

THE "SENTIMENTAL" TRAGEDY OF THEODORE DREISER

A Thesis

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DEDICATION

This work is respectfully
dedicated to my wife, Jan,
who made a dream become a
reality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. ROMANTIC-REALISM: THE PARADOX IN DREISER.	1
II. THEODORE DREISER: TECHNIQUES AND FLAWS.	27
III. THE ARTIST AS A FALLEN WOMAN	57
IV. DREISER AND HIS ROMANTIC MATERIALISM	73
V. CONCLUSION	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY	92

PREFACE

Theodore Dreiser matured as a writer at the turn of the twentieth century when the movement toward naturalism was beginning to gain force and momentum in America. Literary critics, both of today and of Dreiser's time, have neatly classified him as a member of the naturalistic school. In fact, Dreiser is credited as being primarily responsible for the acceptance of naturalism in America and much of the freedom and rights that authors enjoy today in presenting their creative efforts to the public. I first became interested in Dreiser from a critical standpoint while enrolled in a course entitled "The American Novel," under the expert guidance of Dr. Green D. Wyrick, a member of the English faculty at the Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia. Later, when The William Allen White Library received the three-volume collection of Dreiser's letters, Dr. Wyrick called them to my attention. As I examined Dreiser's letters and his novels, I became increasingly aware that Dreiser was not an ordinary writer, nor indeed an ordinary man. It became apparent, from further study, that Dreiser defied the pat classification of naturalist. There were conflicting

elements in both his life and his novels that extended beyond the limited definition usually applied to the term naturalist. This thesis is based upon that conclusion. In examining Dreiser, his novels, and his critics, I have found a paradox of romantic-realism that is supported by both his personal and his literary life. The path to and the facts that determined this conclusion are presented in the following pages.

I wish to extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Green D. Wyrick and Dr. Charles E. Walton, also of the English faculty and the second reader of this study, for their assistance and patience. Their encouragement and understanding are largely responsible for this thesis.

August 16, 1960
Emporia, Kansas

J.A.J.

CHAPTER I

ROMANTIC-REALISM: THE PARADOX IN DREISER

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But, ah, my foes, and oh, my freinds--
It gives a lovely light.

--Edna St. Vincent Millay, Pigs and Thistles

If one listens reverently to the discussions and lectures regarding the literary change that took place in America at the turn of the twentieth century, he is convinced that there was a great climactic revolution that brought an immediate and drastic change in the spirit of this particular era and in the literature that reflected it. The nature of this upheaval is manifest in the fact that the elder generation was in love with illusion and looked timorously at truth through a tinted glass. The writer, hamstrung by authority and convention, selected, suppressed, and rearranged the facts of experience and observation so that the light from the good and the beautiful shone forth in everlasting glory. The new generation at the turn of the century, however, was freeing itself from illusion and facing without fear or shame the facts of life in America. Fiction became a mirror held up before the living world. Rejecting

nothing and altering nothing, it testified to reality. Although both realism and naturalism are concerned with selectivity, unity, and movement, the standard connotation of realism and naturalism is that both essentially imply a recorder of life. The job of the realist and naturalist is to observe and record, not to pass judgment. Realism is the detailed presentation of appearances, especially of familiar experiences and circumstances. It is the name applied to a movement in the nineteenth century which presented descriptions of observed details of every-day life. Realism, claiming to record life as it passes the window, generally avoids the romantic interest in the mysterious, in the exotic, in the depths of the abnormal imagination which are beneath the simple appearances.¹ Naturalism is defined as the technique of portraying a scientifically accurate, detached picture of life, including everything and selecting nothing. More commonly, however, it alludes not to a panoramic view or even to the detailed presentation of a narrow slice of life, but to a particular attitude held by some writers since the middle of the nineteenth century. Though claiming to be dispassionate observers, they were influenced by evolutionary

¹ Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto, ed., *The Study of American Literature*, p. 331.

thought, and regarded man not as possessed of a soul and of free will, but as a creature determined by his heredity and environment. The romantic mind delights in the improbable, the varied, the dynamic, the infinite. The romantic also delights in originality, spontaneity, and in the individual and his development. He asserts his own personality.³ According to Carl Van Doren,

Dreiser belongs to the movement toward naturalism that came to America in the 90's and the turn of the century, when Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris, partly as a protest against the bland realism Howells expanded, were dissenting in their various dialects from the reticences and the romances then current.⁴

Van Doren's commentary is an opinion of Dreiser and his fiction that a majority of critics advocate today. Furthermore, Dreiser is also considered as the one writer who most advanced the cause of freedom of the individual author and the acceptance of naturalism in America during his time. Again Van Doren has asserted:

The lagging triumph of naturalism in

² Ibid., p. 317.

³ Ibid., pp. 273-4.

⁴ Carl Van Doren, "Contemporary American Novelists," Nation, CXII (March 16, 1921), p. 400.

the United States belongs as much to the history of public taste as to the history of the art of fiction. Crane and Norris died too young to carry the movement far. Garland turned to romance, London and Sinclair inclined to melodrama, Herrick lacked flexibility and fire. The burden fell chiefly on Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) and more controversy than ever on any American novelist.⁵

Yet a close examination of style and techniques, in his novels, shows that Dreiser is neither a complete realist nor naturalist. For example, Dreiser's theme, in general, is the problems of the typical material idealism of the American individual in conflict with society and the limitations imposed by it. But the dream of progress and change in the American scene and the magnetic pull of material idealism that is a constant force in his fiction, coupled with his sympathy for and personal interpretation of the individual, remove Dreiser from the objective camera eye of realism and naturalism. In discussing Sister Carrie, Dreiser himself once said, "I never can and never want to bring myself to the place where I can ignore the sensitive and seeking individual in this pitiful struggle with nature--with his enormous urges and pathetic equipment."⁶ It is true that in each

⁵ Carl Van Doren, The American Novel 1789-1939, XII, p. 245.

⁶ A. West, "Books," New Yorker, XXXV (April 25, 1959), p. 169.

of his important works, there is an elaboration of the emotional suffering of the individual in America, the land of great dreams. Each novel furthermore illustrates what Dreiser felt was a misdirected use of American energy. Again, in Sister Carrie, he shows how Carrie and Hurstwood are harmed and corrupted by the false goals and standards of American society. Jennie Gerhardt projects the same theme, but Dreiser's primary concern here, is the American family. He presents two opposites on the social ladder in this novel--he places the blame again on America and her false goals. In The Financier and The Titan, he shows that even the successful are marred by the inherent cruelty of society. The "Genius" is also an attempt to portray the forces in American culture injurious to the American artist. Even his last work, The Bulwark, is a study of American religion and its failure to come to terms with American realities.

As for the purpose and the scope of fiction, Dreiser seems to think like a naturalist: "The artist has but one duty: to present life 'In the round.' If any one thereafter wishes to extract a spiritual meaning, well and good; or a material message, good also. The picture is

the thing."⁷ Here, Dreiser is the naturalist. He later is to expand this statement with an idea that completely shatters the objectivity of "the picture is the thing" and removes him further from the realm of the true realist and naturalist: "My sympathy and sorrow has been for the individual, not life itself."⁸ Thus, Dreiser lights both the romantic and the naturalistic ends of the candle of literary classification. Yet Dreiser's individuals, especially his artists, are hardly people at all; rather, they are creatures driven by an impelling energy. He sees the beginning and the end of the artistic process, but not the methods involved. In Sister Carrie, he views with melancholy admiration the rise and success of Carrie's career, and in the American Tragedy, the pitiful materialism that leads Clyde Griffiths to his doom. Hurstwood, in Sister Carrie, is the victim of excessive sexuality and weakness of will. Clyde Griffiths suffers from the same flaws of character, but his effect upon the reader is more poignant and great because he is created directly from the world that both produces and ruins him. Clyde's crime was his passive acceptance of social

⁷ Carl Shapiro, "Our Bitter Patriot," New Republic, (June 8, 1959), p. 18.

⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

dogmas, ideals, and standards. This is Clyde's individual disaster and the disaster of his class--even the disaster of American culture. On the other hand, Dreiser also paints the victors--the successful materialists--without depth or perspective. Though they are responsible for the ruin of Clyde, they are as non-descript and meaningless. Except for their witless display of wealth and power, these victors lack any real purpose in life. They even lack wisdom and moral health and need the elemental energy to receive any satisfaction from their ruinous handiwork. They are perverted and limited by their power as Clyde was by his defenselessness. Essentially, in Dreiser's novels, the wealthy and the powerful will not ultimately sit in the electric chair themselves, but they are responsible for creating the society out of which come the electric chair and the Clyde Griffiths who die in it! Upon the heads of the wealthy and powerful rests the responsibility for American society with all of its futility, its aimlessness, and its indifferent cruelty. Thus, Dreiser presents the ruin of the victim and the guilt of the victors as the obverse and reverse of the same process of material idealism. Actually Dreiser is a combination of realist, naturalist, and romanticist. Whereas, he is realistic and naturalistic in that he deals with the material directly be-

fore him and with the personal experiences from his own life in which poverty, sex, and the brutality of society were not strangers, on the other hand, he is a romantic because his attitude toward his material is one of wonder, joy, horror--the basic emotions.

Certainly, Dreiser's first two novels, Sister Carrie (1900) and Jennie Gerhardt (1911), had a revolutionary effect upon the literature of the age. And thereafter the disciples of the realistic and naturalistic school heralded Dreiser as a champion of their cause. But the effect of these two particular novels was brought about not so much because Dreiser opposed, but that he worked outside of the social customs of the day in another dimension. If a basic association must be made, Dreiser's would be with Balzac and the French novelists of compassion rather than with Zola and the naturalistic school. Both Dreiser and Balzac were occupied with women and with success. According to Clifton Fadiman,

...Dreiser and Balzac approach their novels from the same direction. But Balzac does more with his. He creates forms and interpretations. In a word Balzac does not brood. He is too intelligent for brooding, too superior to his own fictions. Brooding is the most sophisticated form of daydreaming.

And as Carl Van Doren says, "...at his best Dreiser is the effect of a noble spirit breeding over a world which in spite of many condemnations he deeply, somberly loves."¹⁰ Daydreaming certainly does not belong to the literature of either the realist or the naturalist, and in Dreiser this technique does not lend to cynicism but, instead, to the romance of materialism, the sentimental rags-to-riches theme that is a typical ideal of America. For example, Dreiser's protagonist, Frank Cowperwood, in The Titan and The Financier, has an enormous appetite for money, success, and women. In The Financier, Dreiser takes seventy-four chapters to show how Frank Cowperwood made money and seduced women in Philadelphia. And in The Titan, he takes sixty-four chapters to show how Cowperwood made money and seduced women in Chicago and New York. In the third volume of the trilogy, The Stoic, Dreiser decides to change the locale to London, where he shows how Cowperwood made money and seduced women there. Gene Wlita, the protagonist of The "Genius," also has the same appetite for success and women that Cowperwood possessed. Dreiser himself said, "The things that keep me thinking and think-

¹⁰ Van Doren, "Contemporary American Novelists," op. cit., p. 400.

ing are first my social and financial state..."¹¹ The romance of materialism led Dreiser to celebrate, almost Homerically, the achievements of his Wiltons and Cowperwoods, and to exclaim as he does in The Titan, "How wonderful it is that men grow until, like Colossi, they bestride the world, or like banyan trees, they drop roots from every branch and are themselves a forest--a forest of intricate commercial life, of which a thousand material aspects are the evidence."¹² Such a remark reflects the unconscious standards of a time in which the enormous and complicated achievements of free capitalistic energy were reasons in themselves for wonder and awe rather than for analysis or judgment on an ethical basis.

