

1-1-1968

## Dreiser's women

Alvia Louise Washington Randall  
*Atlanta University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Randall, Alvia Louise Washington, "Dreiser's women" (1968). *ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library*. Paper 2777.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. For more information, please contact [cwiseman@auctr.edu](mailto:cwiseman@auctr.edu).

DREISER'S WOMEN

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

ALVIA LOUISE WASHINGTON RANDALL

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

JANUARY 1968

R = vii T = 61

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION. . . . .	iii
Chapter	
I. TYPES OF WOMEN IN DREISER'S NOVELS. . . . .	1
II. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN DREISER'S NOVELS . . . . .	39
III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DREISER'S TREATMENT OF WOMEN. . . . .	48
BIBLIOGRAPHY. . . . .	60

## INTRODUCTION

Dreiser was a perceptive and distinguished writer whose works have not failed to elicit considerable attention on the part of critics and scholars. Yet most of the criticism has been directed to what might be considered only a portion of his art--that is, he has been examined as a social critic and naturalist; and his thought, as revealed in his writings, has been viewed as more important than the writings themselves--even when the thought, as it often has been, is dismissed as inconsistent and based on inadequate education.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Dreiser, craftsman and artist, has sometimes been lost in the turmoil that surrounded Dreiser, humanitarian, thinker, and iconoclast. It is the intention of this paper to discuss Dreiser in the former context, with special reference to his female characters, a subject to which little attention has been devoted. So far as the writer is aware, no attempt has been made to determine and describe precisely what types of women appear in Dreiser's novels, and the roles that they play.

On considering this subject, a number of questions suggest themselves. What techniques does Dreiser employ in the creation of his women? How do the characters of the women affect the unfolding of the plots? What effect do Dreiser's women have on his men, and what does this reveal

---

<sup>1</sup>See F. O. Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951), p. 239.

about Dreiser's outlook? (This question is particularly interesting in view of the shriek-like female who is becoming an increasing stock-character in present day fiction.) To what extent are the women preordained creations of their environments? Is it true that these ladies may, in the main, be divided into two main types, as suggested by one critic?

The uncritical, naturally sweet sort who give in for reasons of sympathy rather than of passion, and the prime fussy daughters of the genteel. The first type--Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt, Roberta Alden, even Aileen Butler. . . are compounded of Dreiser's memories of his mother and his sisters; the second type is obviously drawn from the model of his first<sup>2</sup> wife, a Missouri girl who was his first contact with the genteel.

To what extent did Dreiser's understanding of womanhood depict reality? How does his depiction of the female coincide with, result from, or contrast with contemporary attitudes towards women in fiction and women in real life? These questions are interesting ones, and one can hardly supply even tentative answers for them without increasing his insight into Dreiser's stature as artist and as a man.

As the reader shall see, Dreiser's sense of life-as-it-is, particularly in his early years, tended to be considerably out of tune with the traditional values of his day. His preoccupation with sex as a motivating force, for instance, made him a controversial writer from the date of the publication of his first novel, Sister Carrie. Sister Carrie, innocent and dated as it may seem today, was greeted with considerable critical furore. To most, steeped in the inane, vapid

---

<sup>2</sup>John Chamberlain, "Theodore Dreiser," New Republic, LXXXIX, No. 1151 (December 23, 1936), p. 237.

romanticism of the typical Victorian novel, it appeared to depict degeneracy. To the few, who were stifled by the sentimental morass, it seemed like a breath of fresh air. In the free-and-easy atmosphere of the sixties, it is hard to understand what all the fuss was about. Yet, within it may be found the ancestry of the modern American novel--and whether that is good or ill, is for the individual to say.

Nevertheless, it is clear that for most male writers, the nature of womanhood is inextricable bound up with the problem of sex. In the nineteen sixties individuals are very preoccupied with sex, often at the expense of love. Perhaps in Dreiser's women, the modern reader will find a presentation more balanced than what he is accustomed to. Certainly they are worthy of examination. And Chamberlain's statement raises yet another question. It implies that all the heroines give in--some out of sympathy, some to forge the chains of matrimony, gentility, and respectability--the solid, middle class virtues. But, one might ask, do none give in out of passion? If not, what does this tell the reader about Dreiser's view of life and the world?

The question of the method by which such a study might be undertaken posed a problem. The main intention is to return to the primary sources, the novels themselves, for the generative material of the paper, using secondary sources only for purposes of enlightenment and comparison. Further, because Dreiser's art was very much the reflection of his life, it is to be expected that the large quantities of biographical and autobiographical material available will also prove useful. A further question concerns the means by which this source material will be organized.

There are any number of possibilities, such as beginning with a chapter on the attitude toward women in Dreiser's day, both in fiction and in life, and then following through with Dreiser's novels in chronological order, tracing the development of his attitude. An objection to this technique is that "Dreiser's day" is a misnomer in the first place. Sister Carrie was published in 1900; The Bulwark and The Stoic came out posthumously in 1946 and 1947, respectively. To generalize about anything in the volatile first half of the twentieth century, particularly about something that underwent such fundamental change as attitudes toward women and sex, would be fruitless indeed.

The writer finally decided to divide the work in two sections, each of which will examine the same group of women from different points of view. Within each chapter, an attempt will be made to evaluate the heroines chronologically, so that Dreiser's development and his adaptation to the changing times may be best illustrated.

Chapter I will be concerned with the women themselves. What are they like? What are their motivations? From what economic classes do they spring? How does class status affect them? What becomes of them? How convincing are they as human beings? How involved does the reader become with them and their fate?

Chapter II is concerned with the function served by these heroines-- that is, the purpose that Dreiser had in mind for them, which is often his reason for writing the book. Like all characters, they serve to illustrate the tragedy and cruelty of life, the way in which circumstances mold one

without his knowing it, and often against his will. The writer will also touch upon the autobiographical origins of many of the women. The effects of Dreiser's treatment of women, will also be treated here.

Finally, in Chapter III, the concluding section, the writer will try to sum up the significance of the study of Dreiser's women.

Throughout, the writer will continually compare Dreiser's sense of what American womanhood was like with the cliches of the period in which they appeared, to see how they "measure up." One of the signs of a first-rate artist, after all, is the ability to see things clearly, to strip aside the conventions of his time in order to get to the reality that they often conceal. It is to be hoped that this thesis will to some extent measure Dreiser's ability to do this; at the same time, an attempt will be made to examine his views in the light of today's prejudices in order to draw some conclusion as to the permanence of his opinions.

Because of space limitations, the writer intends to confine herself solely to the heroine's of Dreiser's novels. Other female characters will be mentioned only peripherally as appropriate. It will, of course, be necessary at the same time to discuss some of the male characters as well as plots of the novels in which all appear, in order to put the females in their proper perspective.

Above all, the author's purpose is to present, in as objective a manner as possible, an original treatise which will constitute a thorough examination of Dreiser's women.



## CHAPTER I

### TYPES OF WOMEN USED IN DREISER'S NOVELS

Generally, the heroines in Dreiser's novels come from three distinct social strata: aristocratic, upper middle-class, and lower middle-class. This writer shall therefore examine the heroines in the light of these backgrounds, and compare the differing representatives of each level of society with one another. In this chapter, the writer's purpose will be simply to describe the appropriate characters. The next two chapters will consider, in varying ways, the purposes served by the heroines.

The first of these women who commends herself to the reader's attention is Sister Carrie, who, as this writer has already indicated, is the heroine and namesake of Dreiser's first published novel, which appeared in 1900, although the action in it is represented as having taken place in 1889. When he began the book, Dreiser maintained that he had no clear idea of what it was going to be about:

My mind was blank except for the name. I had no idea who or what she was to be. I have often thought there was something mystic about it, as if I were being used, like a medium.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, however, something that might have seemed to have been tantamount to divine inspiration was more accurately to be described as an act of remembering, for the story of Carrie had in all its major points

---

<sup>3</sup>Theodore Dreiser to H. L. Mencken, May 13, 1916.

been previously enacted by Dreiser's sister Emma.<sup>4</sup>

Caroline Meeber-whose affectionate family members have dubbed her Sister Carrie--is first discovered taking a train for Chicago, from the little Wisconsin town in which she had been born. She is going to live with her sister and find work in the great metropolis. Dreiser's technique is primarily one that tells the reader about Carrie, what she is like, rather than to let her reveal herself to the reader through what she says and does.

Caroline. . . was possessed of a mind rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis. Self-interest with her was high, but not strong. It was, nevertheless, her guiding characteristic. Warm with the fancies of youth, pretty with the insipid prettiness of the formative period, possessed of a figure promising eventual shapeliness and an eye alight with certain native intelligence, she was a fair example of the middle American class--two generations removed from the emigrant. Books were beyond her interest--knowledge a sealed book. In the intuitive graces she was still crude. She could scarcely toss her head gracefully. Her hands were almost ineffectual. The feet, though small, were set flatly. And yet she was interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things. A half-equipped little knight she was, venturing to reconnoitre the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy, which should make it prey and subject--the proper penitent, grovelling at a woman's slipper.<sup>5</sup>

Yet as Carrie moves through her adventures, detail accumulates detail, until she assumes a depth and breadth which the reader had hardly expected, and which is not conveyed by any mere recitation of the plot. On the train to Chicago, she meets the salesman, Drouet, who is attracted to her. The epitome of the salesman image, a "masher" of great ego,

---

<sup>4</sup>W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), p. 98.

<sup>5</sup>Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (New York: Modern Library n.d.), pp. 2-3.

vanity and pride in his success, he later changes on her in Chicago at a time when her fortunes are at low ebb. Her home background was of the lower middle class, her father a worker in a flour mill; she has come to the city with pitifully few clothes, not warm enough to face the winter. Now she is unable to find work, living on the dubious charity of her brother-in-law and sister in their dreary flat, faced with the prospect of returning home in disgrace. Always attracted to the lovely, pleasant things that attach themselves to high incomes, she finds herself in desperate straits, face-to-face with the bleakest sort of poverty. From this, Drouet delivers her, desiring her at once as a conquest and at the same time pitying her condition out of a kind of heedless but good-natured compassion.

His charms are irresistible, and though he stresses that no strings are attached to his kindnesses, Carrie cannot really help becoming his mistress as much out of gratitude as well as out of any other consideration. She does not love him, but she does like him, and there is no question but that he has been very kind to her. Eventually, he establishes her in a pleasant flat, where she is known and introduced as Mrs. Drouet, though on the subject of making this a fact as well as a fancy, he is evasive.

Through Drouet, Carrie becomes acquainted with Hurstwood, a considerably older and more successful man. He is beautifully, conservatively, expensively dressed; he does very well as the manager of a pleasant sort of high-type saloon, a spot where celebrities are wont to gather. He is also married and the father of two almost grown children, a fact of which Carrie is at first in ignorance. His life is dull, superficial

and arid; Carrie's youth and general air of inexperience are mightily attractive to him. To her, he seems several cuts above Drouet, as indeed he is, a veritable aristocrat, and she is drawn to him almost as strongly, though less for himself than for the life of ease he represents. His charm and persuasiveness are so great, however, and the magic world in which he seems to move has such an aura for her, that she is able to convince herself that what she feels for him is love. In spite of determined pressure on his part, though, including a completely unfulfillable promise of marriage, she is unable to make up her mind to leave Drouet, at least partly because doing so would involve admitting that she had never been married to him in the first place.

