each waking day. Hurstwood feels hopeless. He finds himself home earlier everyday, until he eventually is home day after day. Carrie pities Hurstwood, but she commences to thinking he is despicable. She keeps quiet, until there are a few occasional outbursts. Hurstwood has his newspapers everyday. He may not have a job (or care to be a man anymore), but thank God, at least he can read and understand the world circumstances. Hurstwood's persona asserts itself into Carrie again, but this time it's different. Hurstwood wastes himself down to his final fifty

Be careful!
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bucks. Carrie fears Hurstwood will drag her into poverty with him. She discovers a place on the acting stage as a chorus girl. Now she has to finance Hurstwood's newspaper reading. Carrie runs into success, but still pities Hurstwood. So, she supports him. Carrie departs Hurstwood. Hurstwood feels as though he is an abandoned puppy. "Left me!" he muttered, and repeated, "Left me!" (p. 404). Poor Hurstwood remarks, "She needn't have gone away. I'd have got something." (p. 405) Hurstwood turns to begging and squeezing out a measly existence. His psyche changes mightily. He cannot afford to behave like he does in Chicago. Carrie receives a good bargain in the end from Hurstwood's personality. She learns to be self-helpful and pursues stage success. Now, people peer at Hurstwood as just another beggar and homeless bum. In the completion of the story, Hurstwood can't pay the price to have a personality at all. It costs too much. So, Hurstwood puts himself to rest. Hurstwood's personality and how it affects people goes hand in hand with Hurstwood's actions.

An even better determinant of Hurstwood as the main character are his operations and actions that affect other characters. Hurstwood is the only soul in the book whose every deed involves others more than any other mortal's doings. The outcomes of Hurstwood's endeavors are negative, at first, but in the end everyone but Hurstwood ends up on the positive side. He has so much influence over those around him. Most of his

undertakings, in the novel, have something to do with him tumbling into love with Carrie. The person that Hurstwood weighs on the most is himself. He is the only creature that has a negative ending. Hurstwood causes his existence to decline because of his obsession with Carrie. It does not make sense why Hurstwood will throw everything away that he works so long and hard for. Certainly there are girls before Carrie that get Hurstwood's goat. Why is Carrie the one girl Hurstwood has to have? The answers to this question are simple. Number one, Hurstwood's domestic affairs are in decay, and he desires something new. Number two, no one like Carrie ever appears before. Hurstwood "was altogether a very acceptable individual of our great American upper class---the first grade below the luxuriously rich." (p. 47) Hurstwood is willing to throw his high status away for Carrie. "I could be content, if I had you to love me. If I had you to go to; you for a companion," says Hurstwood. (p. 125) The procedure of enlightening Carrie on how much he loves her, and she, in return, saying she has deep feelings for him, is very pleasing to Hurstwood. The meetings between Hurstwood and Carrie make Hurstwood glow like a young man. In fact, it is the only happiness in his life. Everything is going great until that battle axe, Mrs. Hurstwood, uncovers her husband's romance with Carrie. Here is where Hurstwood's stunts cost him. His wife has every right to be upset with Hurstwood. She is as cold and sharp as a knife. Mrs. Hurstwood

files for divorce and alimony with Hurstwood. Julia Hurstwood is uncaring, but it is Hurstwood's own fault. His exploits are bound to ruin him. Instead of going to compromise with Mrs. Hurstwood's lawyers, which would be the smart thing, Hurstwood gets panicky. He attempts to figure out the situation, but nothing comes of this. Then, one late night, Hurstwood is all alone in Fitzgerald and Moy's. The safe where ten thousand dollars is in keeping is not locked. Hurstwood discloses that he is in the presence of a fortune. He cannot resist looking at the money. "He did not know why he wished to look in there. It was quite a superfluous action, which another time might not have happened at all." (p. 243) Under different circumstances Hurstwood will leave the money, but since he is bound to lose most of his assets to Mrs. Hurstwood, he will take the money. "At once he became the man of action." (p. 247) Hurstwood immediately regrets his actions, but moves along anyway. His next action is lying to Carrie. Hurstwood and Carrie flee Chicago. Hurstwood reports to Carrie, on the train ride to Montreal, that he is false in his news about Drouet being hurt and in the hospital. His nerve pains Carrie and leaves an unforgettable thought on her mind that Hurstwood is not pure. (Also finding out that Hurstwood has another marriage doesn't do much for his credibility with Carrie.) Hurstwood agrees to marry Carrie, and they go to live in New York. (What a merry world it is.) Hurstwood's next "daring" feat is buying into a saloon, and