When Dreiser began to write, civilization in America seemed to be heading for a hard winter. There seemed to be a greediness and jostling among the American citizenry for the "front position." Americans are hounded by remorse and a fate that led them unerringly to their destiny. This psychological problem in America was one of great concern to Dreiser. Helen Dreiser, in her book, My Life with Dreiser, says:

¹¹ Theodore Dreiser, "Hey-Rub-A-Dub-Dub," Nation, CIX (August 30, 1919), p. 279.

¹² Fadiman, op. cit., p. 65.

This problem had been forced on his mind not only by the extreme American enthusiasm for wealth as contrasted with American poverty, but the determination of so many young Americans, boys and girls alike, to obtain wealth quickly by marriage. When he realized the nature of the literature of that period and what was being offered and consumed by publisher and public, he also became aware of the fact that the most interesting stories of the day concerned not only the poor boy getting the girl, but more emphatically the poor boy getting the rich girl. Also he came to know that it was a natural outgrowth of the crude pioneering conditions of American life up to that time, based on the glorification of wealth which started with the early days of slavery and persisted throughout history.¹³

Serials appeared in Family Story Paper, The New York Weekly, Golden Days, and others, as early as 1840 and as late as 1910, showing how the poor working girl dreamed of marrying a very rich bachelor, and how, after many attempts to betray her, he was conquered by true love, and she became his lawful mistress in a brownstone mansion on Fifth Avenue by the same process of virtue rewarded as in Pamela. A typical plot outline of such a narrative may be illustrated as follows.

Mary Teague is left an orphan in charge of a great but ruinous plantation where she lives with the younger children of the family. She has had little education

¹³ Helen Dreiser, My Life with Dreiser, p. 71.

and few social contacts. Her father was a spendthrift and a drunkard; her mother a beautiful but foolish woman. The boorish sons of the neighboring planters try to frighten her into selling the old place; one in particular tries to drive her into marrying him. She fights back with the assistance of a quiet, but resourceful, farm manager whom she has hired to run the estate. The neighbor's malicious tricks are foiled. Love springs up between the man and the girl. But she is a great lady and he (though obviously better educated and civilized) only a paid employee. In order to win him, she sells the plantation and gives all the money to the younger children and takes a job as a millhand. He pursues her, and they are about to be married when she discovers that he is a Harvard man, immensely rich, who had been sent South to lead an open-air life. Consternation and refusal on her part follow, for now she is only a millhand. The plot is solved by a forest fire on the deserted plantation where they had gone together to search for a missing deed. Ringed by fire for two days, matrimony is the only way out.¹⁴

This is a fairly accurate example of the type of story that was popular on the market when Dreiser was editing several "pulp" magazines (and when he wrote Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt). This type of fiction is still being written and is still selling. The picture of life is false, the philosophy is nil, the motivating forces are weak, the hero is always heroic, the heroine is infinitely pure, and the villain is all-black.

¹⁴ "American Tragedy," Saturday Review, II (February 25, 1926), p. 569.

Dreiser, armed with these sentimental stereotypes stemming from the origin of the English novel, took advantage of their appeal to the general public and, equipped with masses of detail, changed the locale of the old narrative to the American big city--Chicago, New York, Philadelphia. He, then, proceeded to establish the literary paradox of romantic realism and produced his "sentimental" tragedies.

Fascinated by the power, brutality, and suffering that revolve in and around the poverty and glitter of the big city, Dreiser writes about the pursuit of wealth. However, wealth itself is not the ultimate goal and theme in the novels, but rather the romantic, adventurous lure of the mystic power and luxury that lie shallowly beneath the surface of big money in America. "Dreiser, himself, told an interviewer in 1941 that power and pity were his themes, and things called corporations--which in his view brutalized those who controlled them and crushed those who did not--were his enemies.¹⁵ As it has been previously stressed, Dreiser's tone involves great brooding pity--one of quantity, not quality.

¹⁵ "Left Bank of the Wabash," Time, LXVII (February 27, 1956), p. 108.

Sex and money are the motivating forces, and the innate cruelty and ironic indifference or fate are cast in the role of Dreiser's villainous character in the struggle of the individual against society. Dreiser's early life established the tone of his mind. As Fadiman has shown, "... Dreiser met early the raw realities of poverty, birth, death, sex--they were to abide with him through his lifetime, and by obsessing him, obscured from him the subtleties of human character."¹⁶ The Catholicism which Dreiser's father tried to force upon him caused him to resent all forms of traditional belief and authority. Also, Dreiser, restricted by poverty and with a great desire to be respectably and economically secure, could, through the reality of this poverty, see the promised land--an America of success, adventure, laughter, beautiful women, power, wealth--all within his grasp. Persons, situations, or epochs in which discipline is an active major force, not simply secondhand shock techniques, are beyond his scope or interest. Characterization that involves the dominance of intellectual or religious passion is also lacking in

¹⁶ Fadiman, op. cit., p. 364.

Dreiser's novels. For example, his heroes and heroines have catlike eyes, feline grace, sensuous strides, eyes and jaws that vary from those of the tiger, lynx, and bear to those of the fox, tolerant mastiff, and surly bulldog. One hero and his mistress are said to have "...run together temperamentally like two leopards."¹⁷ Furthermore, "The lady in question, admiring the large rapacity of her mate, exclaims playfully, "Oh you big tiger! You great big lion! Boo!"¹⁸ Courtship in The Financier, The Titan, Jennie Gerhardt and The "Genius" is presented in much the same manner. There is not one of all the multitudes of obliging women in these books that offer any substantial resistance when encouraged to submit, in essence, the same technique and philosophy regarding women and sex that Mickey Spillane employs in his five best sellers. Dreiser operates in a world that takes itself for granted--a world in which justice is an occasional compromise arrived at in an eternal battle where wealth and women are a system of weights and measures and the scale for analysis is America and its misdirected energy.

¹⁷ S. P. Sherman, "Naturalism of Dreiser," Nation, CI (December 2, 1915), p. 649.

Another aspect of Dreiser's fiction that does not readily comply with the patterns of the realistic or naturalistic school is to be found in his handling of sex. For a man who supposedly fought for the right to handle sex freely in fiction in general, and in the novel in particular, Dreiser presents an incorrigible sophomoric attitude towards women and love. In a passionate letter filled with such tidbits as, "Honey Pot" and "Little Blue Bird," Dreiser asks why "Divine Fire" had not written him. "...What? Do ya lib me? Had you sweet doe yes? Or are dey dough eyes? And will you always love me?"¹⁹ This is also the way that Frank Cowperwood acts with women he seduces in The Financier, The Titan, and The Stoic.

Dreiser's males are characterized by cupidity, pugnacity, and a strong inclination for the opposite sex. The female is a soft, vain, pleasure-seeking individual, devoted to personal adornment, helpless against the appeal and flattery of the male. When Carrie Meeber is faced with a decision of becoming a kept woman, she finds it easier to yield to the seductive appeals of Drouet.

¹⁹ West, op. cit., p. 70.

Dreiser then judicially rationalized the positive and negative aspects of the well-kept mistress. Jennie Gerhardt, by surrendering her virtue, shows that she could not be readily corrupted by the selfish lessons of the world on how to preserve herself from the evil to come. Both Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt are narratives of women who fall as easily as Cowperwood's many mistresses into the hands of the dominating male. The responsibility of sex and its consequences are non-existent to Dreiser. He repeatedly underestimates and ignores the civil and moral forces in organized society that place restrictions on the more expansive moods of sex. "He chooses to represent love in the vagrant hours."²⁰ One explanation of this opinion lies in a situation that reappears regularly in Dreiser's fiction--the situation where a strong man, no longer vigorously youthful, is loving downward to some ignorant, pliable girl who is dazzled by his splendor and magnificence and immediately receptive to his advances. Van Doren believes that Dreiser "...is obsessed by the spectacle of middle age

²⁰ Van Doren, "Contemporary American Novelists," Nation, CXII (March 16, 1921), pp. 400-1.

renewing itself at the fires of youth--an obsession that has its sentimental no less than its naturalistic traits."²¹

Dreiser's treatment and handling of love or sex are far from those of the naturalist who is primarily concerned with presenting an accurate account of the functioning of the glands. And yet, when Dreiser speaks of sex and its function, the result is just the opposite of how he actually handles it in his novels. Dreiser in The Titan, when confronted with stirrings of the heart and glands, comments: "This has little to do with so-called reason and logic."²² The effect and power of sex on the individual, according to Dreiser, are a matter of physical chemistry. Dreiser shows, "The mental and physical appetites of man alone explain him. He is, regardless of ideals, or dreams, or material equipment, an eating, savage animal, and in youth, often in age, his greatest appetite is sex..."²³ Continuing, he writes, "There is no other direct first cause for man. Beyond that to be sure may lie other things--electro-physical forces in endless

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sherman, op. cit., p. 648.

²³ Robert Herrick, "Dreiseriana," Saturday Review, VII (June 6, 1931), p. 875.

combinations and varieties--but invoking what more than is seen here and where?"²⁴ It is the "Chemistry of her being" according to Robert Herrick that arouses the normally dormant forces of Eugene Wilt's sympathies in The "Genius"²⁵ If Stephanie Platow is unfaithful to her married lover in The Titan, she can neither be judged or condemned because she simply was an unsuitable chemical compound--something beyond her control. Such is the realistic-romantic paradox of Dreiser in presenting his moral code or lack of moral code. He has negated human understanding and development of character to portray the unhampered flow of the chemistry of the individual concerned. He has avoided representing human conduct in dealing with sex and has placed it on a primitive level that is out of context. If this theory is to be acceptable at all, one must view love as a vacuum from which the obligations and responsibilities of marriage, parenthood, courtesy, and spiritual love are withdrawn completely. Dreiser does not strive to present how an individual would feel, think, and act in regard to the traditions of his heritage and combined stresses of the organized society in which he lives.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Sherman, op. cit., p. 648.

Instead, he reverts to the law of the jungle and to a chemical formula which is considerably out of focus if one considers the rising materialistic middle class in Dreiser's novels, completely unfeasible in relation to his presentation of the upper class in America.

Thus Dreiser spins a web of evolution that sees no progress except the survival of the fittest in the American jungle. Civilization is a sham to Dreiser, and the order and traditions that are requisites of a civilized culture do not exist (except intangibly) as ideals. Moral, legal, and social codes do not alter or halt the struggle for existence. Dreiser said, "The central truth about man is that he is an animal amenable to no law but the law of his own temperament, doing as he desires, subject only to the limitations of his powers."²⁶ In the ensuing struggle, victory belongs to the animal most physically fit and mentally ruthless, unless the weak, resisting defeat, combine to win by force of numbers. Dreiser simplifies American life almost beyond recognition, and yet he manages to communicate a sentimental kinship of feeling for the masses who are exploited in the process.

²⁶ Ibid.

He attempts to make Darwin's jungle theory seem plausible to the reader by eliminating and suppressing evidence of other motives. To do this, he must divert the reader's interest from the improbability of the incident by using item upon item of irrelevant detail to catch the general impression of authenticity. One may take, for example, the following passage from Sister Carrie, which occurs in realistic form, to support the authenticity of Carrie's rapid rise to a successful stage career.