She is finally persuaded to do so, however, and is only prevented from taking the action by learning that Hurstwood is, indeed, a married man. She breaks off the relationship abruptly.

Now a series of quite logical events occur which precipitate matters. Mrs. Hurstwood, having an inkling of what is going on, suddenly realizes that life without her husband would really be simpler and easier than life with him--especially in view of the fact that all of his property is in her name. She engages a firm of attorneys and announces her threat to sue him for divorce, which, in addition to wiping out most of his savings would, in the latter nineteenth century, cause him grave embarrassment or worse in his position. The attorneys' letters reach Hurstwood at a time when he is half-mad with the loss of Carrie. He cannot make up his mind what to do. Late one night, as the lawyers' deadline is almost upon him, a little the worse for liquor, he finds the resort's safe inexplicably left open and in it a little more than ten thousand dollars.

Suddenly this seems to be the answer to all his problems; irrational though he knows he is, he is dreadfully tempted. In the end, he cannot make up his mind to steal the money, but while he has it out of the safe, the door swings shut and locks, making it impossible for him to return it, and leaving him without an excuse for having it outside the safe in the first place. He panics and flees, regretting it even as he steps out into the street. On a ruse, he collects Carrie at her room and leaves with her for Montreal, where he enters a bigamous marriage with her and returns most of the money to his former employers.

No longer hounded by the law, they move on to New York, where he invests in a part ownership in a middle-class saloon. The income that this provides, however, is a far cry from the luxury of his life in Chicago, and from the type of existence that Carrie had imagined when she became his "wife." For two or three years they manage to get by, Carrie becoming increasingly discontented beneath a placid exterior. Finally, the saloon business comes to an end, the building in which it is housed having been sold. Hurstwood's original investment in it is simply lost. For a few more months he and Carrie struggle along on his savings. At first he makes desultory efforts to find something, but gradually slips deeper and deeper into the apathy of despair. Finally, he does little but sit about the flat reading.

When their savings are all but exhausted, Carrie goes out to look for work in the theater, having displayed some talent along these lines in an amateur production in Chicago. She gets a job, finally, as a chorus girl. Still Hurstwood shows no inclination to go to work, and eventually, as better jobs and parts begin to come her way, she gives up on him and leaves him. Hurstwood drifts steadily downward, to beggary

and finally to suicide. Carrie, through talent and good luck, becomes a star of light comedy, and suddenly finds herself surrounded by all the symbols of success, of wealth, of beauty that she had ever dreamed of-- and just as dissatisfied as she had ever been within the constricting confines of her childhood in Columbia City.

Carrie is a fairly typical example of the Dreiserian lower middle-class heroine. Her ideals, her visions of what it is that makes life beautiful and worth living, are essentially middle class in nature and materialistic in essence. She is the type of person who would be happy if only she had this, that or the other thing--but when these are attained, happiness eludes her. Presented and analyzed in this way, it would seem that Carrie is self-centered, egotistical, and grasping--that is to say, unsympathetic.

Yet such is not the case. There is simply no one adjective that can be used to describe Carrie; she is much too complex for that--is in fact as complex as a living human being. She has seen and has known what it is to be poor and helpless; her terror at the prospect is easily understood. She means absolutely no harm to any of her benefactors; Hurstwood brings about his own downfall without any assistance from Carrie; he even has to trick her into eloping with him.

Carrie's failure to find happiness and the reason for it are the driving forces behind the book. In a concluding paragraph, Dreiser seems to be paralleling it to the artist's quest for the unattainable ideal:

Thus in life there is even the intellectual and the emotional nature--the mind that reasons, and the mind that feels. Of one comes the men of action--generals and statesmen; of the other,

the poet and dreamers--artists all. . . Though often disillusioned, she /Carrie/ was still waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real. Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her. It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world. . . In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Carrie's story has another, simpler moral which this writer shall discuss below in more detail when a study of the function of Dreiser's women is made. Here, suffice it to say, that in spite of her warm, emotional nature, Carrie's chief problem in the achievement of happiness seems to be a curious inability to feel love for anyone. Dreiser is at pains to point out that whatever she feels for her two admirers, it isn't love. Neither does it seem to be any deep physical attraction, nor is there any indication that she regards her sexual relations with them as anything other than a means to an end, or an expression of gratitude. When she leaves her hometown behind, it is as if it had never existed, though it continues to mold her behavior. Never once does she write a letter to her parents, nor receive a letter from them. She never mentions them or even seems to think of them, except occasionally as something half-forgotten out of another life. Carrie, in short, seems to be incapable of loving anyone. No wonder she is unhappy and discontented. One can only wonder if the lack was only in her, or in Dreiser as well, for he appears not to have been aware that in this respect he created her less than whole.

Yet Carrie remains attractive and interesting to the reader, and he is not repelled by her final material success. Indeed, Dreiser's point

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 555-557.

throughout is that though in the eyes of the world in which she lived, she was a "sinner," in fact she was no such thing. Nor, in any meaningful sense, is she responsible for her Hurstwood's downfall. It is his own weakness of character, previously exemplified in many ways, which paves the way for that. The reader should remember, for instance, Hurstwood's vacillation when faced with his wife's ultimatum, and his final resolution of the conflict in which he makes the most serious mistake of his life. But even he is far more pitiable than reprehensible.

Carrie's rise, even though accidental, and not, by conventional standards, "deserved," is welcome because she is an appealing character; and Hurstwood's degeneration, distressing though it may be, is not unbearably offensive because Hurstwood has qualities which cause him to lose some of the reader's sympathy.<sup>7</sup>

Further, the reader senses the ephemeral nature of Carrie's success in a world notoriously fickle. As she sits and rocks at the end of the book, one cannot foresee what her end will be, save that she will find neither great love nor great happiness.

Carrie, then, seems to lack capacity for deep feeling, affection, and even for physical passion. Here is no Guinevere or Isolte. Yet Dreiser considered her to be motivated by emotion. As one critic has noted,

Dreiser classifies Carrie as a woman, not of intellect and reason, but of instinct and feeling. It is true that she is not given to systematic thought, and her preoccupations are

---

<sup>7</sup>Charles Child Walcutt, "Theodore Dreiser and the Divided Stream," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, ed. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 253-254.



with the simple, elemental satisfactions that are little more than animal comforts. . . True, he does bring Carrie to the point of discovering that success and happiness are not identical, but Carrie probably does not understand even this simple axiom. . .<sup>8</sup>

At first glance, then Carrie seems so shallow and dull, both unintellectual and incapable of deep feeling, that one wonders why she should be made the protagonist of the novel at all. The fact is that she comes across the pages as much more interesting than this thumbnail dismissal even begins to suggest. The simplicity of her nature, her real charm, her lack of greed or extraordinary selfishness (in spite of her materialism) all combine to make her attractive and to enlist the reader's sympathy. Further, the fact that she is mysteriously gifted theatrically gives her a deeper dimension. It is as if there are deep wells of emotion in her, if only they can be tapped. According to Matthiessen,

By the end of the book Dreiser is attributing "emotional greatness" to her of the unconscious sort that, without knowing it, can project on the stage an impression of universal longing, what Dreiser's forebears would have called Sehnsucht.

To analyze Sister Carrie, then, is not easy. She is far more carefully drawn than some critics seem to have observed:

Unlike Hurstwood, Carrie is much less an individualized portrait. She is a social type, the "poor working girl" of the banal songs of the period, described realistically rather than sentimentally. An aspiring girl with little intellect, who is all feeling and aspiration, she follows a typical course. . . She can advance, gain finery and luxury, do what she wants to do, give expression to her feelings only through a path of sin.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Claude M. Simpson, Jr., "Theodore Dreiser: Sister Carrie," The American Novel, ed. Wallace Stegner (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965), pp. 114-115.

<sup>9</sup>Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>10</sup>James T. Farrell, "Dreiser's Sister Carrie," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, ed. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 186.

Carrie's dimensions are increased by her talent, by her good nature (as the reader might have already perceived), and by the tragic flaw in character.

By contrast, the heroine of Dreiser's second novel, though superficially similar, is all love, warmth, and affection. Jennie Gerhardt is in fact so virtuous (by all standards but those prevailing under the general heading of 'Victorian') as to make her almost impossible to believe. Yet again, Dreiser's art and insight save her from being a mere Pollyanna, and raise her into something higher and in the last analysis more appealing.

Jennie's lower middle class background is very similar to Carrie Meeber's. For instance, the former's father is a glass blower by trade, the latter's worked in a flour mill. However, where the reader is told almost nothing of the Meebers' home-life in Columbia City, he is well informed as to conditions among the large family of Gerhardts of Columbus, Ohio. It is, in fact, Jennie's involvement with her family which provides much of the motivation for her story.

The book begins with Jennie, then eighteen, and her mother seeking work in a nice hotel in Columbus. Seeing their poverty and desperation, the management is moved by pity to offer them three afternoons of cleaning a week, for three dollars. They have fallen on hard times, with the father unable to find work and with many mouths to feed. To help them, the hotel also introduced them to a resident. Senator Brander gives them his laundry to do and out of compassion pays them considerably more than necessary for it. Jennie's virtue and beauty attract him, and he becomes increasingly interested in her and in her family's plight. Aging and lonely, he cannot help be drawn to Jennie's youth and innocence, in much

the same way as Hurstwood was fascinated by Carrie. Jennie, for her part, is not in love with the Senator, but she is awe-stricken by him and profoundly grateful to him. He decides to marry her and seems determined to treat her honorably, but a single indiscretion at the hotel results in Jennie's becoming pregnant. The Senator is taken ill on a trip and dies without knowing that he is to become a father.

This disaster, coupled with the loss of the Senator's financial support, decided the family to move. The father seeks employment in Youngstown, and finds a job of sorts. The oldest brother, Bass, gets work in Cleveland, and after the birth of the baby, named Vesta, the family joins them there. Jennie finds work as a lady's maid in a wealthy home.

The critics of Dreiser's day could accept Jennie's fall from virtue; what was more inclined to bother them was her own failure, or seeming failure, to feel any remorse, in that she had had a strict, hell-fire-and brimstone, Lutheran upbringing. Stuart B. Sherman observes that

The incredible appears when Mr. Dreiser insists that an accident of this sort to a girl brought up under the conditions stated is not necessarily followed by any sense of sin or shame or regret. Upon this simple pious Lutheran he imposes his own naturalistic philosophy. . . .<sup>11</sup>

Of course, this deliberately misses Dreiser's point. True, Carrie had been brought up a Lutheran, and had accepted the doctrine "without reserve" but this is mainly because she has never really troubled

---

<sup>11</sup>Stuart B. Sherman, "The Barbaric Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, op. cit., p. 77.

to think about it very much. In the next sentence, Dreiser is at pains to clarify what he means.

With Jennie, however, the assent was little more than nominal. Religion had as yet no striking hold upon her. It was a pleasant thing to know that there was a heaven, a fearsome one to realize that there was a hell. Young girls ought to be good and obey their parents. Otherwise the whole religious problem was badly jumbled for her.<sup>12</sup>

The measure of Jennie's character lies more in the fact that she spends little time, if any, mourning the life of comfort and ease that was so nearly hers. She sets to work in her new job with a will and ingratiates herself with her mistress.

Into this household comes Lester Kane, a handsome, extremely wealthy young man from Cincinnati. He sees Jennie lurking in the background like a good servant, and is interested. Finally, he is so fascinated that he cannot stop thinking about her, yet he has not the slightest intention of marrying her or anyone.