he and Carrie make a living off of his business. Hurstwood loses his business and has to find another place to work. Hurstwood's lazy and lackluster job-hunt is a move that leads to his doom. Hurstwood locates no position, but everyday he reads his newspapers. Hurstwood consoles himself with the reading. "His difficulties vanished in the items he so well loved to read." (p. 324) How easy life seems to Hurstwood, when he consumes his day with studying the paper. Hurstwood switches from the "man of action" to the man of inaction. Hurstwood's action or inactivity thoroughly strikes Carrie. It causes Carrie to become more exempt from Hurstwood. As Hurstwood's life declines and concludes with his ultimate suicide, Carrie's life is on the rise. Hurstwood's passivity spurs Carrie to "find something." She becomes an actress after being a chorus girl. The birth of Carrie Madenda, the star, comes from Hurstwood's idleness. No other individual in this novel stirs Carrie the way Hurstwood does with his actions. Only the principal figure in *Sister Carrie* does this. If Carrie is dilatory, Hurstwood would not go out and "find something." Hurstwood's proceedings cause Carrie to be a remarkable figure. His movements make Carrie see him in a different light. "Of course, as his own self-respect vanished, it perished for him in Carrie." (p. 331) Hurstwood's presence in Carrie's life sways her to fear him haunting her at first, when she leaves him. "She arranged a few things hastily and then left for the theater, half expecting to encounter him at the door."

avoid cliches

(p. 406) As the days pass, and time marches on, Carrie forgets Hurstwood, and throws herself into her acting. She encounters Hurstwood, near the end of his life, and his dirty, homeless image leaves her thinking. In the end, Carrie gets the best deal of any of the characters from the performances of Hurstwood. She becomes the well-known actress, Carrie Madenda. She is not the only one, though, who ends up with a good deal. Both Charles Drouet and Julia Hurstwood are much more wealthy and successful in the end of the book than in the beginning. The actions of Hurstwood deserve some credit in Drouet and Mrs. Hurstwood's development. Certainly, if Hurstwood is not in love with Carrie, Drouet will marry Carrie. That is not the case though. Hurstwood falls for Carrie and comes to despise the drummer. "The drummer should not have her," Hurstwood thinks. (p. 181) At the first performance of Carrie, in Chicago, Hurstwood's passion for Carrie burns like never before. He wants to push Drouet out of the way. "'The fool!' he says, now hating Drouet. 'The idiot! I'll do him yet, and that quick! We'll see tomorrow.'"

(p. 182) The exploits of Hurstwood rock Drouet, when he finds out about the flirtation of Hurstwood and Carrie. Carrie and Hurstwood try to keep their encounters secretive, but Drouet hits the truth, and it hurts him. "Look how they acted! He could hardly believe they would try to deceive him." (p. 189) Drouet confronts Carrie about her hanky-panky, and they have an argument, where Drouet leaves Carrie. He will not see Carrie

again for a number of years. Hurstwood's workings are the cause of Carrie and Drouet's break-up. Carrie might not leave Drouet if Hurstwood doesn't seduce her. It would delight the ignorant Drouet very much to have Carrie around. The effect of Hurstwood's deeds are long-lasting on Drouet. He does not appear in the novel again, until the end. By this time, Carrie is a huge star in New York, and "everyone who is anyone" knows who Carrie Madenda is. Drouet makes a surprise visit to Carrie in her dressing room. Drouet overwhelms Carrie with his excitement to see her. What a joy! It's Drouet! Yippee! Hooray! Carrie would rather not see Drouet. "He gazed at her dress, then at her hair, where a becoming hat was set jauntily, then into her eyes, which she took all occasion to avert." (p. 440) Drouet wants to return to the good old days, but Carrie doesn't. He asks her to dinner, but she refuses, and instead invites Drouet to have dinner tomorrow with her. It is partly Drouet's fault for not being interesting enough for Carrie. He does not have imagination. It is also Hurstwood's fault. He is much more clever than Drouet and shows it to Carrie through his dealings. Although Carrie is never his, Drouet still amounts some success in the end. "I'm going to have a business of my own pretty soon," he tells Carrie. (p. 441) Because Hurstwood takes Carrie away, Drouet is alone for the time before he meets up with Carrie again. Carrie is not there to hold Drouet down. Drouet can pursue a wealthy life, thanks to Hurstwood. What Drouet really