"Frown a little more, Miss Miranda," said the stage manager.
 Carrie instantly brightened up thinking he meant it as a rebuke.
 "No, frown," he said. "Frown as you did before."
 Carrie looked at him in astonishment.
 "I mean it," he said. "Frown hard when Mr. Sparks dances. I want to see how it looks."
 It was easy enough to do. Carrie scowled.
 The effect was something so quaint and droll it caught even the manager.
 "That is good," he said. "If she'll do that all through, I think it will take."
 Going over to Carrie, he said:
 "Suppose you try frowning all through. Do it hard. Look mad. It'll make the part really funny."
 On the opening night it looked to Carrie as if there was nothing to her part, after all. The happy sweltering audience did not seem to see her at all in the first act. She frowned and frowned, but to no effect. Eyes were riveted on the more elaborate efforts of the stars.

In the second act, the crowd, wearied by a dull conversation, roved its eyes about the stage and sighted her. There she was grey-suited, sweet-faced, demure, but scowling. At first the general idea was that she was temporarily irritated, that the look was genuine and not fun at all. As she went on frowning, looking now at one principal and now at the other, the audience began to smile. The portly gentlemen in the front rows began to feel that she was a delicious little morsel. It was the kind of frown they would have loved to force away with kisses. All the gentlemen yearned toward her. She was capital. At last the chief comedian singing in the center of the stage, noticed a giggle where it was not expected. Then another and another. When the place came for loud applause it was moderate. What could be the trouble? He realized that something was up.²⁷

Dreiser builds the scene until Carrie is the feature of the play, and the stage manager and company realize she had made a hit. With this sparse realistic detail--even the mention of her performance in a newspaper review--he predicates the rise of Carrie's success upon the stage. Thus, Dreiser is using the standard poor-girl-makes-good-overnight-in-America theme--the land of dreams.

Another example of this type of certifying the unreal with the real occurs in Jennie Gerhardt just after

27 Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 492.

Lester has died. Jennie, no novice at being a mistress, has been deserted by Lester in order to prevent a disinheritance. A number of years have elapsed, and each has gone his own way with no correspondence or communication. Lester has married and developed a life of social ease and luxury that has led to the deterioration of his physical health. Jennie has found solace and peace in her adopted children. Lester, seized with a dangerous kidney illness, sends his servant to call on Jennie to ask her to come to see him. She complies, and Lester tells her that he has loved only her all these years. Jennie is overcome with joy and grief, because this is what she has been waiting to hear, yet he is dying. After Lester dies, Jennie, still faithful and loving, though she has been deserted for a number of years, has an overwhelming desire to have one last glimpse of Lester's coffin. Dreiser supports this improbable situation by having Jennie attend the funeral, appropriately clad in black and heavily veiled, with the following realistic passage:

A little before the time for the funeral cortage to arrive at the church there appeared at one of its subsidiary entrances a woman in black, heavily veiled, who took a seat in an inconspicuous corner. She was a little nervous at first,

for, seeing that the church was dark and empty, she feared lest she had mistaken the time and the place; but after ten minutes of painful suspense a bell in the church tower began to toll solemnly. Shortly thereafter an acolyte in black gown and white surplice appeared and lighted groups of candles on either side of the altar. A hushed stirring of feet in the choir-loft indicated that the service was to be accompanied by music. Some loiterers attracted by the bell, some idle strangers, and a few acquaintances and citizens not directly invited appeared and took seats. Jennie watched all this with wondering eyes. Never in her life had she been inside a Catholic church. The gloom, the beauty of the windows, the whiteness of the altar, the golden flames of the candles impressed her. She was suffused with a sense of sorrow, beauty, and mystery.²⁸

Tearful and red-eyed, Jennie leaves the church, and Dreiser has her hurry to the station for another final look at the black coffin. At the station he supports the authenticity of Jennie's love and faithfulness with details--the people concerned, their movements, and descriptions of the physical scene.

Dreiser in presenting his characters in the realistic or naturalistic point of view gives them only half of their depth or completeness, men and women alike.

²⁸ Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt, p. 427.

They are raised, not educated, regardless of their social stature. This "raising" of his characters includes only breeding and clothing and any trace of the simplest moral or mental influence of their environment or heritage is totally lacking. For example, the parent influence of Frank Cowperwood is suppressed. Eugene Wilita emerges in the early morning of his life from a middle-class family. He takes the train to Chicago, where he immediately begins his life of seduction. Jennie Gerhardt's parents are pious Lutherans who have instilled into her the belief that if she does not preserve her chastity, there will be no salvation for her or her parents. As a consequence she yields to the first man who puts his arm around her. This episode is an example of one of the most glaring things Dreiser leaves out of his novels--an account of the personalities and wills of women, whom he portrays, with hardly an exception, as victims of love, a lump of putty to the wooer, without identity until some male enters their life. Dreiser's characters are essentially driven by blind instinct. And in conceiving his characters in this naturalistic vein, Dreiser pictures them as less aware of and unconditioned by the obligations of stature and traditions than ordinary

people of America--which his characters are supposed to be. This is especially true of his narratives about the lives of artists. Carrie becomes a noted actress in a few short weeks. Wilita, almost as quickly, becomes a well known illustrator. Dreiser refers to other characters in his novels as having great talents, but he seldom substantiates their powers by having them exhibit them.

Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood, and Wilita all tread a common path of materialistic success--a path paved with the people they use and even destroy. But despite all of these naturalistic qualities in presenting the characters of his novels, Dreiser still communicates to the reader a feeling of brooding pity that is on a personal level of interpretation that is not naturalistic or realistic at all.

The preceeding pages have been devoted to a subjective examination of Theodore Dreiser's novels, his philosophy, and his treatment of his subject matter. The paradox of Dreiser as a romantic-realist has also been established, along with the controversy that revolved around Dreiser from the publication of his first novel, Sister Carrie, to his death.

CHAPTER II

THEODORE DREISER: TECHNIQUES AND FLAWS

Words are like leaves, and where they most
abound,
Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.

--Pope, Essay on Criticism

The paradox Dreiser presents in his statements and philosophy, in which he directly supports the naturalistic theory, and his sentimental, often sophomoric, treatment of the individual, his sex, and emotion, will be examined in his novels more objectively in this chapter by exploring some of the literary techniques and flaws that appear to supplement the paradox already mentioned.

Since realism and naturalism rely to a great extent on specific and itemized details, it is only natural that over-indulgence or lack of selectivity in the employment of detail seems to be the curse of many writers who declare themselves disciples of realism and naturalism. Dreiser is no exception. One of the best examples of his use of irrelevant detail and bulkiness is to be found in the opening chapter of

The Philadelphia into which Frank Algernon Cowperwood was born was at his very birth already a city of two hundred and fifty thousand and more. It was set with handsome parks, notable buildings, and crowded with historic memories. Many of the things that we and he knew later were then not in existence--the telegraph, telephone, express company, ocean steamer, or city delivery of mails. There were no postage stamps or registered letters. The street car had not yet arrived, and in its place were hosts of omnibusses, and for longer travel the slowly developing railroad system still largely connected with canals. Young Cowperwood's father was a bank clerk at his birth, and ten years later, when young Cowperwood was turning a very sensible, vigorous eye on the world, his father was still a clerk, although a more trusted and desired one, and was so near a tellership that there was not the least doubt that he would get it. The next year, because the president died and the vice-president became president, the cashier was made vice-president, and Mr. Henry Horthington Cowperwood was promoted to teller. He was a happy man. It meant the munificent sum of thirty-five hundred dollars a year, and he decided, as he told his wife joyously the night he heard it, that he, or they, rather, would now move from Number 21 Buttonwood Street to Number 124 New Market where there was a nice brick house of three stories in height, as opposed to the two stories they now occupied. Buttonwood Street, at the point at which they were now located, was rapidly becoming surrounded by business conditions which were unbearable; and New Market at the point he had picked on was removed at least a score of

blocks from the region that was once so nice but was now becoming so sorrowfully defiled. There was the probability that some day they would move into something even much better than this, but for the present this was sufficient.²⁸

Obviously, this passage is not only an example of poor selectivity and over use of fact, but also it fails in its equally obvious attempt to establish a certain time in a particular city, in addition to its being a classic example of exceptionally poor paragraphing. As Muller said in speaking of Dreiser, "His novels are shapeless, bloated with insignificant detail."²⁹ When Sister Carrie chats with a friend over a dumbwaiter,³⁰ Dreiser writes a paragraph about a dumbwaiter. When Jennie Gerhardt and her mother enter a hotel lobby seeking work, Dreiser follows them and their movements with details that stop just short of the number of brass buttons on the coats of the bellboys.³¹ An awareness of this flaw in Dreiser by the literary world today is exemplified by Robert Benchley's parody of Dreiser, a

²⁸ Theodore Dreiser, The Financier, p.1.

²⁹ Herbert J. Muller, Modern Fiction, p. 204.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

portion of which appeared in Time magazine in an article entitled "The Duelist," a review of Twentieth Century Parody:

Up East Division Street, on a hot day in late July, walked two men, one five feet four, the other, the taller of the two, five feet six, the first being two inches shorter than his more elongated companion, and consequently giving the appearance to passers-by on East Division Street, or whenever the two reached a cross-street, to passers-by on the cross-street of being at least a good two inches shorter than the taller of the little group.³²

In depicting his characters, Dreiser seems to deal with finished pictures---fixed and immovable, they fail to grow and change with their story.

Sister Carrie, Frank Cowperwood, Eugene Wilita, and Jennie Gerhardt all emerge at the end of the novels very much as the same character they were at the beginning. They are touched and tossed about by stress and storm, but it does not affect or penetrate the growth of their characters. One has the feeling that, if each of the characters were to go forth in the world again under a similar set of circumstances, they would react in the same manner. This technique

³² "The Duelists," Time, LXXVI (July 25, 1960), p. 83.

of dealing with fixed types belongs in part to the realistic and naturalistic schools, but in painting his characters in detail, Dreiser exaggerates some qualities and overlooks others almost to the same extent as Charles Dickens in his characterizations. An excellent example of Dreiser's use of a Dickensian technique of characterization occurs in Chapter VII of The Titan--that reputable figure of the lawyer's profession, General Judson P. Van Sicle:

The old soldier, over fifty, had been a general of a division during the Civil War, and had got his real start in life by filing false titles to property in Southern Illinois, then bringing suits to substantiate his fraudulent claims before friendly associates. He was now a prosperous go-between, requiring heavy retainers, and yet not over-prosperous. There was only one kind of business that came to the General--this kind; and one instinctively compared him to that decoy sheep at the stockyards that had been trained to go forth into nervous, frightened flocks of its fellow sheep, balking at being driven into the slaughtering-pen, and lead them peacefully into the shambles, knowing enough always to make its own way quietly to the rear during the onward progress and thus escape. A dusty old lawyer, this, with Heaven knows what welter of altered wills, broken promises, suborned juries, influenced judges, bribed councilmen and legislators, double intentioned agreements and contracts,

and a whole world of shifty legal calculations and false pretenses floating around in his brain. Among the politicians, judges, and lawyers generally, by reason of past useful services, he was supposed to have powerful connections. He liked to be called into any case largely because it meant something to do and kept him from being bored. When compelled to keep an appointment in winter, he would slip on an old greatcoat of gray twill that he had worn until it was shabby, then, taking down a soft felt hat, twisted and pulled out of shape by use, he would pull it low over his dull gray eyes and amble forth. In summer his clothes looked as crinkled as though he had slept in them for weeks. He smoked. In cast of countenance he was not wholly unlike General Grant, with short gray beard and mustache which always seemed more or less unkept and hair that hung down over his forehead in a gray mass. The poor General! He was neither very happy or very unhappy--a doubting Thomas without faith or hope in humanity and without any particular affection for anybody.³³

General Judson Van Sicle is portrayed so utterly as an all-black villain that he impresses one with having the air of just stepping off the stage from an old-fashioned melodrama or out of the pages of the comics into Dreiser's novel.