At first, though strongly attracted herself, Jennie refuses to go away with him, largely on conventional moral grounds. The precipitating factor in her change of heart, however, is the injury sustained by her father which makes it impossible for him to continue his trade, or to do any work for the foreseeable future. With the five dollars a week he had been sending from Youngstown, the family had been just barely able to make ends meet. Without it, and with one more mouth to feed, their position becomes desperate. Lester is willing to help them, and whatever society may say, Jennie feels obligated to do whatever is required to keep them from starvation.

---

<sup>12</sup>Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1911), p. 55.

Lester establishes her in a pleasant apartment in Chicago, and she lets her father believe that they are married, though her mother knows the truth. Lester keeps his promise to look after them handsomely, and for the first time they know security.

Jennie is reasonably happy for the time, for though economic considerations precipitated her into this relationship, her physical attraction to Lester gradually grows into a deep and abiding love:

Impressed as Jennie is with her adornment, it is not the clothes themselves which she cares about but Lester. Clothes are far from becoming any sort of end in themselves. Even though, being human, she feels a quick spontaneous joy in their possession, Jennie's elemental happiness springs from satisfaction in being dressed suitable for her position as Lester's mistress.<sup>13</sup>

Lester is reasonably successful at concealing his unconventional menage from his acquaintances, business associates, and strait-laced family, but the inevitable occurs when his sister Louise finally discovers it accidentally. She is deeply offended and naturally assumes the worst about Jennie; she reports back to Cincinnati in considerable dudgeon. The family brings all manner of pressures to bear upon Lester, but without success. He finds himself wishing that he had married Jennie in the first place; now it is too late to undo the trouble in which he finds himself. Yet he is fond of her in his fashion, and life with her is too pleasant to be lightly abandoned.

Lester continues to let matters drift; in fact, when it comes to making up his mind, Lester is a veritable Hamlet. "I'll think about it,"

---

<sup>13</sup>Phillip L. Gerber, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), p. 81.

is his standard reply to any advice offered him, and this is precisely all that he does. In this weakness, he is reminiscent of Scarlet O'Hara's famous, "I can't bear to think about that now. I'll think about it in the morning, when I feel better."

In fact, Lester apparently would be willing to let matters drift interminable, but circumstances take a hand in the form of his father's death. Originally, the estate of over a million dollars was to have been divided among the children, but in his anger over the affair with Jennie, Mr. Kane caused his will to be changed. Lester is to be given an income of ten thousand dollars per year for the three years succeeding his father's death. If during that time, he and Jennie separate, he will receive his full share of the estate. On the other hand, if he marries her, he will not come into his inheritance, but the income will continue for life. If, however, he should neither leave nor marry her, at the end of three years he will be cut off without a penny.

This would seem to be enough to goad almost anyone into action, but not Lester, He consoles himself with the thought that there is plenty of time to reach some decision, and keeps Jennie in ignorance of the terms of the will.

The logical thing seems to be to increase his own fortune, and he makes one disastrous effort in this line, losing about thirty-eight thousand dollars in real estate, and gives the idea up. For two of the three years he continues to vacillate.

In the meantime, they have moved from the apartment to a grand house on the south side, where they maintain a moderate amount of social contact with the neighbors. Even this limited socializing is curtailed,

however, by rumors concerning the scandal surrounding them. Vesta is with them, represented as the child of Jennie's first marriage, and Jennie's father also lives his last years with them, believing them to be married.

Lester's vacillating in the question of the estate finally prompts the family to send a lawyer to Jennie, to apprise her of the provisions of the will. It seems to her absurd and unwarranted that Lester should be deprived of his share of the estate because of her, and accordingly she sets about leaving him. She and Vesta set up housekeeping in a small but pleasant cottage in a Wisconsin lake community, and Lester finally marries a socially prominent widow. He continues to see that Jennie is provided for, but makes no effort to re-establish any semblance of their old relationship.

The change in living conditions is much harder on Jennie than on Lester, who continues to drift. He has lost only the comfort of Jennie's affectionate companionship; Jennie has lost the great love of her life. She manages, however, comforted by Vesta--but then, in her early teens, the child comes down with typhoid fever (the same disease that had killed Senator Brander), and she too dies. Now quite alone, Jennie returns to Chicago, becomes reconciled to her lonely future. Eventually she adopts two children.

During the ensuing period of years, she and Lester have seen one another only seldom, but now Lester becomes ill. His wife is traveling in Europe, and in his loneliness he sends for Jennie. At a previous meeting, when he visited her after Vesta's death, he told her that he had come to regret not marrying her at the beginning. He has become embittered with life:

I don't know whether you see what I'm driving at, but all of us are more or less pawns. We're moved about like chessmen by circumstances over which we have no control. . . It's a silly show. The best we can do is hold our personality in tact. It doesn't appear that integrity has much to do with it.<sup>14</sup>

Jennie bears Lester no ill will, and seems to feel no resentment that he has treated her in a manner which many would call shabby. She nurses him patiently through his last illness and mourns him bitterly when he is gone; the last chapter of the book is devoted to her pathetic and anonymous appearance on the fringes of Lester's funeral. The rest of her still-young life--she is in her mid-thirties at the book's end--is devoted to the care of her foster children. Spiller believes that

Jennie was Dreiser's own favorite, as she will remain with many of his readers, for it was Jennie's goodness that led to her downfall. Poverty and gentle responsiveness rather than desire for excitement or vice led her to liaisons first with Senator Brander and then with the rich young man, Lester Kane. . . When Lester turned to a woman of his own temperament and status, Jennie's gift of life could not be restored to her. Yet it is Jennie and not Lester who survives; the tragic issue is unresolved.<sup>15</sup>

Jennie is indeed an attractive character, though her goodness, unselfishness and lack of resentment at times try the reader's credulity. There is a good reason that she should be so, however. Dreiser sets her up in a situation which was, in the eyes of traditional morality, an evil and reprehensible one: she has relations with two men who are not married to her. In all other respects, however, she displays every Christian virtue. Over and over, Lester describes her (in tones of some reverence) as a "good woman," and Dreiser concurs wholeheartedly.

---

<sup>14</sup>Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt, op. cit., p. 401.

<sup>15</sup>Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (New York: Macmillan Co., 1955), p. 226.



In fact, by any reasonable standard this is a fitting description for her. Through her, Dreiser is trying to illustrate the limitations and unrealism of the Victorian code.

Yet Jennie is sexually immoral--even by traditional standards--in the most limited manner imaginable. Her first experience can be dismissed having been caused by innocence placed in an impossible position vis à vis a much older and more experienced man. Thereafter, though her considerations in entering into the relationship with Lester are partly economic, she is absolutely faithful to the man she loves. In this respect, she is considerably more moral than Carrie, who loves not at all. Not by any stretch of the imagination could Jennie be described as promiscuous. Never does she pursue her own pleasure at the expense of others. She is in fact more strictly moral than many of the married ladies with whom she comes in contact. She has taken no vows to bind her to her husband, but she behaves as if she had. In fact, she is bound more securely than through promises--she is bound by her love. At the same time, Lester is equally faithful to her. He is not able to love with her depth of feeling, but comfort and custom and the pleasure of her company serve to keep him within the confines of domesticity. These pleasure-nests that Dreiser contrives for his characters are in fact rather conventional, innocent affairs. The menage of Jennie and Lester, and the difficulties they encounter in its abandonment, ought once and for all to have put the lie to the idea of "free love." There is anything but that, and suggests an axiom: if it is really love, it is never free.

In fact, Dreiser's contention is that his two protagonists are driven into their untenable position by circumstances entirely beyond their control, that they are moved like chessmen, in Lester's words, their own will and desire having little relevance to the outcome. This is more noticeably true in Jennie's case, but with Lester the difficulty seems to be more one of a vacillating character than with the pressures of society. Yet one might conclude that the interaction between Lester's natural desires when they come in conflict with the code of his social stratum is what causes his seeming uncertainty. He is a man who has what he wants and is unwilling to exchange it for what the world thinks he should want, even in the face of mounting pressure to conform.

Of these two early heroines, then, little more need be said at this point. While Jennie is on the whole a more attractive personality, Carrie is more interesting. Jennie, all love and devotion, is perforce a little colorless. Loveless Carrie, feeling without thinking, seeking she knows not what in all the wrong places, is the more haunting evocation.

Sister Carrie touched only lightly upon the American monied aristocracy; Jennie Gerhardt contrasted the lives of two families, Gerhardts and Kanes, one poverty-ridden lower class, the other very wealthy, both failures.<sup>16</sup> In his third and fourth novels, published in 1912 and 1914, Dreiser shifted his emphasis for the first time from those who lacked money and the gift for getting it, to those who possess it without caring just how they acquire it. The action of The Financier and The Titan

---

<sup>16</sup>Charles Shapiro, "Our Bitter Patriot," *New Republic*, CXL, No. 23 (June 8, 1959), p. 18.

revolves around their "hero," Frank Algernon Cowperwood, amoral in love and business, around whom women hover like flies.

Since this is the case, and the main theme of the book is Cowperwood's rise from failure and disgrace (divorce, the loss of a million dollar fortune, and imprisonment for embezzlement) to a position of economic and social dominance in Chicago, there is no need to enter into an exhaustive examination of the plot, except insofar as it involves the main female characters in the story.

The Financier and The Titan have no heroine in the accepted sense of the term; the leading female role goes to Aileen Butler, first Frank Cowperwood's mistress, later his wife. Hers is a background dissimilar to those of Carrie and Jennie; her father was an Irish politician, and though the family was pure middle class, Aileen has never known the terror of poverty. She has great aspirations, however, for wealth and even more, for social position and a place among the great ones of her day. Her most important attribute (and at the same time, in a way, her bane) is her fantastic beauty:

She followed him with adoring eyes--a fool of love, a spoiled child, a family pet, amorous, eager, affectionate, the type so strong a man would naturally like--she tossed her pretty red gold head and waved him a kiss. Then she walked away with rich, sinuous, healthy strides--the type that men turn to look after.

