THEODORE DREISER
THE RELUCTANT NATURALIST

R. GORDON MOYLES

15083

THEODORE DREISER

THE RELUCTANT NATURALIST

BY

ROBERT GORDON MOYLES, B.A. (Ed.), B.A. (Hons.)

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English Language and Literature, Memorial University of Newfoundland, March, 1967.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the writing and preparation of this thesis I have received valuable assistance from many persons. I wish to express my appreciation to the staff of the Library of Memorial University of Newfoundland and particularly to Miss Jean Carmichael, Inter-Library Loans and Mrs. H. Halpert, Acquisitions.

I am also indebted to Miss Emma Brown who typed and to my wife, Ada, who read the early drafts.

Most important, to Dr. Herbert Halpert, my supervisor, I owe sincere thanks for friendly advice, constructive (even if sometimes ego-deflating) criticism and, most of all, for his vigorous encouragement.

R.G.M.

Memorial University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

It is one of the splendid yet sinister fascinations of life that there is no tracing to their ultimate sources all the winds of influence that play upon a given barque - all the breaths of chance that fill or desert our bellied or our sagging sails. We plan and plan, but who by taking thought can add a cubit to his stature? Who can overcome or even assist the Providence that shapes our ends, rough hew them as we may.

- Theodore Dreiser, The Titan

I. INTRODUCTION

1.

Many literary commentators claim that Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) is the American literary naturalist par excellence. Though he conforms to the generally accepted definition of 'literary naturalism', Dreiser, unlike the conventional picture of the literary naturalist, is a sensitive, sympathetic, subjective and even, at times, a romantic novelist. His early novels are filled with a deep yearning after some transcendental meaning to life. His characters have a depth of soul and an intensity of spirit which seem to be inconsistent with a theory of man as a mere mechanism. Dreiser, it seems, does not always fully realize, or cannot always fully accept, the implications of a naturalistic philosophy. I hope to substantiate those claims in an examination of seven of his novels (Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, The Financier, The Titan, An American Tragedy, The Bulwark and The Stoic)[1],

---

[1] I have chosen not to discuss The Genius (1915). It makes no new contribution to Dreiser's naturalism and may, in fact, be called a parody of 'The Trilogy of Desire' (The Financier, The Titan and The Stoic) and to discuss it would merely be to repeat most of the things said about those novels.

and I hope to show that Dreiser, for most of his writing career, was, at best, a reluctant naturalist.

Dreiser's reluctance to accept naturalism as a final answer to the 'overwhelming question' was with him from the beginning of his career as a novelist. The individuals in his first two novels, Sister Carrie (1900) and Jennie Gerhardt (1911) are, Dreiser maintains, "mere wisps in the wind". Their destinies are determined by "forces wholly supernatural" against which an exertion of the will is useless. The forces he recognizes are twofold: social forces without and chemical forces within. Sometimes they combine effort, sometimes thwart each other, but always the individual suffers. Thus the main themes which Dreiser attempts to develop, and which are the foci of discussion in my first chapter, are the helplessness of the individual, the purposelessness of life and the uselessness of struggle. He does not fully succeed, however, in making these themes convincing and I shall point out inconsistencies in his presentation and cite evidence of his overwhelming pity for and sympathy with his characters. His characters have a sense of dignity which mere mechanisms could not have and which is wholly inconsistent with a philosophy of pessimistic determinism.

In Dreiser's first two novels the characters are depicted as essentially weak and, despite their dignity, their resignation to the cosmic and chemical forces which

control them is inevitable. In direct contrast, in his next two novels, The Financier (1912), The Titan (1914), Dreiser chooses to portray a physical and mental 'strong man' who is seemingly master of his fate. Frank Cowperwood, the chief protagonist, succeeds in business, in love, and apparently in life. Yet Dreiser explicitly declares that his strength and success is merely an illusion. He is as much at the mercy of cosmic and chemical forces as the weaker individuals of the first two novels.

In the second chapter, in which I examine these novels, Dreiser's treatment of the "survival of the fittest" theme and his handling of the problems of free will and amorality are discussed. Again I shall maintain that Dreiser is inconsistent and contradictory. As in the previous novels, he explicitly maintains that the individual, controlled as he is by these forces, cannot be blamed for his actions. Yet there are some characters whose behaviour he condemns. He also blames society for its actions but, following his own reasoning, it seems that society must also be a pawn controlled by forces greater than itself. Society may well act only according to the forces which shape its destiny. Dreiser is again, in this group of novels, an inconsistent and reluctant naturalist.

The subject of the third chapter, An American

Tragedy (1925) is, in my opinion, Dreiser's most definitively naturalistic novel. In his previous novels Dreiser has been fighting a philosophical battle with little success. He is blundering and confused. He approaches An American Tragedy, however, with the confidence of a man who knows where he is going. In this novel, and only in this novel, he achieves the aims of the ideal naturalist. In it he portrays vividly the social pressures which, in conflict with natural impulses, overwhelm and defeat the individual. He creates the setting so successfully that there is no longer any need for the philosophical interpolations which marred his previous books. Dreiser is more objective, more detached and less overtly sympathetic than before and the sense of yearning which pervaded the earlier novels is no longer present. For these reasons it is also a much more pessimistic novel.