Dreiser's literary imperfections are many. When taken to task by Robert Ullman for grammatical errors,

³³ Theodore Dreiser, The Titan, p. 47.

meaningless and incorrect paragraphing, sentences devoid of predicates, absurd neologisms that create such an abominable impression of carelessness and insensitivity in his novels, and finally for throwing first drafts of his work at his readers, we have Dreiser's own words to support Ullman's claims.³⁴ Dreiser replied that Ullman was correct in his accusations concerning the rough form of his work, but explained that publishers employed competent editors and readers, and that time caused him to leave that task to others.³⁵ Dreiser added, "I must brave the neglected predicate and occasional solecism in order to suggest the drama and the beauty and pathos of this business of living."³⁶ After making this apologia, Dreiser admitted that he was nothing more than a mere literary mechanic. "Besides," Dreiser said, "we all travel the line of least resistance. In my case writing is economically the least difficult of several avenues open to me."³⁷

³⁴ West, op. cit., p. 70.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

This statement also applies to the characters in Dreiser's novels. They all follow the path of least resistance in regard to sex and material success.

Another defect in Dreiser, one which the critics have noted, particularly in The Titan, American Tragedy, and The Stoic, is his lack of ability to capture the tone of upper class dialogue. He could understand a Pappa Gerhardt, or a Glyde Griffiths, but not a Sandra Finchley. An anonymous critic has noted, "He speaks right on intermittently, diffusely, redundantly, with no stylistic guide beyond an apt phrase. His attempts to identify his story with a definite period in the past are strangely intermittent."³⁸ Continuing, the article said, "Even more exasperating are his rambling excursions into the field of ethical speculation. The ease with which he walks through the things he does not see is certainly extraordinary."³⁹

³⁸ Nation, "Financier Review," 95 (December 19, 1912) p. 589.

³⁹ Ibid.

Dreiser is often bookish. He is far from consistent in writing the language of the Middle West. In many places in his novels, his prose is genteel, bordering on the "fine." One may take, for example, this section from Sister Carrie:

Friday broke fair and warm. It was one of those lovely harbringers of spring, given as a sign in dreary winter that earth is not forsaken of warmth and beauty. The blue Heaven, holding its one golden orb, poured down a crystal wash of warm light. It was plain from the voice of the sparrows, that all was halcyon outside.⁴⁰

Another example is also to be found in the opening of Chapter II of Jennie Gerhardt:

The spirit of Jennie--who shall express it? This daughter of poverty, who was now to fetch and carry the laundry of this distinguished citizen of Columbus, was a creature of mellowness of temperament which words can but vaguely suggest. There are natures born to the inheritance of flesh that come without understanding, and that go again without seeming to have wondered why. Life, so long as they endure it, is a true wonderland, a thing of infinite beauty, which would be Heaven enough. Opening their eyes they see a comfortable and perfect world. Trees, flowers, the world of sound and the world of color. These are

⁴⁰ Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 482.

the valued inheritance of their state. If one said to them "Mine," they would wander radiantly forth singing the song which all the earth may some day hope to hear. It is the song of goodness.⁴¹

In The Financier, he soars to even greater rhetorical heights, as the following passage demonstrates:

Shall we pause to speculate for a moment on this sympathetic ebullition of temperament? Literature, outside of the masters, has given us but one idea of the mistress, the subtle, calculating siren who delights to prey upon the souls of men. The journalism and the moral pamphleteering of the time seem to foster it with a partisan zeal. You would imagine that a censorship of life had been established by divinity, and the care of its execution given into the hands of the utterly conservative. Yet there is that other form of liaison which has nothing to do with conscious calculation. In the vast majority of cases it is without design or guile. The average woman, controlled by her affections and deeply in love, is no more capable of anything save sacrificial thought than a child--the desire to give; and so long as this state endures she can only do this. She may change. Hell hath no fury, etc.⁴²

⁴¹ Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt, p. 15.

⁴² Theodore Dreiser, The Financier, p. 301.

There are also many glistening clichés in Dreiser's fiction that are echoes of the sentimental stereotypes and slick fiction formulas with which he was familiar. For example, he refers to things as "artistic," more times than one cares to count. One should observe a few lines picked at random from Sister Carrie: "And I'm telling you," he returned, fixing a clear steady eye on her...⁴³ And, "Oh Jolly!" cried the latter.⁴⁴ Or, "She was capital."⁴⁵ Then there are these tried and true lines from Jennie Gerhardt: "Her eyes looked the words she could not say."⁴⁶ And, "Her face shone with light and her eyes fairly danced."⁴⁷ Or in referring to the good and noble Senator, "He was neither loud voiced or angry mannered, but there was a tightness about his lips which bespoke the man of certain force

⁴³ Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 155.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 480.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 492

⁴⁶ Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

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⁴³ Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 155.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 480.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 492

⁴⁶ Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

and determination."⁴⁸ Also the following lines from The Financier: "'That looks rather serious,' said Cowperwood calmly to his companions, a cold commanding force coming into his eyes and voice."⁴⁹ And along similar lines, "Cowperwood's eyes instantly hardened, losing that color of mirth which had filled them before."⁵⁰ Finally, one recalls the following lines that are requisite to any law-abiding western thriller: "'By-by, dearie,' he smiled as the train bell [driver] signaled the approaching departure. 'You and I will get out of this shortly. Don't grieve. I'll be back in two or three weeks, or I'll send for you. I'd take you now only I don't know how the country is out there.'"⁵¹ Or these fresh, sparkling lines:

He looked strangely replete for a man of thirty-six--suave, steady, incisive, with eyes as fine as those of a Newfoundland or a Collie and as innocent and winsome. They were wonderful eyes, soft and springlike at times, glowing with a rich, human understanding which could flash lightning. Deceptive eyes, unreadable, but alluring alike to men and to women in all walks and conditions of life.⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 64.

⁴⁹ Theodore Dreiser, The Financier, p. 293.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 531.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 1.

⁵² Ibid., p. 6.

Even his Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia have something of the slick fictional touch much like that of a big city reproduced on the stage of a summer theater in a small midwestern town. For example, here is Dreiser's description of New York in Sister Carrie:

The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure with all the softness of expression possible in the most cultured human. The gleam of a thousand lights--if often as effective as the persuasive eye. Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman. A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives, appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms. Without a counselor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehood may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! Unrecognized for what they are, their beauty, like music, too often relaxes, then weakens, then perverts the simpler human preceptions. 53

Later, Dreiser again represents the city in a similar impressionistic manner:

To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untraveled, the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing. Particularly if it be evening--that mystic period between the glare and the gloom of the world when life is changing from

53 Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 2.

one sphere or condition to another. Ah, the promise of the night. What does it not hold for the weary! What old illusion of hope is not here forever repeated! Says the soul to the toiler itself, 'I shall soon be free. I shall be in the ways and the hosts of the merry. The streets, the lamps, the lighted chamber set for dining, are for me. The theatres, the halls, the parties, the ways of rest and the paths of song--these are mine in the night.' Though all humanity be still enclosed in the shops, the thrill runs abroad. It is in the air. The dullest feel something which they may not always express or describe.⁵⁴

And here is a more objective technique used by Dreiser, an example of what he could do in contrast with the above, in describing the city of Chicago in The Titan:

The tracks, side by side, were becoming more and more numerous. Freight-cars were assembled here by the thousands from all parts of the country--yellow, red, blue, green, white. Chicago he recalled already had thirty railroads terminating here, as though it were the end of the world. The little low one and two story houses, quite new as to wood, were frequently unpainted and already smoky--in places grimy. At grade-crossings where ambling street-cars and wagons and muddy-wheeled buggies waited, he noted how flat the streets were, how unpaved, how sidewalks went up and down rhythmically--here a flight of steps, a veritable platform before a house, there a long stretch of boards laid flat on the mud of the prairie

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

itself. What a city! Presently a branch of the filthy, arrogant, self-sufficient little Chicago came into view with all of its mass of sputtering tugs, its black, oily water, its tall red, brown, and green grain elevators, its immense black coal pockets and yellowish-brown lumber yards. Here was life; he saw it in a flash. Here was a seething city in the making.⁵⁵

Even Dreiser's plots, when stripped of their setting and emotional appeal, are not new or completely naturalistic.

His first novel, Sister Carrie, tells the story of Carrie Meeber, one of thousands of American girls who leave a small village and poor family to make their fortune in the big city. Carrie left a small, rural, mid-western town in Missouri to find employment in Chicago and help to ease the financial burden at home. Dreiser leads Carrie through a heart-breaking search for a job in a factory--a job that is devitalizing and degrading. This combined with the drabness and drudgery of life at her sister's home, the impersonal manner in which she is dropped from the payroll because she was too ill to work, the fact that her income is less than what is necessary for bare existence, and a natural

⁵⁵ Theodore Dreiser, The Titan, p. 3.

longing for companionship and recreation are the deciding factors that cause Carrie to accept the utilitarian seductive appeals of Drouet (and later Hurstwood) to be his mistress. This aspect of the story certainly is nothing new. In Victorian novels, it was the defenseless young milkmaid that unfailingly fell victim to the nearest young lordling on the first moonlight night of spring. By the time Hurstwood has gradually crumpled to nothing, Carrie has established a successful career on the stage. She rapidly rises to stardom, but remains dissatisfied with life. The narrative ends on this note. There is no direct effect or hindrance placed upon Carrie by moral, religious, or social norms, and there is no dramatic development growing out of a clash of wills. The language is tame; all the descriptive intimacies of sex are suppressed. Harlan Hatcher said "...its selection of detail is nearer George Eliot than Ernest Hemingway."⁵⁶ An article in The Saturday Review said, "Sister Carrie's stern contradicting of popular morality with popular practice shocked a generation that still believed with Horatio Alger in the ultimate reward of virtue and

⁵⁶ Harlan Hatcher, Creating the Modern Novel, p. 43.

hard work.⁵⁷ Actually, Dreiser paints Carrie's career as a growth, not as a demoralizing occurrence. There is a personal, voluntary quality about the book. It is felt rather than observed by someone on the outside looking in. Cowley in speaking of Sister Carrie said:

It was not a tour of the depths, but a cry from them. The genteel reader's repulsion was not that the characters were cheap and seemed to be in the naturalistic school, but that the author admired them.⁵⁸

Hurstwood, as another example, was a keeper of a gorgeous saloon with rich screens, fancy wines, and an excellent line of goods. Dreiser described him as "...altogether a very acceptable individual of our great American upper class--the first grade below the luxuriously rich....,"⁵⁹ even though he was crude and offensive. Thus, Dreiser is on the outside looking at the glossy surface of Hurstwood's material success. When Hurstwood begins to deteriorate and his material wealth and success are gone, Dreiser's admiration has long faded.

Carrie offended the morality of the day by allow-

⁵⁷ "Theodore Dreiser," Saturday Review, 35 (July 12, 1952), p. 25.

⁵⁸ Malcolm Cowley, "Slow Triumph of Sister Carrie," New Republic, 116 (June 23, 1947), p. 25.

⁵⁹ Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie.

ing herself to be seduced by the first "drummer" to come along. She should have fought off at least two before surrendering. She, then, was the mistress of Hurstwood, and instead of punishment, she became independently successful and economically secure. But in plot development, Dreiser has done nothing new, and he cannot avoid feeling a sense of brooding pity for his lost soul on the highway of life.