"That's her--that's that Butler girl," observed one railroad worker to another. "Gee! a man wouldn't want anything better than that, would he?"<sup>17</sup>

Aileen's beauty is of the obtrusive kind which distracts from everything else around it; when she enters a room, all eyes are perforce

---

<sup>17</sup>Theodore Dreiser, The Titan (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961), p. 22.

on her. In her efforts to "crash" Chicago society, her looks are not an asset. Hers is not the kind of beauty that a lady should have, and it is not long before rumors are circulating about her exceedingly unladylike past. Later, Cowperwood causes her portrait to be painted, with a result perhaps a little to successful:

. . . a blue-and-white-banded straw hat. . . shading her lusty, animal eyes. The artist had caught her spirit quite accurately, the dash, the assumption, the bravado based on the courage of inexperience, or lack of true subtlety. A refreshing thing in its way, a little showy, as everything that related to her was, and inclined to arouse jealousy in those not so liberally endowed by life, but fine as a character piece. In the warm glow of the guttered gas-jets she looked particularly brilliant here, pampered, idle, jaunty--the well-kept, stall-fed pet of the world. Many stopped to see, and many were the comments, private and otherwise.<sup>18</sup>

This is not to imply that Aileen is a beautiful but stupid redhead; quite the contrary. She is of perfectly normal intelligence, but no better than that. Her limitations are severe. She is completely without curiosity in matters of the intellect; the greater sphere of Cowperwood's world is completely beyond her. He begins to compare her with women more intellectually gifted, with Chicago's aristocracy, and to find her wanting. He is as interested in his way, as she is in hers, in conquering Chicago's "upper crust," but she is by no means a match for the cruelty of this world, which Dreiser captures perfectly in a few scathing sentences, as he describes the Cowperwoods' first great party:

Aileen, backed by the courageous presence of Cowperwood, who, in the dining room, the library, and the art-galley,

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 84

was holding a private levee of men, stood up in her vain beauty, a thing to see-almost to weep over, embodying the vanity of all seeming things, the mockery of having and yet not having. This parading throug that was more curious than interested, more jealous than sympathetic, more critical than kind, was coming almost solely to observe.<sup>19</sup>

Thus they are very much "out," and Frank cannot help but feel that it is Aileen who is holding him back. It occurs to him that if he had only had another sort of wife, the way to social success might have been made easy for him, rather than difficult. Never strictly faithful to her, he begins a series of complicated amours, some with a considerable degree of seriousness and longevity. When Aileen belatedly becomes suspicious and hires a firm of private detectives to confirm her fears, she creates a magnificent scene, nearly murdering a young woman friend of Cowperwood's. Yet she has not quite the fiber to leave at this point; her love for Cowperwood was real enough, within her limitation, and it is impossible for her not to hope that he may love her again, some day. Yet in the years that follow this moment of truth, her husband gives her the trappings and appearance of affection, without its reality, while he continues to pursue various women. No serious affair involves him, however, until he encounters Stephanie Platow.

Stephanie's background is one of wealth, but not of the upper strata of society, for she is half Jewish--her father is a successful Russian Jewish furrier, her mother a girl from Texas who once had been his bookkeeper. She is a strange girl--beautiful, moody, gifted. She has become involved with an amateur theatrical group and at twenty-one is actually a promiscuous young woman with quite a bit of experience.

---

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

She manages for a time to keep the full extent of this from Cowperwood, however, and when he discovers that she is actually simultaneously conducting another affair--is in fact using money he gave her to buy gifts for her other lover--he rejects her. The irony of his fury seems to escape him; Stephanie has done no worse by him than he by his two wives and many paramours.

The scene of near-murder is followed for Aileen by years of loneliness and misery in which she comes finally to understand that there is no hope that she will ever regain Cowperwood's love, though he is loathe to let her go. Her love for him, which was always sincere, congeals slowly into a kind of desperate mourning for her lost dreams, for the high hopes she had once had of being a leading figure in society. Even so, given her temperament, it is a considerable time before she at least is unfaithful to her husband, and then it is with a well-known rake who is not unlike him in temperament. Cowperwood is in no position to complain.

The third major female figure is Berenice Fleming, daughter of a socially prominent family, fallen on evil days. Her mother is descended from a well-known Virginia family and once was rich, but her dissolute second husband has, prior to his death, squandered most of her inheritance. In order to support her two children and avoid a life of penury herself, she has descended by gradual degrees until, at the time Cowperwood encounters her, she is the madam of an expensive brothel. Cowperwood cares little for her, but he manages to catch a glimpse of the photograph of the daughter and is fascinated. When the mother gets into difficulty

and has to leave town, he resolves to help her on the quite correct theory that it will lead eventually to a meeting with Berenice.

He is fascinated with her, and secretly assumes her family's full support. Berenice though young and inexperienced is an unusual woman:

Here was a woman, he saw, who could and would command the utmost reaches of his soul in every direction. If he interested her at all, he would need them all. The eyes of her were at once so elusive, so direct, so friendly, so cool and keen. . . Here was an iron individuality with a soul for romance and art and philosophy and life. He could not take her as he had those others.<sup>20</sup>

So smitten is he that he persuades Aileen to move to New York with him, on the pretext that perhaps there they can circulate in society. His actual intention is to bide his time, to keep Aileen more or less content--to refrain from rocking the boat--until he can see how things go. At the back of his mind is the hope that he may eventually divorce Aileen to marry Berenice.

As the book progresses, Aileen becomes an increasingly pitiful figure, turning to men she does not love for distraction, to liquor for relief from the pain of her thoughts, endlessly hoping that something, even the attrition of age, will somehow bring Cowperwood back to her. In her last appearance in the book, Cowperwood asks her for a divorce and she responds with a tirade and a suicide attempt.

In the meantime, through clever and ruthless machinations, Cowperwood has gained almost complete control over the economic and political life of Chicago. However, the forces arrayed against him gain in partial victory and deliver a severe setback. As he is contemplating

---

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 389.

this, now in his fifties and weary at last of the struggle, Berenice makes up her mind finally and comes to him. On this note the book closes.

The character of Berenice is far more difficult to understand than that of Aileen. She, like most of Dreiser's materialistic heroines, would rather be unhappy than poor. Yet she has a sharp intelligence which sees through the posturings of society, though at the same time any threats to her social position alarm her. She has an instinctive understanding for Cowperwood and apparently, unlike any of the other women who have occupied, will be able to domesticate him--will always be a little ahead of him, some part of her eternally untouched and unattainable.

The final outcome of the Cowperwood saga is contained in The Stoic published posthumously in 1947. Cowperwood continues to run true to form with women, turning to a dancer and to others. Aileen refuses to divorce him, so he hires an actor to keep her entertained and out of his way, while he pursues his own path. Though he is devoted to Berenice, the discrepancy in their ages create some difficulty; in spite of this and his unfaithfulness, however, their relationship continues until his death. After it, Aileen, who has inherited the bulk of his estate, proceeds to fritter it away. Her story ends with Cowperwood's possessions sold at auction; a year or so later she dies of pneumonia.

While Aileen slides downward into death, Berenice pursues a different course:

During the period in which the estate of Cowperwood had disintegrated and the death of Aileen had occurred, Berenice had slowly but surely embarked on a course that she felt would adjust her to society and life in any form, provided, as she reasoned from time to time, she could equip herself with the



mental and spiritual data that would brush completely out of her consideration the whole Western materialistic viewpoint which made money and luxury its only god.<sup>21</sup>

An encounter with the Bhagavad-Gita attracts her to the philosophy of the East, and she accordingly sets out for India to study Hindu thought. She spends some five years there, then returns to the United States to discover what has happened to Cowperwood's affairs. The horror of the life of the common people of India has made a deep impression on her, and at first her plan is to devote herself to their service. Back in New York, however, she discovers that many Americans live in conditions that are not much better, and she decides to use most of the money and possessions that Cowperwood left her to found a hospital for the care of children. She herself becomes a nurse, yet she is frustrated by the fact that the best she can do is not enough, hardly more than a drop in the ocean of need.

She thought of Cowperwood and the part she had played in his life. How long he had struggled and fought--for what? Wealth, power, luxury, influence, social position? Where were they now, the aspirations and dreams of achievement that so haunted and drove Frank Cowperwood? And how far away from all this she had moved in so short a time!<sup>22</sup>

The contrast between these two most important women in the trilogy--Aileen and Berenice--points up an interesting fact in Dreiser's treatment of the female and one that has been frequently commented upon by critics of his total work. It is a motif we will see repeated according to Matthiessen,

Here is the clearest-cut instance /the reference is to An American Tragedy/ of what we have noted recurrently in

---

<sup>21</sup>Theodore Dreiser, The Stoic (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1947), pp. 285-286.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

Dreiser's portrayal of women. He was able to give reality to the kind he had known when he was young. But as soon as he reached above a certain point in the social scale, the details seem superficial and the total effect false.<sup>23</sup>

This is equally true of the Cowperwood trilogy; Aileen is far more vital and involving than Berenice, no matter how many extraordinary adjectives Dreiser may attach to the latter. She remains withal a cardboard figure, moving through a set series of steps required by the author's purposes. Aileen alone is completely realized, intensely believable, and in the suffering of her love-hate for Cowperwood and her hopeless social aspirations, very moving.

Dreiser followed the publication of the first two installments of the Cowperwood story with the appearance in 1915 of his most autobiographical work, The Genius.

Here the story revolves around the painter, Eugene Witla, and again, there are two main female characters, Angela Blue and Susanne Dale. Witla's life is patterned very closely on Dreiser's:

Witla, after a boyhood of romantic daydreaming in the Midwest and yearning for girls he idealizes, lives through a period of disillusionment, reads Spencer, Tyndall, and Huxley, and goes to New York to enjoy the attractions of the city and the blandishments of women.<sup>24</sup>

The city inspires him to a certain commercial success, and he is able to marry a midwestern girl, Angela Blue. She is one of the genteel ladies of the small-town sort who appear from time to time in Dreiser's work, and is very like Dreiser's first wife Sarah White, known as Jug. Witla marries her mainly because he feels that he must have her, and that is the only way to get her:

---

<sup>23</sup>Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 197.

<sup>24</sup>Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 155.

Eugene looked at her and came to the conclusion after a time that she was as beautiful as any girl he had ever seen--that she had more soul, more emotion, more sweetness. He tried to hold her hand, to kiss her, to take her in his arms but she eluded him in a careful, wary and yet half yielding way. She wanted him to propose to her, not because she was anxious to trap him, but because her conventional conscience told her these things were not right outside a definite engagement and she wanted to be engaged first.<sup>25</sup>

Witla, however, is a man of strong sensual appetite; it is what makes him an artist. He is fascinated by youth and beauty--though he grows older, his taste in mistresses, of which he has a succession, remains for the very young. None satisfy him for long, until he encounters Susanne Dale, the book's second important woman character. This is an aristocratic girl, well versed in the arts of self control, since she is able to listen to Eugene's lovemaking without going off into gales of laughter:

'Open your eyes,' he pleaded. 'Oh, God! That this should come to me! Now I could die. Life can hold no more. Oh, Flower Face! Oh, Silver Feet! Oh, Myrtle Bloom! Divine Fire! How perfect you are. How perfect! And to think you love me!'<sup>26</sup>

This approach, however, has served Witla well before, and apparently Suzanne (and Dreiser) do not think it unusual. Though "in society" it is understood that Suzanne is an unusaul girl of the Berenice Fleming mold:

She liked interesting characters, able books, striking pictures. She had been particularly impressed with those of Eugene's; she had seen and had told her mother they were wonderful. She loved poetry of high order, and was possessed of a boundless appetite for the ridiculous and the comic. . . She was a student of character, and of her own mother, and was beginning to see clearly what were the motives that were

---

<sup>25</sup>Theodore Dreiser, The "Genius" (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963), p. 90.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 541.

prompting her mother. . . Her really sensuous beauty was nothing to her. She did not value it highly.<sup>27</sup>

Suzanne's mother interferes in the relationship, however, and steps between the two. In the meantime, Wilta still lives with Angela who conceives a child in the hope that this will bind Eugene to his home-- then she dies in giving birth. Eugene is deeply moved and disturbed by her passing, and tries to delve more deeply into the mysteries of life. He is led in the end to Christian Science; he and Suzanne eventually go their separate ways. By chance they meet one last time and each, refusing to give the other the satisfaction of knowing that love still lives, passes by without a sign of recognition.

Just as Aileen in the trilogy was far more real and believable than Berenice so too in The "Genius" is Angela more human than Suzanne.