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desires is Carrie. Drouet can't have Carrie but lives on anyway. Hurstwood's spouse, Julia Hurstwood, also lives on, enjoying prosperity. Because Hurstwood has an affair with Carrie, Mrs. Hurstwood can get what she wants out of Hurstwood. She demands money. Hurstwood is sick of the situation and escapes the city, leaving Julia with a substantial amount of moolah. She, like Drouet, does not make an attendance in the novel until the end. Julia, her daughter, Jessica, and Jessica's husband are all traveling in comfort, through New York City. They are obviously loaded with money. "Mrs. Hurstwood nestled comfortably in her corner and smiled. It was so nice to be the mother-in-law of a rich young man----one whose financial state had borne her personal inspection." (p. 459) After that, nothing else happens to Julia Hurstwood. She lives a life rolling in money, as time beats on. Like Drouet and Carrie before her, Julia Hurstwood is more successful and well-to-do in the conclusion than in the beginning. Hurstwood, as the main character, deeply affects ^{? don't they all affect each other?} their growth as individuals. Hurstwood is the only one of the four to end the novel in a miserable way, also as a result of his own actions.

Using the personality and actions of Hurstwood that affect others, it is time to explain why the book should be *Hurstwood* and not *Sister Carrie*. In comparison with Carrie, Hurstwood impresses upon people more seriously than does Carrie. Sure, the reader can say Carrie changes and affects Hurstwood's life. That

beginning here, the argument is discussed which sh. be more obvious throughout

is true, but does she really change or affect the way Drouet goes about his life? Not really. Drouet still runs about his normal life, in Chicago, like he does before he encounters Carrie. Only when Hurstwood pulls Carrie away, does Drouet show the effects on his life. Once Carrie leaves, Drouet is free to chase his goals, and in the end, financially, he does. He forgets about Carrie and moves on to new friends and pleasures in the end. "The old butterfly was as light on the wing as ever." (p. 459) Carrie does not directly affect Julia Hurstwood either. Hurstwood is the one who gives up his vast fortune to allow Julia to come into a "king's ransom." Carrie relates indirectly to this situation. The title *Sister Carrie* is too pleasant. The title *Hurstwood* gives the story an edge. It would be an intriguing name because of who it is referring to. Hurstwood gives the reader many more images that the story presents, than does *Sister Carrie*. After reading the book, the reader thinks back to images to associate with the publication. Flashbacks of the well-dressed, clean-cut, and handsome Hurstwood appear. The image of Hurstwood bearing the cold weather to find a place of employment, with "time hanging heavily on his hands," is apparent. The one picture that draws a line in the sand is of the bum Hurstwood. No other portrait in the book is more vivid. Hurstwood has to resort to begging from Carrie. "At first she did not recognize the shabby, baggy figure. He frightened her, edging so close, a seemingly hungry stranger." (p. 443) Carrie does not have one image that

can match the power of this one. The final reason for naming the book *Hurstwood* is for success. Dreiser calls it *Sister Carrie*. Therefore, his audience is going to focus its attention more on Carrie than on Hurstwood. Maybe it would not have all the criticism people in the past throw at it, if their attention focuses on Hurstwood. It is a smart thing to call a book by a tragic title. It gets the attention of people. William Shakespeare is notorious for giving his plays tragic titles. Look at Shakespeare. He is the most celebrated writer of all time. *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello* are all tragedies. Shakespeare's titles imply tragedy that the characters experience. The title *Hurstwood* does the same as a Shakespeare title, in pointing out a tragic figure. Dreiser would receive much more respect, like Shakespeare, if he names his stories the way Shakespeare does.

Hurstwood is the main character in *Sister Carrie*, by his personality and actions, and by that *Hurstwood* seems a more appropriate title. *Sister Carrie* looks to be a proper name. When reading the book, though, *Hurstwood* is so influential, that the title should be *Hurstwood*. A title does not always point out the main character.