Jennie Gerhardt is essentially an encore that followed Sister Carrie. However, in Jennie Gerhardt, the parent influence is not suppressed as it was in Sister Carrie. Jennie is provided with pious Lutheran parents of fallen fortune, who "raise" her with utmost strictness. Later in the book, out of gratitude she yields her body to a man of fifty, Senator Brander, who has let her do his laundry, among other things, and has been kind to her and her family. The good Senator dies, and Jennie is left to become a mother. The family, heartbroken, moves to Cleveland from Columbus. Dreiser presents this unhappy circumstance--the coming motherhood of Jennie--without any sense of shame, sin, or regret. In exploring Jennie's psychology immediately before the birth of her illegitimate child, one finds her looking forward to

the event "without a murmur,...with serene, unfaltering courage."⁶⁰ Perhaps a year later, a healthy magnate, Lester Kane, who has seen Jennie only a dozen times, claps a hand upon her shoulder and says, "You belong to me."⁶¹ He, then, coldly outlines the terms on which he will establish her in New York as his mistress. Jennie, then, goes home to talk it over with her pious, God-fearing mother, who hesitates, not because of Jennie or any feeling of moral obligation, but because she will have to deceive old Gerhardt, Jennie's father. The difficulty of telling the lie is very great, but she agrees to it. Thus, Jennie is depicted as the innocently beautiful daughter of an impoverished serf who has no defense against wealth and position. She is a Cinderella ripe for a Prince Charming to come and sweep her off her feet. She accepts the proposition, but she maintains some wholesomeness and nobility of soul because she is as spiritually faithful to her daughter and the man she lives with as any wife would be. Lester is faced with the problem of either losing Jennie or his million and

⁶⁰ Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt.

⁶¹ Ibid.

a half dollars. So Jennie is deserted and lives for a number of years alone with her daughter. Lester marries a bride acceptable to his family and social position and begins slowly to disintegrate. He becomes a fop, and because of ill health, lies dying. Lester sends his servant to ask Jennie to come to him. His wife is in Europe. She, still faithful, hurries to his bedside and is with him to his demise.

Although Jennie is frankly more of a mistress than Carrie, she suffers a little more and was more acceptable to the general public. Jennie Gerhardt is the result of a combination of a poor home and her love for her baby daughter, and as Hatcher said, "It has more soul than the first novel."⁶² It is not a picture of life that is portrayed but a feeling of pity for the unfortunates across the street, up the block. There is apparent in Jennie Gerhardt an indication of Dreiser's coming admiration of the superman that would break through the surface and be examined in The Titan and The Financier.

⁶² Hatcher, op. cit., p. 45.

Frank Algernon Cowperwood, the protagonist of The Financier, is a familiar enough figure in the nineteenth century American novel. He is tall, good-looking, and gray-eyed; he is obsessed by a passionate, romantic absorption with finance as an art. This is one of the most popular themes native to America--the rise to money and power by the "rugged individual." Cowperwood's career is presented in The Financier from the time of his birth to the panic of 1873. Frank, when ten years old, begins to show immediate signs of unmistakable financial genius by engineering a very grown-up deal in Castile soap that earns him nearly 100 per cent profit. As he rises, he concentrates all of his energy on the amassing of money. Frank climbs from a post with a grain and commission house to a position of responsibility with a bank and brokerage firm, then to the note brokerage business in which he takes full advantage of the uncertain finances of the Civil War era. He branches out into street-railways securities, forces his way into the circle of politicians in power, and demands part of the take from the city grafts. Cowperwood is steadily working toward becoming the richest man in America. At the age of thirty-four, he is worth two and a half

million dollars. The Chicago fire, an unhappy coincidence, causes a panic that practically bankrupts Cowperwood.

Perhaps some mention of his domestic life, as Dreiser presented it, should be related here, since it also had an influence upon his temporary defeat. Cowperwood was also a libertine; he grew tired of his prudish wife and had an affair with the devoted and beautiful Aileen Butler, daughter of a wealthy and powerful politician and contractor. Cowperwood put Aileen in a house of her own in the approved manner of the day, but they were seen. It was reported to her father. This disclosure of the affair came at the time of the panic of 1871. And this indiscretion caused Mr. Butler to deny the aid to Cowperwood that would have kept him out of prison. Butler's refusal of financial aid, the weakness of the city treasurer, and the politicians' greed caused Cowperwood's fall. The politicians had played the same game by the same rules for a long time and wanted to be rid of their powerful rival. Cowperwood, by this time, is important enough to avoid the unpleasant extremes of life in jail. He has visitors and carries on his business. In thirteen months he is pardoned--just in time

to recoup his fortune by selling early in the panic of 1873. The witches of Macbeth might well have cried to Cowperwood, "You shall be famed hereafter." This narrative of the success of the "rugged individualists" was also a typical plot of the nineteenth century American novel. It is a plot based on a dream that was familiar to almost every American boy of poorer circumstances than the very rich--the successful climbing of the ladder of material success.

In The Titan, Cowperwood is married to Aileen, having divorced his first wife. But the scandal excludes them from the society life of Chicago, where Cowperwood has moved. He soon becomes promiscuous again, and there follows a long line of mistresses that includes the wives of bankers, a few actresses, and many stenographers. As in The Financier, the anger generated by these actions (almost as polygamous as the stud of some four-footed herd) is a contributing factor to his final defeat. Cowperwood begins in Chicago by becoming the partner of an old Chicago broker who knows his city. Cowperwood then outwits a Chicago utility magnate by securing, through generous bribes, franchises in the suburbs. He finally manages to sell out to his rivals at his own price.

The body of the novel then deals with Cowperwood's long and corrupt fight to control the street railways of Chicago, the result of the struggle and its effect on banks, councilmen, newspapers, legislators, mayors, and governors. Cowperwood is finally defeated in his attempt to gain a fifty year franchise. Despite the naturalistic elements of this type of narrative, Dreiser communicates a feeling of sympathy to the reader for the masses of people that must have been destroyed, so, Cowperwood could gather his wealth, power, collection of art and women, and a feeling of awe and wonder for Cowperwood and his particular kind. The Stoic, published after Dreiser's death, completes Cowperwood's career. In it he moves from Chicago to London. Cowperwood nearing sixty is still the stereotype that Dreiser originally conceived. He is ruddy, assured, and genial with a gardenia in his lapel, gray hat, gray shoes, complete with cane. Essentially Cowperwood remains unaltered to the end; his energies and appetites slacking slightly until he falls a victim to Bright's disease. He dies, estranged from Alien, in a New York hotel room. His servants bring his body by stealth to his Fifth Avenue mansion. Dreiser, who had at this later period in his life become mystic and somewhat reconciled to God, does not develop the image of insecurity of a

giant of finance as his lifeless body lies helpless in the vast meaningless rooms of his mansion. Instead he leaves the narrative as one of material romance, a basic and popular plot of his era in literature.

In the entire history of Cowperwood there are very few pages that attempt, in realistic social terms, to interpret or evaluate his predatory career. The sources of Cowperwood's profits are never questioned; they are taken for granted. The life that Cowperwood represented in America is actually never presented in authentic detail. There is an allurements of romance and adventure surrounding him that is representative of much of the material sentiment of the time. According to Clifton Fadiman, "By 1925, Dreiser's point of view underwent a radical change, but at this period in his career the Nero-like magnificence of Cowperwood's rise is all that interests him. He creates the epic of the financial manipulator as individual."⁶³

The protagonist of The Genius, Eugene Wilta, is the reverse of Frank Cowperwood. Wilta is one of the weaklings that Cowperwood would have crushed and Sister Carrie would have used. The plot certainly is not new. Wilta is

⁶³ Fadiman, op. cit., p. 65.

a talented boy living in a small town in Illinois in the 1880's. He has a retiring manner, pride, sensitivity, and artistic moods that separate him from the other boys of the town. He develops an ability to paint, and emerges from the heart of his middle-class environment to take a train to Chicago to make his fortune. He makes good in Chicago and goes to New York, leaving behind a few emotional attachments--mainly one Angela Blue. Dreiser paints Angela with sympathetic strokes. She is an inhibited girl, five years Wilta's senior, to whom he is engaged. In New York he mingles with the art crowd, does good work, has a measure of success, several engagements with women, and, finally, because of his conscience or a sense of duty, marries Angela and brings her to New York. She does not fit into his new life, and unhappiness develops. They journey to Paris, then comes a period of poverty, ill health, and a miserably slow climb to prosperity with Eugene's love affairs adding complications. He begins his advance to the top of the publishing business. He draws a salary of twenty-five thousand dollars, lives well, is accepted socially, and respected and envied as an example of success. As he nears forty, he becomes infatuated with a young society girl, Suzanna Dale. His pursuit

of her, the last third of the novel, wrecks his home; Angela then dies in childbirth. Suzanne is whisked away by her mother, and Wilta becomes interested only in Christian Science and his daughter. Wilta's artistic pursuit of beauty seems to have been a quest for young women. He wanted to find out how full mentally and physically girls at eighteen or nineteen were. Dreiser adds to the appeal of sentiment and pity with his portrayal of Angela, the utterly helpless wife of Wilta. As stated before, Wilta is a complete opposite from the character of Cowperwood; but he, too, represents the popular plot of a poor boy's rise to material wealth and vocational respectability overnight and of his ultimate failure which was caused by personal weakness.

In the American Tragedy, Dreiser uses another weak character for his protagonist, Clyde Griffiths. The plot runs along these familiar lines. Griffiths leaves his middle-class family to find work. Weak and impressionable, Griffiths expects to escape from the dullness of his family life in the city. He gets a job as a bellhop in a hotel. He is good-looking, with pleasing modesty and personality. A rich uncle gives him an executive position in a men's collar factory. He seduces

a girl of similar background and then is dazzled by a rich flapper from the smart set, who wants to marry him. In order to rid himself of his now pregnant girl friend, he plans to drown her. Afloat on the lake, he loses his nerve and cannot execute the crime, but the boat capsizes. The girl strikes her head accidentally, and Clyde lets her drown. Arrested, he goes through the interminable trial full of a sentimental appeal and interpretation of Griffiths. He is convicted and spends the last days of his life trying to decide whether he was really guilty or not, but finds no clear answer. A poor thing he lived; a poor thing he died. This is the plot of the life of Clyde Griffiths of An American Tragedy, presented in two volumes by Dreiser--a short, worthless, almost meaningless life. Although Dreiser uses the elements of the typical nineteenth century American novel plot in the beginning of An American Tragedy, his finest work, he deviates from the typed plot patterns in the last section of the novel to develop with powerful strokes a study of good and evil in America.

For an analogy to the plot of The Bulwark one must go back to the moralizing novels of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Using the record of Barnes'

childhood, youth, love, marriage, his business success in Philadelphia, the alienation of his children, and the inadequacy and sorrowfulness of their lives after rejecting the Quaker faith, Dreiser employs much the same methods to create a sympathetic character. Everything in the narrative is subordinated to the moment when Barnes sees that there is an obscure purpose and justification to life. The details of drama and development of the story are pushed rapidly toward the moment Barnes experiences faith and affirmation with God, and his daughter turns abruptly from a life of free sexual experience to one of chaste sadness for life itself.