What we observed of the trilogy is true again in The "Genius". Angela, though presented far too prolixly, is real in her disappointments and defects; but the others, and especially Suzanne-- the ultimate in "the beauty of eighteen"--are abstract monsters of unreality. Dreiser seems to have paid the price of his promiscuity in a progressive blunting of his sensibility. His Berenice Flemings and Suzanne Dales are his worst failures, stereotyped "ideals" with no more living differentiation than they would have had in the cheapest magazines.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, while Berenice and Suzanne are very like, Angela and Aileen are similar only in believability; in other respects they are quite different. Both are capable of love, to be sure, but there is more passion in Aileen. Angela is very much the respectable mid-western middle-class smalltown girl. Yet she is more than just a stereotype; the reader believes in her, and in the end she reaches a certain majesty.

---

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 543-544.

<sup>28</sup>Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 166.

The unreality of Berenice, on the other hand, is heightened by the ending of The Stoic, in which her conversion from debutante to philanthropist seems at best to be arbitrary and imposed from without, despite all the preceding protestations as to her superior intellect and individuality, though perhaps Gerber's evocation of it seems a little strong:

Dreiser invokes a lightning bolt of conscience which, striking Berenice with force sufficient to bring about "the dawn of a spiritual awakening," transforms the girl from an empty-headed, self-centered odalisque into a yoga-practicing social worker bent on improving slum conditions in New York's Harlem.

She becomes the worst kind of unknowledgeable do-gooder. . .<sup>29</sup>

The contrast between two sorts of women, upper and lower class, was continued into Dreiser's next and probably finest novel, An American Tragedy. Here the two are the loving and pathetic Roberta Alden and the spoiled social butterfly Sondra Finchley; and once again, the reader finds Dreiser succeeding with the former but not with the latter:

The critics have pounced on his failure. . . to hear and recreate the tone of upper class dialogues, While he could understand a Papa Gerhardt or a Clyde Griffiths, he never could adequately deal with a Sondra Finchley. (Hollywood knew exactly what it was doing when it cast Elizabeth Taylor as the rich girl.)<sup>30</sup>

And again, Roberta is the far more appealing individual:

If any young person in this story is superior in character, capacity, human depth and warmth, it is the girl Roberta. But she, like Clyde, is bewildered in a world of ignorance and poverty.

<sup>29</sup>Philip I. Gerber, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), p. 109.

<sup>30</sup>Shapiro, op. cit., p. 18.

Through her love for Clyde, in fact, she develops morally. She becomes a richer person than she had been. . .<sup>31</sup>

The plot of An American Tragedy is too well known to require a detailed review here. It will be recalled that Dreiser based it on a newspaper account of an actual crime, one which he felt was typical of a certain sort of transgression in American society:

In 1906, Chester Gillette, a poor-relation straw boss in his wealthy uncle's skirt factory in Cortland, N. Y., seduced a pretty millhand, Grace Brown. He then became enamored of the daughter of a wealthy Cortlandian, who encouraged his suit and dream of rising through marriage to the town's upper set. The pregnant Grace now represented a threat of his social ascent. So Chester escorted Grace to Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks, pretending that he would marry her. Instead, he took her boating, stunned her with a tennis racket, overturned the boat and swam to shore while she drowned.<sup>32</sup>

Over the years, Dreiser had collected a number of similar stories. What interested him about them was that in them the motive of the murder was not any of the usual ones for which the police usually search (who benefits?) but rather, basically, the desire of the murderer to rise in the world, to escape his lower class origins, to enter a more exalted stratum of society. Thus, Dreiser reasoned that the ultimate cause of the murder was really the American way of life which condemned some to poverty while the few enjoyed unearned riches, thereby exciting the jealousy of the have-nots.

In the novel, sex is represented as one of the ladders by which the ascent may be made; in some cases, it may be the only ladder. Thus, the characters in An American Tragedy sometimes raise themselves by aspiring to take lovers from a social class higher than their own.

---

<sup>31</sup>James T. Farrell, "An American Tragedy," New York Book Review (May 6, 1945), p. 6.

<sup>32</sup>Swanberg, op. cit., p. 305.

In this way, Clyde is to Roberta as Sondra is to Clyde. In fact, to Roberta, a poor shopgirl, a farmer's daughter, Clyde represents a way of life that seems far superior to her own, since she is not really aware that his beginnings were quite as humble as her own (the shirt factory in which both work belongs to Clyde's wealthy uncle; Clyde is employed as a foreman):

And so it was that Roberta, after encountering Clyde and sensing the superior world in which she imagined he moved, and being so taken with the charm of his personality, was seized with the very virus of ambition and unrest that afflicted him.<sup>33</sup>

Roberta, though of the lower middle class, is not free and easy in her sexual morals, but rather belongs to that particular breed of poor but proud Anglo-Saxons of Calvinist extraction and inclination. Her pretensions are genteel in the extreme, but she is herself as lost and lonely as Clyde, and in the last analysis she is unable to resist the strong pull of his physical attractiveness. Clyde fancies himself to be in love with her, as she undoubtedly is with him, and for a time their relationship is almost an idyl. Yet, even before her first capitulation, even before her first conversation with him, he has seen Sondra Finchley and her group and has been unable to forget. During his first evening with Roberta, Sondra comes into his mind; it is a fine night, and he wonders where she is and what she and her friends are doing.

Thus, some time after Roberta and Clyde have become intimate, when Sondra, mistaking Clyde for his cousin Gilbert, offers him a ride in her chauffeur-driven car, all his dreams for improving his situation

---

<sup>33</sup>Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy (New York: Horace Leveright, 1929), p. 256.

and for attaining this seemingly unattainable beautiful girl are reawakened.

The fact that his relations with Roberta were what they were now was not of sufficient import or weight to offset the temperamental or imaginative pull of such a girl as Sondra and all that she represented. . . Ah, to know this perfect girl more intimately! . . . The devil.' He would not go around to Roberta's this evening. He would trump up some excuse--tell her in the morning that he had been called upon by his uncle or cousin to do some work. He could not and would not go, feeling as he did just now.

So much for the effect of wealth, beauty, the peculiar social state to which he most aspired, on a temperament that was as fluid and unstable as water.<sup>34</sup>

As the reader has already noted, many critics have included Sondra with Berenice Fleming and Suzanne Dale as instances of Dreiserian failure in drawing portraits of society girls. It is true that Sondra, compared to Roberta, is one-dimensional and strangely empty, and that this is undoubtedly a mischance of ability rather than a triumph of design, yet it serves a useful purpose in the reader's view of the book as a whole. Sondra is as empty as a resort town in the winter; Clyde sacrifices two lives, his own and another, for her and for what she represents to him--and neither she nor it is worth it. Yet there is a great difference in conception between Sondra and girls like Berenice and Suzanne, for in drawing them Dreiser was aiming for something higher than Sondra--aristocratic girls, to the manor born, who nonetheless had extraordinary qualities which would make them true mates for a titan of finance (a Nietzschean superman, if you will, in terms of the industrial revolution) or a "genius." The failure in execution is comparable to the

---

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 317-318.



loftiness of the conception. With Sondra, the aim is lower and the failure therefore of much smaller dimension, This is as it should be, for the fact that what Clyde wants has no more substance than a willow-the-wisp is an integral part of Dreiser's feeling about the "tragedy." Sondra is a shallow fool; only an equally shallow fool--like Clyde--could fail to notice it.

In An American Tragedy, Dreiser combined his monumental scheme of natural and social determinism with a pity for the ensnared individuals that made much of the book very moving. That Clyde found the cheap hotel glitter so fascinating, was a telling comment on his human situation. That he unconsciously treated Roberta cruelly and accepted her love as merely his due made his stricken mistress a tragic figure. That he found the empty Sondra Finchley so attractive because of her money, social position, and flirting ways, complete with inane baby-talk, was simply pathetic.<sup>35</sup>

An American Tragedy was the last of his novels to be published in Dreiser's lifetime. His final work, The Bulwark, which had been in process for some thirty years, came out in 1946, several months after his death. It has thus all the faults of a piece written over long periods of time, with many lapses for other efforts in between. Inconsistencies appear, and since Dreiser's original conception of the time in which it was set altered while it was in process, there are anachronisms as well.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about The Bulwark is the evolution which evidences in Dreiser's outlook and philosophy. It indicates how far he had travelled from the time in 1928 when he wrote, "As I see him the utterly infinitesimal individual weaves among the mysteries

---

<sup>35</sup>H. Wayne Morgan, "Theodore Dreiser: The Naturalist as Humanist," American Writers in Rebellion (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 178.

of floss-like and wholly meaningless course--if course it be. In short, I catch no meaning from all I have seen, and pass quite as I came, confused and dismayed."<sup>36</sup>

However, a number of Dreiser's other writings in the decade following the publication of An American Tragedy suggested that he was coming to find evidence of the existence of some divine, and even kindly, intelligence behind the universe which had hitherto seemed so perplexing. This increasingly metaphysical approach is clearly evidenced in The Bulwark.

It is the story of another successful businessman, the Quaker Solon Barnes. His beginnings were quite humble, and he has raised himself by his own ability and effort, and has married, quite happily, his childhood sweetheart, Benecia Wallin, the daughter of a well-to-do Quaker. Yet wealth means little to her:

The Wallins had no children other than Benecia for whom to amass wealth, and plainly she was not one to be interested in money. . . She was of a gentle tender disposition--one made for love and retiring happiness, not vanity or show.<sup>37</sup>

Benecia is in fact, a certain type of Dreiser heroine, but with a difference. She is carefully brought up, conventionally moral, quiet, and religious--but she also is loving, kind, and devoted to her husband. She is nothing whatever like Angela Blue, for instance, with her surface gentility covering her ferocious and emasculating sexuality.

Benecia's role is not a major one, however, except to furnish Solon with five difficult children, three girls--Isobel, Dorothea, and Etta--and two boys, Orville and Stewart. Isobel and Orville grow up to

---

<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 235.

<sup>37</sup>Theodore Dreiser, The Bulwark (New York: Popular Library, 1960), p. 38.

be respectable, if rather unimaginative and unattractive in personality (Orville is charming to look at but dull; Isobel is plain from babyhood and lacking in robust health). Dorothea is lovely to look upon. But it is the two youngest, Stewart and Etta, who are to become the most independent and troublesome.

During the period of the children's growing up, Solon becomes more and more successful, both in private financial dealings and in his position with the bank. His eminent respectability has become a kind of window-dressing for the other officers of the bank. He is indeed a "bulwark"--one they can hide behind while they conduct their affairs and the banks in ways that would not stand up well to public scrutiny.

Solon raises his children in his parents' home along strict Quaker lines. They attend the Friends' school, it being deemed that the ways of the public schools are too permissive and undisciplined. As the youngsters grow older, they become more fractious as they become more aware of the difference between the world's ways and theirs:

The Barnes children, although unwittingly at first, were becoming, as they grew older, more and more of a problem, for each in turn could not help being confronted by the marked contrast between the spirit of the Barnes home and that of the world at large. In spite of the many admirable qualities of the home, these were distinctly at variance with the rush and swing and spirit of the time itself, and this fact could scarcely fail to impress even the least impressionable minds.<sup>38</sup>

It is not that Solon does not love his children. Quite the contrary, his desire is to give them a proper Quaker upbringing and protect them from what he feels to be evil. The two eldest, Orville and

---

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 113-114.

Isobel, give little trouble. Orville is too dull to be anything but respectable, and Isobel, though hungering for love and enjoyment is too plain to achieve it. She becomes a spinster school teacher. Dorothea grows into a beauty, and with the aid of a socialite cousin, makes a fashionable marriage.