It is evident from Dreiser's novels that he used certain emotional appeals to create a sympathetic ear among the public, and that his realism without hesitation crossed the line into romanticism and idealism. In American metaphysics, reality is generally materialistic reality, hard, persistent, and unshakeable. The type of mind that is felt to be reliable is that which is most representative of this reality as it recreates the sensations it affords. Essentially it betrays true reality for the general or popular opinion of the power, luxury, and respectability that the gathering of material items brings to the individual in the eyes of the public. The result is idealism bordering on romanticism. All of

this is true of Dreiser. He emerges as a writer not quite emancipated from his childhood desire for monetary security, emphasizing his glorification of material success. And, yet, out of this tangled maze of contradictions, facts, and opinions, comes an image of an American primitive of genuine power, for his novels still reveal and cause pain and his themes show a concentrated concern with a society that he believed had failed.

CHAPTER III

THE ARTIST AS A FALLEN WOMAN

In her first passion woman loves her lover;
In all others, all she loves is love.

--Don Juan, (Canto III, III)

Much of the pity and sentiment that Dreiser communicates to his readers is achieved by his use and development of the standard and ever popular "fallen servant girl" theme--a theme that has its origin in the English language in Pamela, by Richardson. Pamela, a pretty serving girl, "is concerned not only with the behavior and properties of the poor but honest folk, servant girls, farmers, and footmen; but with the proper behavior of the curates, the landed gentry, and the nobility."⁶⁴ The theme and suspense of the novel is the preservation of female virtue. Although Pamela would be laughed at by the modern reader, it "... is modern in one way at least: she knows the Facts of Life. She aims at selling her petit capital for the highest price--an honorable marriage--and to do so she uses her beauty and charm for all they are

⁶⁴ Frank Luther Mott, Golden Multitudes, p. 35.

worth."⁶⁵ It must also be remembered that this theme included Dreiser's feeling of comradeship for the lower class in their struggle with the rich. The "fallen servant girl" theme came to America in the form of Charlotte, a Tale of Truth, often entitled Charlotte Temple, by Mrs. Rowson. As Helen Waite Papashivily said:

Mrs. Rowson certainly knew and, in one of her later novels, The Inquisitor, listed exactly what attracted readers--"a sufficient quantity of sighs, tears, swooning, hysterics and moving expression of heart rending woe."⁶⁶

It is evident that Dreiser was also aware of the need for sighs, tears, and heart-rending woe, from the following statement of policy made by Dreiser as editor of the Butterick Publications:

We like sentiment, we like humor, we like realism, but it must be tinged with sufficient idealism to make it all of a truly uplifting character. Our field in this respect is limited by the same limitations which govern the well regulated home. We cannot admit stories which deal with false or immoral relations or which point a false moral, or which deal with things degrading, such as drunkenness. I am personally opposed in this magazine to stories which have an element of horror in them, or which are disgusting in their

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

⁶⁶ Helen Waite Papashivily, All the Happy Endings, p. 10.

realism and fidelity to life. The finer side of things--the idealistic--is the answer for us, and we find really splendid materials within these limitations.⁶⁷

The general action of Charlotte Temple is representative of the many novels that followed in its wake, utilizing the same formula. Mrs. Rowson's narrative, in brief, is as follows:

At fifteen Charlotte was seduced by Montraville, a young officer, and under promise of marriage ran away from school in England and accompanied him to New York. Montraville, however, needed a rich wife and when he met a prospective candidate, a young lady with "a lively disposition, a humane heart and an unencumbered income of seven hundred a year," he readily believed reports of Charlotte's misbehavior made by a jealous rival and cast her off. Without friends or money, Charlotte bore their child in a hovel, lingering just long enough to die in the arms of her father who belatedly arrives to take her home.⁶⁸

Before correlating the "fallen servant girl" theme in regard to Dreiser's fiction, it is necessary for one to consider the characteristics that these sterling heroines have in common. They are usually poor, or at least from lower middle class, innocent, awe-struck by wealth and the city, moderately attractive to the male species, and generally suffer

⁶⁷ Harold C. Gardiner, Fifty Years of the American Novel, p. 37.

⁶⁸ Papashivily, op. cit., p. 29.

or are punished for their sins. Helen Papashivily writes:

In English and European fiction a frail creature might still stoop to folly, but not a popular American heroine. She had to be drugged, tricked, coerced, mesmerized, hypnotized, or otherwise ensnared, for never of her own free will and knowledge would a trueborn daughter of the Republic accept a relationship outside of marriage.⁶⁹

Industrialization, however, brought about a slight change in this prototype. When the husband left home for the production line, it meant that one individual was responsible for the existence of several individuals. Large families became a handicap and early marriages lost their appeal and attraction. Helen Papashivily underscores the point:

Prudent men like Montraville and Sanford looked for a wife with money to pay for her keep and the girl without position or prospects faced an uncertain future. The flights and fancies, the retreats and advances, the vaporings and affections of the sentimental heroines through three, four, even eight volumes of attempted seduction concealed a very unsentimental struggle for existence.⁷⁰

Bearing in mind the picture of the prototype of the "fallen servant girl," let us note Dreiser's use of the theme. Dreiser painted two full-length portraits

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

of the "fallen servant girl" in Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt. Carrie Meeber, of Sister Carrie, is the country girl marked by poverty and moving toward the big city to make her fortune. Carrie arrives in Chicago to live with her sister. Malcolm Cowley explains:

In her excited discovery of Chicago, Carrie is essentially Dreiser himself. Leaving her home in Wisconsin, where her father is a day laborer in a flour mill, in the summer of 1889, she approaches the city with the same "wonder and desire" that Dreiser felt in approaching it a couple of summers earlier. For her, too, it is a "Great magnet." She experiences the same dread of being rebuffed, and when she does land her first job--cutting shoes--she walks to it through the "walled canyons" with the same overwhelmed sense of smallness.⁷¹

Thus, Dreiser opens his novel with the prototype of the "fallen servant girl." Carrie is awed by the greatness of the city; she is poor, is seeking work, and is aware of her own insignificant place--traits in common with the sentimental heroines that have roamed the pages of American and English fiction. Carrie goes first to Chicago. There, she has her choice of becoming the well-kept mistress of Drouet or of slowly starving to death. She accepts Drouet's proposition. There is no question of marriage--Carrie has no wealth or position, and Drouet

⁷¹ Cowley, "Slow Triumph of Sister Carrie," CXVI, (June 23, 1947), p. 25.

is happy in his carefree life. Carrie is, then, attracted to Hurstwood and the glitter of the wealth and comfort of the life he heads. Hurstwood, promising marriage, persuades her to run away with him to New York. Carrie, ensnared by her feelings and economic circumstances, is tricked into going with him. She learns that he is already married and that he has also stolen a sum of money. In New York, Carrie begins her career on the stage and eventually leaves Hurstwood. Throughout, Carrie maintains a passive, dream-like subjection to the forces around her. She is the innocent catalyst of Hurstwood's downfall, but her motivation is an economic one. At the end of the novel, she views life with the same passive, incredulous stare with which she first confronted Chicago. All of this is naturalistic and realistic enough, but Dreiser, in handling Carrie, broods and clucks over her like a mother hen clucking over her chicks. He presents Carrie as an individual and creates and pities her trials and tribulations. Underlying Carrie's economic plight and Dreiser's great massing of detail in the novel, there is an emotional recognition of her morality and the suffering that was her portion--a theme which also appears plainly in folk music and tragic poetry. As Cowley said:

The book itself is felt rather than observed objectively from the outside as a true naturalist would do. It is based on dreams rather than documents.⁷²

Thus Dreiser, using a time-worn stereotype for unification, has presented a narrative that is more wishful than vital, more hypnotic than provocative.

In Jennie Gerhardt, he again employs the "fallen servant girl" to produce another sentimental tragedy. Jennie is plagued with the same kind of poverty that affected Carrie Meeber. She, too, is wholesome, innocent, awed, and attracted to the world of wealth and luxury. Dreiser's opening situation has Jennie and her mother entering the Terre Haute House in search of work. This initial paragraph establishes the tone of sentiment and sympathy that is to permeate the development of this theme. This passage depicts Mrs. Gerhardt with "such a shadow of distress"⁷³ upon her face, "...as only those who have looked into the countenances of the distraught and helpless poor know anything about."⁷⁴ Jennie is on the outside looking in at the world of the Senator Branders and Lester Kanes.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Again, as in Sister Carrie, the heroine has no monetary benefits or social position that could lead to a prosperous marriage. She is seduced by Senator Brander, who had promised to marry her, and she becomes the mother of his child. He dies, and she is left with no inheritance. So Jennie becomes the mistress of Kane and devotes her attentions to him and her child. Dreiser, however, has Jennie pay heavily for her folly. Her child is stricken with typhoid fever and dies. At first her father is indifferent to her consequences, but finally is able to forgive her. Lester deserts her to prevent his disinheritance, and Jennie is faced with the prospect of a bleak, empty future. Dreiser's final handling of the "fallen servant girl" theme occurs when Lester on his death bed sends for Jennie and tells her she is the only one he has really loved. Jennie is overcome with a mixture of joy and sorrow. Dreiser evokes reader sympathy for Jennie throughout the ensuing funeral scene, previously discussed. The novel ends when Jennie's youth and beauty have given way to middle age. Thus Dreiser has instilled two more tenants in Heartbreak Hotel. Carrie and Jennie have moved in next door to Charlotte Temple; their plight is not altogether a new development in human history.

In his other novels, The Financier, The Titan, The Stoic, The "Genius", An American Tragedy, and The Bulwark, Dreiser has also employed the "fallen servant girl" theme in the supporting female characters. For example, Aileen Butler, the female protagonist of the trilogy, The Financier, The Titan, and The Stoic, is endowed with red-gold hair, good taste in clothes and physical attractiveness to the male. Aileen secretly meets Cowperwood and has an affair with him. Exposed, eventually, by her father, she is caught and swept along by Cowperwood and his zooming career. As they live their lives together, Dreiser has her tell Cowperwood that if he deserts her she will go to hell. And when he is in prison it is she who suffers the most. However, Aileen is eventually to become an honest woman, as did her many counterparts before her. The Financier ends with Cowperwood's boarding a train to Chicago, where he marries Aileen as soon as his divorce is granted. In The Titan, Aileen and Cowperwood are ostracized by Chicago society because of scandal relating to their love affair. It is at this time that Aileen, despite her sexual aggressiveness, realizes that she is losing Cowperwood. As a result, she indulges in drink and distracts herself with other men.

During this particular period of her life, she is, in reality, paying for her earlier folly because Cowperwood is the only person she really cares about. The third novel in the trilogy, The Stoic, Dreiser has Aileen pay the full price by her estrangement from Cowperwood. Here, Dreiser shifts in his fallen woman theme from Aileen to Bernice, the youthful beauty who had taken Cowperwood from Aileen. When Cowperwood dies, Dreiser causes Bernice to turn to mystical, religious pursuits. She is eventually converted to the mysticism of Bhavad-Gita. Dreiser has concluded the fallen woman theme on the old standard--one that dates back to the morality plays of English literature--of the individual's inner and necessary peace with God. It is true that it is not the Christian God, but it is at least the manifestation of a belief in a superior being.

Another character that represents the fallen woman theme in Dreiser's fiction is that of Angela Blue, Eugene Wilta's wife in The "Genius." Poor, yet attractive, she is seduced by Wilta, who promptly leaves her to make his great migration to the big city of New York to seek his fortune. After several affairs and a moderate business success, his conscience asserts it-

self, and he makes Angela an honest woman by marrying and transporting her to New York to share in this new life which he has created. Angela, however, does not fit into Wilta's new existence, and they slowly drift apart. They share a period of failure and poverty together, and then start anew on the long road back to material success. Wilta becomes involved in the pursuit of the youthful, ideal beauty, which Dreiser mirrors in his portrait of Suzanne. Angela dies in childbirth, and Wilta is left to pursue the ideal woman.