Etta, however, has both beauty and intelligence, as well as spirit and a hunger for experience. She gradually becomes more deeply dissatisfied with life in the straitlaced Quaker household, and when her father discovers a French book she has been reading, a row is precipitated which culminates in her leaving home. After a brief sojourn at the University of Wisconsin, she and a friend go to Greenwich Village to live, and there she meets and falls in love with an artist. For a time, she is his mistress. Her love is so deep, however, that it makes demands upon him which he cannot meet. There is no quarrel; he drags himself away with difficulty, but he leaves her nonetheless.

Simultaneously, the youngest brother (a kind of upper class Clyde Griffiths) has been giving Solon and Benecia increasing cause for concern. His thirst for life and experience is preponderantly sensual, and at school he falls in with a couple of well-to-do shallow boys who are allowed too much freedom by their parents. They introduce him to the joys of sex, and he finds that his carefully supervised purse is inadequate for their adventures. He takes to stealing from his mother's handbag. One boy, who has been having difficulty making headway with a young woman named Psyche Tanzer, gives her a mild opiate not knowing that she has a weak heart. She goes into a coma and dies; the boys (including Stewart,

who was in the car) are arrested and charged with rape and murder. Unable to face what has happened, Stewart commits suicide in his jail cell.

This tragedy proves to be too much for Benecia to bear, and not long after Stewart's funeral, she too dies. Etta returns and becomes reconciled with her father, who resigns from his position in the bank rather than be longer associated with its policies. The double blows have mellowed him, and for the first time in his stiffly upright life, he begins to understand the meaning of Christian Love.

Etta . . . has been united in forgiveness with her father, who finds himself close to her as he is not to his two respectable and successful children. As she reads aloud to him from his Quaker books, she also grasps for the first time in her life "the weight of spiritual beauty." But the novel ends on the day of her father's funeral. Orville encounters her crying beside their father's coffin, and is surprised that she should care, since, in his cool prudential eyes, she was the one responsible for starting all the family's troubles. She does not bother to get angry at him but answers simply: "Oh, I am not crying for myself, or for Father--I am crying for life."<sup>39</sup>

Thus the closing chapters of The Bulwark represent for Dreiser a turning toward a sort of religiosity, and as a result the characterization of Etta remains quite different from anything he had attempted hitherto. At the beginning she seems a little like Carrie Meeber--yet not quite, For Carrie knows what it is to be poor, whereas Etta does not.. True, her father is not liberal with money, and their life is comfortable but by no means lavish--but Etta has never known what it means to be alone and without any way of supporting herself. Her hunger is not for finery and luxury, but for experience; it seems to her that in this way the meaning of life may be found, and this is something

---

<sup>39</sup>Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 248.

that she cares about. After all her wanderings, however, she discovers that life's essence, insofar as it can be found at all, was to be discovered in her own home.

These then are Dreiser's heroines: Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt, Aileen Butler Cowperwood, Berenice Fleming, Angela Blue, Suzanne Dale, Roberta Alden, Sondra Finchley, Benecia Barnes, and Etta Barnes. Do they, as has been suggested, belong to two main sorts, one sweet but passionless, giving in for a variety of reasons other than passion; the others genteel and prissy? This writer is of the opinion that this is a considerable over-simplification which does great injustice to Dreiser. None of the wealthy girls fit into either of these categories, nor does Jennie Gerhardt, who was both sweet and passionate, and full of love, nor Aileen Butler, the world's spoiled pet, the fool of love. Further, the genteel range from the steely first Mrs. Cowperwood, to the determined and oversexed Angela Blue, to the steadfast love of Benecia Barnes, these ladies having common nothing but their proper respectable backgrounds. It simply tortures Dreiser's sense to try to twist his characterizations into these or any other definite categories.

No, the dissimilarities among the heroines are more important than the things they have in common, the exceptions being Berenice Fleming and Suzanne Dale, two stampings from the same mold and both imperfectly realized, for the very good reason that such human beings have never walked the earth and probably never will.

This chapter, then, has been devoted to a discussion of these women within the context of the novels in which they appear. The writer will now turn to Dreiser's literary purposes in treating his women the way that he did.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN DREISER'S NOVELS

What role did Dreiser envision for the ladies he created? What was his purpose in creating them?

There is probably no one single answer to these questions, but it may be that the most important factor governing his inspiration was his peculiar ability to look at the world and, as was said about Sophocles, grasp it as it was and whole. His eyes were not blinded by the conventions of his day; he was aware of them, but he tended to project them into his novels only in passing, mentioning them in order to contrast them with what people actually did. Thus Roberta Alden's remarks when Clyde suggests that no one would see him if he came up to her room:

"No, no, I can't let you do that. It wouldn't be right. I don't want to. Someone might see us. Somebody might know you." For the moment the moral repulsion was so great that unconsciously she endeavored to relinquish herself from his embrace. . . . "But I know what's right and I don't think that's right and I won't do it."<sup>40</sup>

Of course, when it comes down to submitting to his wishes or giving up Clyde, Roberta lets her qualms fall quickly by the wayside. Faced with the realities of life and love, Dreiser seems to be saying, conventional morality is of little if any help in guiding and governing human behavior.

This very fact was at the root of Dreiser's early difficulties with the critics. They conceded that possibly he might be telling some

---

<sup>40</sup>Dreiser, An American Tragedy, op. cit., p. 297.

part of the truth that was appropriate to a certain depraved class of individual--but this was not the kind of thing that nice people even considered putting in books. Why not write about that other reality, that pleasant moral reality of the "good" people? Sherman has noted that

The possibility of making the unvarying victoriousness of jungle-motive plausible depends directly upon the suppression of the evidence of other motives. In this work of suppression Mr. Dreiser simplifies American life almost beyond recognition. Whether it is because he comes from Indiana, or whether it is because he steadily envisages the human animal, I cannot say; I can only note that he never speaks of his men and women as "educated" or "brought up." Whatever their social status, they are invariably "raised." Raising human stock in America evidently includes feeding and clothing it, but does not include the inculcation of even the most elementary moral ideas. Hence Mr. Dreiser's field seems curiously outside American society.<sup>41</sup>

Other critics complained of Dreiser that he looked at the world of human suffering, saw what they saw, yet did not come to their conclusion. As one critic observes,

Thus it was that while he saw the beauty and the tragedy and the power of life, what he did not see is the plan of life: he did not realize--and here a child could have led him--that all the suffering that he saw, that the unhappiness and the very incompleteness of this world would argue for the existence of a God Who has clearly destined us for some other world.<sup>42</sup>

To be sure, Dreiser came around to some such conclusion as this towards the end of his life after all. As we have seen, this change of heart was reflected in The Bulwark. Yet the younger Dreiser would have complained that just because such a conclusion is comforting does not make it logical or compelling.

Dreiser's ability to look at America through clear and untinted spectacles was at least partially the result of his background.

---

<sup>41</sup>Sherman, op. cit., pp. 76-77.

<sup>42</sup>Camille McCole, "The Tragedy of Theodore Dreiser," Catholic World, CXXXII, No. 787 (October, 1930), p. 4.



The young Theodore had not been accepted by Puritan-commercial folk; therefore he was not loaded down in childhood with hampering theories of the correct way in which to live and act and write. The great moral paradox of the age--how to square the competitive parable of the talents with the teachings of the New Testament--did not trouble him, since he was not preached at by elders who were quick to urge young people to succeed--and to be good Christian men and women at the same time.<sup>43</sup>

So here the reader sees Theodore Dreiser, setting out at the turn of the century to write about the world as he understood it, his view unhampered, or largely so, by preconceived notions.

It was quite natural, then, that he should turn to his own friends and relatives for material. Nothing was too personal to be grist for his mill. In this sense, he was one of the most autobiographical of writers, though not in the way that the term is most often employed--as when a critic complains, for instance, of the work of a young first-novelist as being too autobiographical, meaning too fraught with the personal emotions of the young writer. Dreiser drew from the experiences of himself and his family, but he did so with a reportorial detachment that was almost cold, very nearly clinical. He describes his subjects as a man from Mars might--how interesting they are, how curious, how strange, how sympathetic or repellant--yet Dreiser himself is always separate from them, manipulating them to demonstrate his points, watching them like a child studying the strange life it has found under a rock.

So, too, it is with Dreiser's women. What did society of his day think of womanhood--that is to say, of the period when he began to write? Though in some areas she had begun her rebellion, for the most

---

<sup>43</sup>Chamberlain, op. cit., p. 237.

part her place was still in the kitchen. Her pleasures were in minding her house and family, in creative cookery, but most definitely not in bed. There were some passionate women, of course, but they were rather odd, not nice, not the kind of women that respectable men married, though it was accepted that they were available for the release of certain male tensions until marriage made them unnecessary. Such women were loose and immoral, and retribution awaited them.

But Dreiser had not been impressed with these stereotypes. In his first novels, Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, he simply fictionalized some things that had actually happened to his own sisters. Marie Bower makes this point in the statement that follows.

Exactly paralleling Jennie Gerhardt's experiences, when Eleanor was fifteen or sixteen and the family was in desperate poverty, she came to know an elderly lawyer of Terre Haute, Indiana, who became through her a benefactor of the family. The money was kept with the full knowledge of Mrs. Dreiser, naive and unaware as she was of social formalae, though without the awareness of the father.<sup>44</sup>

In the same way, another of Dreiser's sisters almost ran off with a salesman who had given her a pair of shoes, not unlike Carrie's first experiences with Drouet.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of the world's opinion, then, Dreiser could see nothing hateful or immoral about his sisters. They were motivated not by a desire to live a life of luxury and ease so much as by simple desperation to escape from poverty. The way they take is the only way open to them, the only path leading away from the abyss yawning at their feet. Carrie is alone in the city, with no one to care if she goes hungry, becomes ill,

---

<sup>44</sup>Marie Hadley Bower, Theodore Dreiser: The Man and His Times; His Work and its Reception (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1940), p. 59.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 155.

er has no place to sleep. How could she help but respond to the good-natured kindness of Drouet? How much more dreadful the fate which would have awaited her if she had not! Jennie is not alone; and in one sense, that is the worse for her--for if she falls into the abyss, her beloved family will be pulled in after her. Dreiser suggests that it would have been immoral for her to refuse Lester Kane's bargain, a negation of the responsibilities she has assumed.

Carrie and Jennie then are drawn from life to illustrate life's dilemmas. It is no accident that Dreiser made Jennie in particular, admirable in all respects save the one involving her relationship with Lester Kane. Faced with choices confronting Jennie, Dreiser is maintaining that conventional sexual codes are simply irrelevant and useless. They don't apply. What use is it to say to Jennie that it's wrong to sleep with a man who is not your husband? Is it not equally wrong, Jennie might reply, to let your family go hungry and without shelter when there is something you could do to save them--something that, in the last analysis, is not even repugnant to you?

Thus, Carrie and Jennie and many more of Dreiser's heroines are outside the mainstream of their day's moral codes. In this, Dreiser thought, they were not particularly unusual:

Mr. Dreiser is not really more preoccupied with sex than is the conventional novelist. But there are two ways of interpreting life through literature. Either you assume antecedently that all people are, even in their lapses, spiritually identified with the dominant social morality of their group and age, or you do not. Dreiser does not. Observation and experience have led him to conclude that a great many people have never so identified themselves with group morality, that their conformity is born of fear or the web of circumstances, and

that thus there arises a very acute and significant conflict.<sup>46</sup>

As a matter of fact, sex is not the preoccupation of Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt. It is barely mentioned. The theme of both is the fear of poverty, the dreadful contrast between the lives of the poor and the rich, the terrible price that has to be paid for lack of success in the great American pastime of ~~money~~-making.