Another embodiment of the fallen woman theme that Dreiser employs in his fiction emerges in his presentation of Roberta Alden, one of the female characters in An American Tragedy. Roberta is a poor but attractive mill girl, lonely and sad, who becomes involved with Clyde Griffiths, the protagonist of the novel. Clyde seduces her, and she becomes pregnant. In the meantime, Clyde receives a "better offer" of marriage from Sandra Finchley, who belongs to the world of wealth and glitter to which Clyde is drawn. Dreiser, consequently, has Roberta pay for her original sin with her life, for Clyde lets her drown when the boat in which they are riding overturns.

In The "Genius," Dreiser again presents the theme of the fallen woman in Etta, the daughter of Quaker Barnes. F. O. Matthiessen observes:

The two youngest, Etta and Stewart, are the sort whom Dreiser has always treated with the greatest sympathy, and the tensions with their father form most of the novel's second half. These passages also resume leading themes from Dreiser's earlier work. Etta is lured by the "romance" of life; "slowly rocking in her little rocking chair," she dreams like Carrie of 'color, motion, beauty.'⁷⁵

Etta runs away from home and takes an apartment in Greenwich Village. She falls in love with a painter, who feels that he must be free from all obligations in order to pursue his art. Etta is left alone, and like Aileen, seeks consolation with other men--always, however, loving only the painter, Orville. Dreiser emphasizes this situation in order to evoke sympathy for Etta, whose real purpose in life, like so many of her predecessors, who have fallen, was the kingdom of love and marriage. Eventually, Etta returns to her home, deeply saddened, and is reunited with her father who forgives her. Again, Dreiser concludes his fallen

⁷⁵ F. O. Matthiessen, Dreiser, p. 244.

woman theme with the individual's finding peace in a superior being, and Etta for the first time is allowed to grasp the true meaning of spiritual beauty. The novel ends with her father's funeral and her answer to Orville--an answer that is pathetic as well as sentimental: "Oh, I am not crying for myself, or for father--I am crying for life."⁷⁶

In this manner, Dreiser has incorporated the theme of the fallen woman into his fiction--the girl on her way to the big city, to fame and fortune. Nothing intervenes between these ladies and their destiny. There is a quality of isolation and loneliness about them that is more appealing and sentimental than any crucial suffering, because they do not know what is happening until it is too late to alter the course of events. They are swept up in the folds of life and must play their parts--as a fly in the web of the spider.

The use of the "fallen servant girl" theme by Dreiser is not limited by sex. In addition to the female characters, he has also extended the major

⁷⁶Theodore Dreiser, The Bulwark, p. 333.

qualifications--the desire for wealth, physical attraction, and suffering to many of his male characters. For example, Hurstwood, as he is portrayed by Dreiser, has all of the necessary qualifications for becoming a member of the fallen woman prototype. He is, when he is first encountered in Sister Carrie, attractive to the opposite sex. Betrayed by his excessive sexuality, Hurstwood commits the sin of being unfaithful to his wife by running away with Carrie. Convention demands that he be punished for his immoral act. From this point in the novel Hurstwood falls into a decline. In a few short weeks he travels the path from upper middle class ease to begging on the street. Eventually, he commits suicide, thus ending a life which had become unbearable. Another male embodiment of the fallen woman theme is the character of Eugene Winta of The "Genius." Eugene is poor, yet physically attractive to the opposite sex. He leaves the small town to travel to the big city and fame and fortune. Like his counterpart, the fallen women, Eugene is weak--the victim of his own sexuality and lack of will and drive to cope with the circumstances that wind their tentacles about him dragging him deeper into the web which even-

tually destroys his career and success. When his wife dies, and Suzanne's mother ends their affair, he is left, as the fallen woman, without a future--merely with an emptiness. Clyde Griffiths of An American Tragedy is a further example of another male character in whom Dreiser mirrors the fallen woman theme. Clyde, like Eugene Wiltz, is physically attractive to women. He is also weak and easily ensnared by circumstances and material values. He has an affair with Roberta Alden. After he becomes entangled with the responsibilities of coming parenthood, he suddenly has the opportunity to advance economically and socially, (through Sandra Finchley). Aware that his past may well ruin his future, he plans to murder Roberta. At the last moment, however, he cannot carry through his plan. Roberta, then, accidentally drowns, and Clyde is apprehended, tried, and sentenced to death entirely on circumstantial evidence. Thus, he too pays with the pound of flesh required from sinners by traditional American novel morality. In Jennie Gerhardt, Senator Brander and Lester Kane are both involved in the seduction of unwed women, and like their counterparts, both eventually pay the price for their sin. Even Frank Cowperwood, the

invincible superman, pays for his folly. In The Financier, he suffers directly for his affair with Aileen in that he is denied the financial aid that would have saved him from a prison term and the loss of his carefully amassed fortune. When he dies, no one cares, and his body must be brought secretly to his mansion by his servants. It is obvious, therefore, that Dreiser has all of his characters pay a heavy price for their indiscretions.

It is quite apparent that Dreiser was consciously employing the fallen woman theme with its concurrent sentimental and sympathetic reader appeal in his fiction. This is a theme that has at its core the main cry of the naturalist--the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. It is also evident that Dreiser extended this naturalistic core of his theme into the realm of the romantic moralistic ideal of his time, again reinstating the paradox of Dreiser, the romantic-realist.

CHAPTER IV

DREISER AND HIS ROMANTIC MATERIALISM

Wine maketh merry: but money answereth
all things.

Ecclesiastes. x: 19

Another aspect that supports the paradox of Dreiser as a romantic-realist is his own idealistic economic utopia that he believed in and worked toward. Dreiser, as were his characters, was obsessed with a fear of poverty, while, at the same time, he was aware of many true incidents where the poor boy rises to economic security in America. Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, Frank Cowperwood, Eugene Wilita, and Clyde Griffiths are all representative of this poverty complex. Each was primarily concerned, as Dreiser was, with economics. Dreiser allows his characters a social success which was denied the author himself as a youth. Therefore, before expanding Dreiser's theme of romantic materialistic values, one should, first, examine the author's earlier years and understand the conditions that initiated and developed his fear of poverty.

Dreiser was the twelfth of thirteen children. At one time, his father was a manager of a large woolen

mill, but a series of financial disasters eventually reduced him to the status of a beaten man. Poverty and domestic quarrels developed within young Theodore a feeling of insecurity. His father, who was German, was an expert in the selection and manufacture of wool, but he was not ruthless or blessed with an adequate business sense to cause him to capitalize on his abilities. These deficiencies, coupled with the chance burning of their uninsured mill, caused the Dreiser family to begin their long struggle for existence. F. O. Matthiessen has emphasized their early poverty in the following passage:

During the first six years of Dreiser's life, his father had no steady job. When a mill shut down for the winter, he would take whatever he could get. He no longer possessed courage or initiative. Yet he clung to his strict conception of the role played by the head of a family--a practice which, as his son noted, "did not flourish in the looser western social policy." Tension mounted between him and his other children, "who because of long suffering at his critical hands, and because of the practical contributions they were making from time to time toward the support of the home, were no longer prepared to listen, much less accept, his diatribes on conduct." In full reaction against his orthodox moralism they were "caught fast by the material unreligious aspect of things."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Matthiessen, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

Dreiser, like his brothers and sisters, did not regard his father with much respect and, according to Harlan Hatcher, did not paint a loving picture of this man:

We have unforgettable pictures of this man from the son who saw in him an irritating mixture of a tender and loving old man who tried to keep the hot spirits of his children confined to the demure and priggish code acceptable to the priest, and an incompetent and foolish crank unfit for human intercourse because of his blind fanatical acceptance of all the child-minded superstitions of his religion.⁷⁷

His concept of his mother, however, was quite different, as Matthiessen illustrates:

He describes himself as always a "mother's child." One of the earliest memories he recalled of her presence was of sitting on the floor stroking her feet. "I can hear her now." "See poor mother's shoes? See the hold here?" "She reached down to show me, and in wonder and finally pity--evoked by the tone of her voice which so long controlled me--I began to examine, growing more sorrowful as I did so. And then, finally a sudden swelling sense of pity that ended in tears. I smoothed her shoes and cried. I recall her taking me up and holding me affectionately against her breast and smoothing my head. Then feeling more sorrowful and helpless, I presume I cried some more. But that was the birth of sympathy and tenderness in me."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Hatcher, op. cit., p. 36.

⁷⁸ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 7.

Dreiser's mother emerges as a lovable individual with temperament which was exactly opposite to the stern character of his father. She sympathized with young Theodore, shielding him as much as possible, creating in her son a sentimental devotion. There was only one occasion according to Matthiessen, in which she sank into a "dumb despair."⁷⁹ This period of despair was during the family's worst poverty, immediately after the panic of 1877. Dreiser's father had been out of work for more than a year. (It was at this time that Dreiser began to steal coal.) Furthermore, they had been moving to poorer and poorer houses in Terre Haute. Finally, the family decided it had to break up; the father went to look for work in another city; the older children were to go out on their own; the mother and the younger children, of which Theodore was one, were to move to a small town where living would be cheaper. For a time, they lived above a fire house in Vincennes, but soon they moved when Dreiser's mother discovered that the other part of the building was being used as a brothel. From this place, they moved to Sullivan, where Theodore began to lose some of his innocent boyhood attitudes about life. Mattheissen explains:

⁷⁹ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 9.

Here in Sullivan, too, the death of an old man in the shabby house next door gave him his first suggestion "of the paltry importance of our individual lives." There was not even enough to pay for a funeral, and once again Theodore experienced the oppressive physical dread of poverty and defeat which remained ingrained in him for life.⁸⁰

Another formative influence upon young Theodore's developing values was that of his older brother, Paul. Harlan Hatcher writes:

Inasmuch as Theodore Dreiser was the youngest but one in this large and struggling family, he was affected by the older children and their attempted adjustments to life. His brother Paul, much older than he, a successful songwriter and comedian who helped the family and loved the easy immoral life that used to be expected of an actor, prospered outside the code of his father. He was to the eyes of the younger boy the one authentic success in the family...⁸¹

Paul also helped the family by having them move to Evansville, where he established them in a cottage which he rented from his mistress, a madam and the inspiration for "My Gal Sal." Paul and his mistress quarreled, and the Dreiser family was forced to move again. Mrs. Dreiser took the family to Chicago the summer when Theodore was twelve years old. He was,

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

⁸¹ Hatcher, op. cit., p. 37.

according to Matthiessen, more excited by the violently growing city than by anything which had occurred in his life so far, but he was also frightened by its noise and confusion.⁸² It is apparent that the seeds of Dreiser's poverty complex, that were to mature in him and his fiction in his later years, were planted solidly in his youthful days.

Toward the end of his youth, Dreiser's mother died, and at this time, because of a growing tension with his father, he broke away from home and started to make his own way. He carried newspapers, delivered groceries, labored in an onion row, worked in the Chicago railroad yards, worked in a hardware store, tried to sell real estate, drove a wagon for a laundry, distributed Christmas packages for a Chicago newspaper, collected payments for furniture dealers, and finally obtained a position as a reporter on a Chicago newspaper. Dreiser's growing concern and awe for material evidence of success are shown in the following passage from Newspaper Days:

After a short wait I was permitted to enter the sanctuary of this great person, [the editor] who to me seemed to be

⁸² Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 13.

the equal of a millionaire at least...
 'See what a wonderful thing it is to be
 connected with the newspaper business!
 I told myself.'⁸³

As a newspaper reporter, Dreiser began the career that took him to St. Louis, Toledo, Cleveland, and Pittsburg during the time Carnegie was fighting the workers, and the industrial barons, flaunting their profits, were erecting mansions. According to Hatcher:

Instead of Whitman's vision of a glorious race of men and women making a beautiful new world out of the untouched West, he saw the lives of those whose laundry he gathered up or whose weekly installments he collected; the powerful Cowperwoods building their goldcoast mansions, fighting their way to the enormous graft of the public utilities...⁸⁴

Later, in his mature years, after he had been exposed to many facets of American life and had become increasingly interested in his own existence, Dreiser developed an acquaintance with several authors who, in turn, helped him to resolve his particular set of values.

Again Hatcher remarks:

Huxley, Tyndall, and Spencer, all nineteenth century minds who were trying to understand the world and human life in objective, scientific terms, shattered the last few illusions left to him by

⁸⁴ Theodore Dreiser, *Newspaper Days*, p. 4-5.

⁸³ Hatcher, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

his newspaper career. The remarkable and only important thing about the experience was that the point of view of these men and the conclusions which they had reached were borne out by his own life and observation. He was suddenly and finally emancipated from an older ideology which did not fit the facts as he had observed them. He had found a new organizing principle which enabled him to accept the meaningless welter of experience without trying to impose upon it values which did not fit.⁸⁵

But, despite his poverty, hardship, and awareness of the cruelty of life in America, Dreiser maintained a sentimental idealism in the American dream of material success. Even during his early life, he was by nature sentimental, as Hatcher has said:

...he liked to read the romances of Ouida and Mrs. Harrison. He was full of dreams. He escaped the dark oppression of the store-room full of rusty stoves by flights of imagination wherein the dreary railroad yards became beautiful with the colored lights on the switches "winking and glowing like flowers,"....

As F. O. Matthiessen exclaims, "He was a poor boy staring hungrily into the bright windows of the rich."⁸⁷ Thus, Dreiser's youth clearly reflects the paradox of this romantic-realist.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

⁸⁷ Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 4.

From the newspaper business, he rose materially until he edited several magazines, including the Butterick Publications, for a handsome salary. They were magazines, ironically enough, in which he could not have published his own fiction. Soon afterwards Dreiser began to write his novels and many short stories, but his poverty complex and his powerful drive for material success remained with him as part of his life and his fiction. Helen Dreiser writes of the later years of his maturity:

It was at this period that I noticed in Dreiser a definite poverty complex. Although he had already written The Financier and The Titan, and had some years been editor-in-chief of the Butterick Publications at a large salary, he believed that money would never come to him in a big way. He wanted money for the freedom and privileges it would bestow on him, but he persistently held to the belief that this kind of money was not for him.⁸⁸

The previous passage not only demonstrates Dreiser's poverty complex that remained with him through the years, but shows, as well, that his ideal of the freedom and luxury of the rich also remained and was a continuing manifestation of his earlier romantic materialism. Another romantic trait of Dreiser's that persisted throughout his life was his mixture of passivity, fear, romantic

fascination and love for the big city--a place where during his lifetime the wealth of the nation was to be centered. Dreiser's sentimental nature in his later years is also obvious, in that he often petitioned judges on behalf of prisoners, and was continually trying to help young authors in their careers. The paradox of Dreiser is readily apparent in the statement which he made in a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt. He wrote, in the year of 1941, that England was no more democratic than Germany. He repudiated religion, yet believed in revelations brought about by a side-street spiritualist. When he needed a lawyer, he looked for a fortune teller, which, Nelson Algren states, "...may have been a good move at that."⁸⁹

As has been previously stated, the things that first concerned Dreiser were his financial and social status. He placed creative writing on a monetary level--for him, it was a means to an end. For Dreiser, creative writing was the line of least resistance on the road to economic security, but he, at first, encountered a considerable amount of difficulty in having his novels published. Much has been printed about his various battles

⁸⁹ Nelson Algren, "Dreiser Hedged Out," Nation, CLXXXVIII (May 16, 1959), p. 460.

in the courts with censor boards and publishers. Any detailed study of Dreiser will supply the student of American literature with the pertinent facts of this struggle. For example, F. O. Matthiessen has an excellent book entitled, Theodore Dreiser. All that one needs to be concerned with here is Dreiser's preoccupation with the sale of his books. The following letter shows his mercenary attitude toward his work. It was written to H. L. Mencken on February 24, 1911.

My Dear Mencken:

The truth will out. I have finished one book--Jennie Gerhardt--and am half through another. The "Genius" I expect to try out this book game for about four or five books after which unless I am enjoying a good income from this I will quit...

Another example of his mercenary view is illustrated in a letter dated April 28, 1911, also to H. L. Mencken, who had just sent him some comments upon Jennie Gerhardt:

My Dear Mencken:

It sounds too good to be true but it is a great comfort nevertheless. You & Charles B. DeCamp & James Huneker are

I would like you to cover the book it will do. If you can summarize proofs in time I can

book three is done and will be

90 Theodore Dreiser, Letters of Theodore Dreiser,

as grim critically as any I know and you seem to be agreed to the general merits of the proposition. Yours is the sanest & the best analysis I have received yet. It is broader in its understanding than the others. However--will it sell? I am going to do three after the one I am doing or finishing now--then if there is no money in the game I am going to run a weekly. I can write a book every six months I think so I won't be out of the editing game unless perchance I can make a living this way.⁹¹

This letter not only reveals Dreiser's attitude toward literary efforts, but leads the reader to the obvious conclusion that he was not interested in the quality of his work but in the quantity. Further proof of this attitude appears in an additional letter to H. L. Mencken, who was aiding Dreiser in the editing of his manuscripts. This letter is dated August 8, 1911:

My Dear H.L.:

Proofs will be ready in a few days now I fancy--I am reading them--but I wish that you would write Harper's direct. I have had several requests for data but everytime I suggest giving out anything now they leap in the air with loud cries and protest that I am endangering the wave of interest later by talking too soon. I would like you to write direct for the good it will do. If they don't surrender proofs in time I will. Yes book three is done and being typewritten slowly. The data for book four--The

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 116

Financier--is practically gathered.
 I shall begin writing in September.
 If Jennie doesn't sell though I won't
 hang on to this writing game very
 long.⁹²

Dreiser was also aware of the necessity of presenting a modified public image of himself to his readers. He wrote to William C. Lengel, who had solicited Dreiser for some biographical material which he planned to use in an article on the man: "I don't think the middle west concept of what is good and virtuous and worthwhile is worth two cents, but it wouldn't help me or my books to have you say that."⁹³ Dreiser concludes the letter with, "I wish I were rich, what more can I say."⁹⁴ In another letter a few weeks later, Dreiser appeals to Grant Richards, an English publisher and admirer of Dreiser who was currently visiting in America, to say something about him and Jennie Gerhardt if Richards is interviewed. Dreiser adds that it is almost impossible to make Americans aware of the fact he is alive.⁹⁵ Dreiser's continuing

⁹² Ibid., p. 119.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 120.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

concern with the sale of Jennie Gerhardt is re-emphasized in a letter to Miss Flora Holly, Dreiser's literary agent.

Dear Miss Holly:

Thanks for your letter of the 4th. I understand from Mr. Duenka that the book isn't selling and hasn't--a large critical fuss & no money. That's poor literary business isn't it? Well don't spread the report. It may sell a little later.⁹⁶

The repetition (over a short interval of time) of Dreiser's references to the success of his books on the market illustrates his main interest in producing them--monetary gain. The obsession with money he would receive from his books remained with Dreiser throughout his life. However, it was toned down considerably in his later years, as his views became more socialistic and as he achieved an assurance of economic security. Perhaps, Dreiser's most materialistic statement in regard to the art of creative writing is the following:

Fairest Mencken:

I hereby make you as sound a business proposition as will come to you this blessed year of our lord 1921. I would like to have the Nobel Prize, not that I deserve it, but it appeals to me as

a nice bit of change. You are in a position to make a large noise looking to that result--start the ball rolling and if I snake in the forty thousand--isn't that what the lucky mutt is supposed to draw?--you get five thousands...⁹⁷

When Dreiser criticized manuscripts sent to him for appraisal, by his friends, he talked of the selling prospects of the work in addition to its literary merits. An example of this type of his evaluation is illustrated by his letter, (to Charles Fort) July 10, 1915:

My Dear Fort:

...However there are many things I want to talk to you about in connection with this. Several facts occur to me which may be of use to you. There are parts where it seems to me you have not fully sustained your propositions. Just the same it's an astonishing book. Slightly worked over it ought to sell a hundred thousand. Congratulations.⁹⁸

It is obvious that Dreiser was ruthless in his material values, as well as sympathetic. Yet, regardless of his tangled view of life in contradiction to his idealism, he manages to generate, ultimately, a picture of existence that is ugly, passionate, foolish, romantic, and profound.

⁹⁷ "Swack! Smack! Crack! Newsweek, LII (March 9, 1959), p. 112.

⁹⁸ Theodore Dreiser, Letters of Theodore Dreiser, p. 193.

Thus, the paradox of human and economic values that Dreiser imposed upon his characters was also his own personal interpretation of American values. He emerges as a writer who was never emancipated from his own boyhood dream of success; a condition that does not have the objectivity that the naturalist would employ in literature.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

Voltaire, Candide

Dreiser made it clear that the one thing an individual could depend upon in his lifetime was change. And man traveled in this world of change, engaged in his puny struggle for existence. In this cosmic survey of the world of man, human dignity and destiny become minute indeed. Because of the infinite status of man and his struggle for survival, Dreiser could, with justification to the meaning of the word tragedy, use plain stories of middle class people--there is no necessity for a Lear or a Hamlet. Dreiser narrowed the cosmic scope of his novels to a definite range of interests and to the individual--an individual, who, like himself, was a composite of realistic and idealistic principles. It has been shown that Dreiser, despite his belief and acceptance and use of the naturalistic theory in his novels, did not remain within the narrow confines of the definition of a naturalist. Instead he entered the realm of the sentimentalist and the idealist through the use of

his fallen woman theme, his clichés, his "fine" writing and his romantic materialism. Thus, Dreiser's subject matter belongs to the realist, while, at the same time it is romanticized and brooded over until it loses its flavor of reality. His novels are sentimental plot clichés, replete with factual detail, which, with the suppression of environmental hereditary influences on the individual, establish his paradox of romantic-realism.

Dreiser's use of details and factual passages, however, create a surface impression of realism, which adds a false tone of authenticity to the claims of his contemporary and modern critics--that Dreiser can be classified as a full-fledged member of the naturalistic school. But the fact still remains that Dreiser, as a writer, was not able to view his material objectively. He injects his personal romantic materialism and interpretation of life into his novels and protagonists. In so doing, he was at odds with the objectivity that major realists and naturalists advocated in their fiction. To view Dreiser's style and manner of presentation in the light of his being a pure realist or naturalist is to gain an incomplete picture of his novels. To underestimate his power and achievement because of his employment

of standard themes, clichés, and sentimentality is also a mistake. In spite of the controversy and contradiction to be found in Dreiser's novels, he nevertheless communicates a feeling of genuine power to his readers. His narratives still hurt and reveal even today.

Actually the paradox of Dreiser--the man as a romantic-realist--is the paradox of America, itself. Dreiser, as America, was wide of scope, incompatible, struggling for expression and recognition, caught up between the conventional dream of power and the opposing dream of morality. This, then, is Dreiser's effect, at once powerful and stereotyped, but, at all times, maintaining its emotional appeal to his reading public, an effect which has earned for him a position of literary prominence in the history of the evolution of the American novel.

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