Sex comes more truly to the fore in the Cowperwood trilogy, both in the hero's almost maniacal philandering, and in the possessive, passionate attachment for him of Aileen Butler. Aileen dares all to be his mistress; she achieves a measure of respectability as his wife. She comes nearer to holding him than anyone prior to Berenice Fleming, and she does so mainly through her spirit and her physical attractiveness. The implication is, as well, that she is a highly satisfactory sexual partner. These are her weapons in the game of life, and they are a pitifully inadequate arsenal. She has none of the fears of Jennie and Carrie; for her the worst that can happen is the loss of Cowperwood. She lives in the lap of luxury but yearns for unattainable social success.

In truth, Aileen Butler's life is an utter failure. For what reason, one might ask, did she live? She brings happiness to no one, including herself. In the end, to free himself from her annoyance, Cowperwood hires an actor to amuse her. Her life, begun so hopefully, with so much to offer of beauty, good humor, and love, ends as a nagging nuisance, unloved by anyone. Here indeed is a believable tale, a sad exhibition of the stuff of tragedy, of the very bafflement that

---

<sup>46</sup>"American Types," The Nation, CVIII (May 24, 1919), p. 838.

is life itself. Having no resources to fall back on when her arsenal is exhausted, she is helpless, at the mercy of her one desire: to start over, to have Cowperwood in love with her again.

In fact, Dreiser seems to have seen in the condition of women like Aileen Butler the very epitome of the tragedy and cruelty of life. Men like Cowperwood can, to an extent, make and shape their destiny, but women like Aileen are caught forever helplessly in the moira of their natures. If one is the fool of love, what is left when love is no more? In the trilogy, lovelessness looms even higher than poverty on the horizon of fear.

Cowperwood, in his compulsive womanizing, seems to have been not unlike Dreiser himself, but Aileen does not appear to have had any ready parallels in his own life, though Chamberlain suggests that in some respects she was made up of qualities gleaned from his mother and sisters.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps so, but it would no doubt be a difficult thing to find her qualities in any representative group of women. Aileen is the kind of creature that DuBarry might have been, a king's mistress, perhaps--warm and loving, with many fine qualities. Society has made her what she is, Dreiser seems to say. By robbing woman of intellect and resources it has left the Aileens of this earth to become something almost less than human, the world's spoiled pet.

That Dreiser yearned after some impossible ideal of the perfect woman seems highly probable; he tried to give concrete terms to this ideal in Berenice and Suzanne. One would think that these might have been patterned after the second Mrs. Dreiser, Helen Patges Richardson,

---

<sup>47</sup>Chamberlain, op. cit., p. 128.

except for the fact that he did not meet her until 1919. Yet she seemed a type that was destined to appeal to him--beautiful, intelligent, interested in the arts, capable of independent self support. One might surmise that in his drawing of Suzanne and Berenice he was trying to forecast her, though she was no socialite:

Helen was tall, shapely, sinuous, sensual, with a smiling face framed by a mass of gold-chestnut hair. That anyone with such physical attributes could also be an efficient secretary was astonishing and /her employer/ grew very fond of her.<sup>48</sup>

This suspicion tends to be confirmed by the fact that in The Stoic, written long after Dreiser's marriage to Helen, Berenice becomes increasingly Helen-like. In fact, in the last years of Dreiser's life, Helen was becoming interested in Oriental philosophy and was even contemplating a trip to India to further her studies--the same trip that Berenice actually took.<sup>49</sup>

However, in hunting autobiographical subjects, this writer is of the opinion that The Genius is the most fertile soil, by far. Eugene and his wife Angela, are very much the same sort of individuals as Dreiser and his first wife. Here was Dreiser's most harrowing encounter with gentility preserved and pilloried forever. Just as society creates Aileens by making woman subordinate to man and robbing her of her individuality, so also it creates Angelas by adding to this artificial notions of morality and propriety. Bower believes that

Mrs. Dreiser's objection to her husband's varietistic sexual tendencies must have been a major factor in their break-up. Like Angela, she had been reared in the American tradition with a profound reverence for the sanctity of

---

<sup>48</sup>Swanberg, op. cit., pp. 290-291.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 627.

marriage and the inviolate character of the marriage vows. Her husband's infidelity must have meant bitter suffering for her, suffering which aroused his sympathy as it did Eugene's but which nevertheless was powerless to change his very nature.<sup>50</sup>

These examples give some idea of the manner in which Dreiser used fictional characters to illustrate his own living experiences. The old injunction, that a writer must take for his subject that with which he is familiar, had for him the most literal implications. Since he thought that the conventional view of life and womanhood was all wrong, his weapon in refuting it was to create human beings who were as close as possible to the real living persons he had known. "No," he seems to be saying, "You've got it all wrong. This is how it is. Don't you see?"

At the same time, he was very much aware of the essential loneliness and mystery of life, the tragedy and suffering that is the lot of the common man. His women, so many of whom come to grief through the agency of their menfolk, appear to be almost symbols for the sufferings of humanity as a whole. This seems to be their role.

Dreiser was in the vanguard of the forerunners of the modern novel. In his acceptance of the importance of sexuality in determining human behavior, he is very nearly the father of every one of today's writers. Yet he seems to have kept a sense of proportion that they sometimes lack. Sex is important, but it is not all. It is not sex alone that drives Carrie, Jennie, Suzanne, Berenice--or even Roberta or Aileen. It is all part of a greater, deeper, more abiding hunger which sometimes seems to be exclusively the property of women, and which Dreiser appears to sense rather than define. But it is there, nonetheless.

---

<sup>50</sup>Bower, op. cit., p. 154.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DREISER'S TREATMENT OF WOMEN

In order to draw the proper conclusions from the study about Theodore Dreiser's women, the era into which he was born and the decades during which he grew up, must be thoroughly understood.

The end of the nineteenth century was an era of change. It was characterized by the transition from a predominately rural system to an industrial economy based on capital and labor. The collaboration between these two factors--uneasy as it was--led to American's rise as a leading power whose strength was to be demonstrated and increased in two subsequent world wars.

It must be kept in mind, though, that the socio-economic changes were not always accompanied by appropriate revisions of society's moral code. As often is the case in times of crisis, a system of double standards evolved: the accepted code of gentility by which people were suppose to live, and the actual standards of every-day behavior that were a far cry from the sham code proclaimed by various groups and individuals for "official" use. The discrepancy between these two measures was perhaps not quite as blatant as in Victorian England (whose sexual vicissitudes were recently unmasked by a number of well-documented exposes,) but it was bad enough to incite several writers to take issue with these double standards. The reader shall see how some of these shifted into the political field, while other authors were satisfied to point



out the shortcomings in the various fields of human endeavor, without offering a ready-made prescription for curing all ills.

It was this latter type of social criticism to which Dreiser came fairly close. When his first novels appeared during the early part of the twentieth century, the public began to realize that this writer was determined to show them life as it really was, not the genteel morality of hypocrites or the shallow optimism of the Polyanna school. How true to life his stories turned out to be, was not realized by the public until the cataclysm of World War I swept away much of the old-fashioned prejudices.

Thus, by the time the United States had become a world power to be reckoned with abroad, and a country housing the greatest extremes of wealth and poverty within its boundaries, T. Dreiser was on the scene, recording the stories of what he may have considered to be representative Americans, in a series of successful novels that gained him considerable acclaim if not the undivided admiration of the critics.

During this period in history, the changing pattern of American life was faithfully depicted in some of his novels, as has happened in every other period in history, both preceding and succeeding the one in question. The literature of the pre-Civil War era had been as genteel as the plantations it had destroyed, and the high state of emotionality which accompanied this "war of causes" produced literature which was romantic in spirit and fraught with the utmost sentimentalism.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, writers other than Dreiser began to create a new reflection of a new time.

From the concern for business, finances and the new society came such novels as Alice Adams and The Magnificent Ambersons, by Booth Tarkington, which dramatized the impact of business on small towns, The Octopus and The Pit, by Frank Norris, which exposed the dishonest ways and means of the railroad industry, and the writings of a new novelist, Sinclair Lewis, who was beginning his lifetime literary task of exposing the intellectual narrowness of small towns, the inadequacies of business life, and the general then-contemporary American conflict between obtaining knowledge and making money.<sup>51</sup>

So into a tide of protest-literature which existed side by side with the remnants of pseudo-sentimental romantic novels, came another type of literature--a type which cannot be partly classified and categorized with the rest because it was different. These writing of Theodore Dreiser, to which this reference is aimed were, and are, an entity unto themselves.

To be sure, Dreiser exhibited a philosophy of life in his novels. Whether or not the interjection of this philosophy was intentional, cannot be stated offhand. Furthermore, although writers and critiques agree that a philosophy personal to the author is apparent in his works, there is much less agreement as to what this philosophy actually was.

One proposition is that Dreiser, while appealing to nature and rejecting conventional moral codes, sought to go beyond nature toward a transcendental concept of Spirit. For example, Walcutt argues that

---

<sup>51</sup>Note: This final point is best exhibited in what is commonly referred to by modern readers as the "Sinclair Lewis trilogy," consisting of Babbitt, Main Street and Arrowsmith.

(Dreiser) defends Drouet's "natural" pursuit of Carrie and suggest that his "conscience" is society's imposition. He would need to delight himself with Carrie as surely as he would need to eat his heavy breakfast. He might suffer the least rudimentary twinge of conscience in whatever he did, and just so far as he was evil and sinning. But Drouet's spontaneity reflects--or at least promises--something higher than impulse. We have but an infantile perception of morals. There is more in the subject than mere conformity to a law of evolution. It is yet deeper than conformity to things of earth alone.<sup>52</sup>

Another proposition is that each of Dreiser's major works is an elaboration of his central theme (or philosophy of life) "of the suffering of the individual in the land of great dreams," and that each novel was therefore a presentation of a different aspect of what Dreiser felt was a cruel misdirection of the energies of his nation.<sup>53</sup>

Still other critiques contend that Dreiser was first and last a "naturalist" who did little more in his writings than expose the base and animal in his individuals.

While this writer appreciates that a cohesive and convincing argument can be made to support any or all of these and other interpretations of the Dreiseran philosophy, she prefers to delve more deeply into the motivations behind the writings.

Stendhal once remarked that "if the writer carries a mirror and it reflects the mud of the road, it is not the mirror's fault."<sup>54</sup> If this statement is considered in terms of the writings of Dreiser, one can readily see how applicable it is, for to a great extent Dreiser

---

<sup>52</sup>Charles Child Walcott, "Theodore Dreiser and the Divided Stream," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 252.

<sup>53</sup>Charles Shapiro, "Our Bitter Patriot," New Republic, p. 18.

<sup>54</sup>Rollo Walter Brown, "Fifteen Women," Saturday Review of Literature, VI, #29, Feb. 8, 1930, p. 707.

was reflecting the "muddy road" of his environment and his society in his work. The Titan and The Financier are perhaps the best examples of the above as they unabashedly portray the captains of industry and finance as dominant figures in the community. But was not Lester Kane motivated by the desire to increase his financial status, and who was Sister Carrie if not Dreiser's vehicle for commenting upon man's pathetic obsession for seeking the ideal on the distant peak? So it is with Cowperwood, and so it is with most of his characters.

Hence, one may conclude that Theodore Dreiser, the writer, was directly or indirectly shaped by his environment, Yet, this author is not an Ibsen or a Shaw. He was not content to create only in the name of social commentary. In his women in particular one sees that although Theodore Dreiser bore his characters within an environmental framework which smacked of society of his day (a society whose principles he clearly could not accept), he went more than one step further--he re-created the lives of the people who made up the society as he perceived these lives in his artist's mirror. He was doing what every fine artist ultimately does: writing about that which he knows best.

Theodore Dreiser grew up in the kind of small towns his novels often depict. His father, "a thin grasshopper of a man,"<sup>55</sup> was a miller whose mill was completely destroyed by a fire. His mother, described as "warmly affectionate" had tried desperately to protect her large brood and keep them close to her and to home, but, alas, was powerless against the kind of fate which had destroyed the mill.<sup>56</sup> Thus,

---

<sup>55</sup>Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (New York: Macmillan Co., 1955), p. 224.

<sup>56</sup>Op. Cit., p. 225.

Theodore, the child, saw his father left totally helpless against environment and unable to provide resources for the care of his family. He also saw the personality of his father change, as the once-kindly person turned into an irascible, disagreeable old man, who brooded constantly about his fate and his inability to support his family. He also saw that his mother's sweet nature did not buy bread, from which one could conclude that human kindness and tenderness of heart would not prove the victors in the struggle for survival.

The young Dreiser saw all but one of his brothers fall into sordid existences, and saw most clearly the toll of hard life on the lives of his four sisters. He saw one sister give birth to an illegitimate child, and the others become enmeshed in prostituism, alcoholism, petty gambling, thievery, and sordid death.

Therefore, in one sense, one might say that all that Dreiser wrote was a continuous autobiography, and that his philosophy, at least pertaining to his work in the universal sense, was to write from what he knew to be life. Surely, the struggles, conflicts and hardships of his mother and father, and the "downfall" of his brothers and sisters suggest this no less than do his own struggles and broken dreams to realize his art. With this in mind, it might be said that no other writer had lived his life--no other writer had Theodore Dreiser's particular, personal "mirror to hold up to the road." Also, in the opinion of this author, perhaps no other writer had the courage and passion left by the wounds of life in them to break away from convention and leave themselves open to harsh public censure that Theodore Dreiser had acquired over the years.

It is very true that Dreiser's women were not reflections of their times in the way that society preferred to think of its women. It is true that Dreiser was, as some critiques say, perhaps "unnaturally" concerned or obsessed with sex and money in his novels. It is certainly true that Dreiser did away with the euphemism concerning his female characters, and that he scorned the "morality," or perhaps more accurately, the conception of morality that was prevalent in his society at the time of his writings. But it is not true that Dreiser was a "naturalist," and it is not true that his women lived lives contrary to the standards of morality of his day. For the first point, the title of "naturalist" must be exchanged for "realist," since Dreiser was not a realist in the sense that he conveyed universal realities, but very much a realist in that he wrote into his novels true episodes from his real life. He did not search in society or in individuals for the base instincts that are operant when an unmarried girl becomes pregnant; he merely looked to the right and left of himself, and he found them.

As concerns the second point, Dreiser and others exposed that what was considered to be the true "morality" of his society was a sham: hence, he created characters who lived lives contrary to the conception or idea of morality in his society, but not contrary to the actual standards.

It is now apparent why Dreiser had such a strong case in his own mind for proving through his novels that women who gave in to passion, or women who led the lives that his women did, were not evil. In the first place, he had known the external circumstances which had caused his ~~W~~ sisters (and brothers) to fall into what most would consider a

sordid existence. So in a sense he could justify the existence of those close to him by putting the blame on society. He could also express in this manner, as this writer will examine presently, that it was the conception of morality that the American people held on to which was causing the downfall of his women, instead of the situation being the other way round.

For example, because of what Dreiser felt to be the new morality, or that philosophy of life which places wealth, material possessions and social prominence above all else in the minds of men, the society in which he lived resulted in housing the extremes of poverty and riches. Because he sympathized with the poor, (or one might even say 'empathized') he could most vividly create them. And one which he created was Jennie Gerhardt. Jennie was beautiful and innocent--qualities of great merit to those who upheld the guise of puritanical morality in Dreiser's society--but being the oldest of a large, poor family she is forced to go to work at a local hotel when her father becomes ill.

So here Dreiser takes a beautiful and innocent young girl, places her among the many have-nots in his society, and shows how she is placed in the position of losing her beauty (in the spiritual sense) and certainly her innocence through no fault of her own. Had Jennie's father been a wealthy merchant rather than a starving, sick glass blower, Jennie might well have gone to do volunteer work in a Settlement House with Jane Addams, rather than to go to work as a maid in a hotel.

While at the hotel Jennie's beauty, and perhaps innocence, attracts Senator Brander, a guest at the hotel. When Brander helps her family out financially and keeps her brother out of jail for stealing coal from the railroad, Jennie, out of gratitude, and probably out of

loneliness, yields to him. At his sudden death she is left pregnant. When she moves to Cleveland she meets Lester Kane, and, her family in dire need again, she goes on a trip to New York with him in return for his financial help. As soon as she finds out that she is a detriment to Lester both socially and financially, she insists upon leaving him; after numerous vicissitudes she comes to nurse Lester on his deathbed.

Therefore, where, this writer asks, is Jennie a "sordid woman?" In the only two affairs that she had it was a question of survival for herself and her family. Jennie wasn't a bad woman; society had robbed her of her innocence, had made her "wise" to the fact that antiquated ideas of morality would not feed herself or her child or her family, and would not keep her brother out of jail. From the fact that Jennie left Lester the moment that she discovered herself to be an obstacle to his career, proves the fact that Jennie wanted only to serve her benefactor, that she was not a "lusty animal," but rather a pathetic child who had to formulate a new code of morality for herself in order to survive.

Sister Carrie is similarly a victim of her society. Where but in a society fraught with materialists and false definitions of success and happiness would a young, small-town girl from a simple-living family be infected with the desire to have the "good life" for herself by seeking money, fine clothes, and all the other symbols of success for the materialist. And where but in society would such a girl suffer such disillusionments as she possesses still another "symbol of success?"

And who was Berenice Fleming, if not the character whom Dreiser created in his novel The Titan, to show that in his society one could



attain a position in the highest of social classes merely through the wise use of money? And how Aileen Butler Cowperwood did suffer for her lack of "social poise."

And so it is with all of Dreiser's women--women whom the author created from truth and women whom the author tried to make live a truth, He was not content to deal only with the lower classes, but also made attempts to create women of the highest social strata. He was not as successful at creating a believable character from the upper class, as was mentioned above in the discussion of Sondra Finchely in The American Tragedy, and this factor only serves to support this author's contention that Theodore Dreiser wrote solely from himself. He had no experience with the upper social classes or the lives of high society during his early life. Much better could he depict how the "gas lamps made shadows in the cramped little room," and much better could he reproduce the lingo of a sister with whom he had grown up, than could he imitate the language of a woman whom he had never met, but had only conceived of in an archtypical fashion.

Thus far this writer has established that Dreiser's women were created out of the reality of the author's own existence, and that they are vehicles to express the author's attitude toward the workings and motives of his society as it existed. But is there anything else?

Often an author will create a character or a plot for the specific purpose that he has in mind, and his work will be found to have new colorations and interpretations and meanings far and above, or at least in addition to, what he actually intended. Originally, in the opinion of this writer, Theodore Dreiser wanted to purge his own tortured mind,

to bitterly attack society, and to plead for a square and honest evaluation of morality through his writings.

It could be even stated that what Dreiser was attempting was exactly what one of his characters was doing when she was found crying at her father's grave and said: "Oh, I am not crying for myself or for father--I am crying for life."<sup>57</sup>

For indeed Theodore Dreiser was crying for life, life for himself, his sisters, his characters, his society.

Yet, there must be a reason that the works of Dreiser are still existent. Surely, the modern reader cannot empathize with the woman who fails to get into the upper-crust of society, or hail the supreme virtues of a woman who dedicates her life to social work. In modern life such things are all too common; problems of this sort have been written about too much. However, a woman struggling to support a child, or a woman scorned by her husband, or a woman lonely and alone, are all universal topics--topics which people of any age can understand and feel sympathy for.

The contribution of Theodore Dreiser is that of breaking the barriers of convention, opening the road to truth and artistic integrity for others to follow. The achievement is no small one considering the age in which Dreiser lived and wrote, and the value of this accomplishment cannot be measured.

It is of secondary importance to anyone but the most naive student of literature to determine whether or not Carrie was a "bad" woman or whether or not Jenny was "right" in leaving Lester, or exactly

---

<sup>57</sup> Here the writer refers to the aforementioned character of Etta in The Bulwark.

what the life over which Etta cried was all about. Rather, it is of far greater interest to recognize that at last the minds of writers could follow an example and search for originality and truth in describing life in twentieth century America.

What, then, shall Theodore Dreiser be labeled, if label him this writer must? Genius? Mediocre craftsman? Innovator? Anti-Socialist? What is his place amongst men of letters? Perhaps the author would do best to conclude her discussion of Theodore Dreiser by borrowing the words of H. L. Mencken: "He was the best, and he was the worst. He always fought for the best."<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup>W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), Dedication, no page.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

- Dreiser, Theodore. Sister Carrie. New York: Modern Library, n. d.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Jennie Gerhardt. Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1911.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Titan. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Stoic. Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1947.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The "Genius". Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963.
- \_\_\_\_\_. An American Tragedy. New York: Horace Liveright, 1929.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Bulwark. New York: Popular Library, 1960.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Fiancier. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961.

### Secondary Sources

#### Books

- Elias, Robert H. Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949.
- Gerber, Philip I. Theodore Dreiser. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964.
- Matthiessen, F. O. Theodore Dreiser. New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951.
- Spiller, Robert E. The Cycle of American Literature. Macmillan Co., 1955.
- Swanberg, W. A. Dreiser. New York: Bantam Books, 1965.

Articles

- "American Types," The Nation, CVIII(May24, 1919), 838.
- Brown, Walter Rollo. "Fifteen Women," Saturday Review of Literature, VI (February, 1930), 707.
- Chamberlain, John. "Theodore Dreiser," New Republic, LXXXIX, No. 1151 (December 23, 1936), 236-238.
- Farrell, James T. "Dreiser's Sister Carrie" The Stature of Theodore Dreiser. Edited by Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "An American Tragedy," New York Times Book Review, May 6, 1945, p. 6.
- McCole, Camille. "The Tragedy of Theodore Dreiser," Catholic World, CXXXII, No. 787 (October, 1930), p. 4.
- Morgan, H. Wayne. "Theodore Dreiser: The Naturalist as Humanist," American Writers in Rebellion. New York: Hill and Wang, 1965.
- Shapiro, Charles, "Our Bitter Patriot," New Republic, CXL, No.23 (June 8, 1959), 18.
- Sherman, Stuart B. "The Barbaric Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser. Edited by Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955.
- Simpson, Claude M., Jr. "Theodore Dreiser: Sister Carrie," The American Novel. Edited by Wallace Stegner. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965.
- Walcutt, Charles Child. "Theodore Dreiser and the Divided Stream," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser. Edited by Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955.

Unpublished Material

- Bower, Marie Hadley. "Theodore Dreiser: The Man and His Times: His Work and Its Reception." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of English, The Ohio State University, 1940.