Dreiser's achievement in An American Tragedy is purely an artistic one; that is, he could achieve in his creation what he could not in his personal life. Emotionally he was still unable to accept the futility of life and in two subsequent novels, The Bulwark (1946) and the posthumously published The Stoic (1947), he rejects naturalism in favour of a more nearly Christian philosophy. Thus he ends his career as a novelist as he began it: confused, uncertain and groping for answers. This pattern

in the development of his novels parallels that which biographers find in his personal life. Philosophically, he was confused and uncertain. Superficially he accepted a naturalistic position and for a time convinced himself that it adequately answered the questions about life. This he later rejected in favour of socialism. Very near the end he became a mystic and died, at least it seemed to those who knew him, as a Christian.

2.

As a basis for a study of what I call Dreiser's reluctant naturalism I shall present a synopsis of the generally accepted views of literary naturalism. The clearest definitions are given by Vernon L. Parrington and Malcolm Cowley. Parrington offers a convenient list of six criteria for literary naturalism:

> 1. Objectivity. Seek the truth in the spirit of the scientist.
> 2. Frankness. A rejection of Victorian reticence. The total man and woman must be studied - the deeper instincts, the endless impulses. The three strongest instincts of fear, hunger, sex. In the life of the ordinary person, the third is most critical, hence the naturalist makes much of it.
> 3. An amoral attitude toward material. The naturalist is not a judge, he holds no brief for any ethical standards.
> 4. A philosophy of determinism. This is the vital principle of naturalism, setting it off from realism.

5. A bias towards pessimism, in selecting details. A reaction from the romantic conception of the purposive will.... It is as the victim, the individual defeated by the world, and made a sardonic jest of, that the naturalist chooses to treat man.

6. A bias in the selection of characters.

a. Characters of marked physique and small intellectual activity - persons of strong animal drives.

b. Characters of excited, neurotic temperament, at the mercy of moods, driven by forces that they do not stop to analyze.

c. An occasional use of a strong character whose will is broken.[2]

Cowley's examination of the concept of literary naturalism is more succinct:

> Naturalism has been defined in two words as pessimistic determinism, and the definition is true as far as it goes. The Naturalistic writers were all determinists in that they believed in the omnipotence of abstract forces. They were pessimists as far as they believed that men and women were absolutely incapable of shaping their own destinies. They regarded the individual as "a pawn on a chessboard"; the phrase recurs time and again in their novels. They felt that he could not achieve happiness by any conscious decision and that he received no earthly or heavenly reward for acting morally; man was, in Dreiser's words, "the victim of forces over which he had no control".[3]

---

[2] Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (New York, 1930), III, 323. As the publisher indicates, these were based on notes for a lecture.

[3] Malcolm Cowley, "Not Men: A Natural History of American Naturalism" in American Literature: A College Survey, Eds., Brown and Flanagan (New York, 1961), p. 820. Originally published in The Kenyon Review (Spring, 1947).

These statements suggest that one is justified in calling literary naturalism a 'school of writing' or a 'Movement' and critics unanimously do so. Its force as a literary movement gained its real impetus from the scientific spirit of the nineteenth century: from the ideas promulgated by Charles Darwin and popularized by his disciple, Herbert Spencer. The novelist, besides trying to attain the scientist's objective approach to his material, also sought to validate or illustrate some of the hypotheses of Spencer and other 'naturalistic' scientists through fictional observations of human behaviour. Originally the novelist, with his mind open to the implications of biology and the other natural sciences, emphasized the role of heredity as the major force controlling man. Later he turned to the social sciences, and the shaping force of environment became his major theme. Broadly speaking, he developed the tendency to treat life, as the scientists had done, as merely another aspect of natural phenomena, often ignoring or denying the transcendental or spiritual aspects of man's nature.

The foremost literary exponent of the new philosophy was Emile Zola who defined the naturalistic method in his Le roman experiméntal (1880). This manifesto is heavily influenced by Claude Bernard's L'Introduction à la médicine éxperimental (1865), but many of Zola's ideas and methods,

especially those in his novels, are derived from Darwin's Origin of Species (1859; French trans., 1862).[4] The naturalist author, he claimed, should be a scientific observer of fictional human guinea pigs, verifying certain psychological and social hypotheses. "The experimental novelist is therefore the one who accepts proven facts, who points out in man and society the mechanism of the phenomena over which science is mistress, and who does not interpose his personal sentiments, except in the phenomena whose determination is not yet settled and who tries to test, as much as he can, this personal sentiment, this idea a priori, by observation and experiment."[5] Even before Zola, however, novelists such as Honoré de Balzac (in his group of novels and stories, The Human Comedy) and Gustave Flaubert (in Madame Bovary) attempted an objective, 'scientific' observation of human behaviour.[6] Other French novelists, Maupassant and the brothers Goncourt to name three, are also associated with the early naturalistic school. It seems, then, that literary naturalism, as we have it in America, is a product of English scientific theory and French literary tradition.

---

[4] See O.B. Hardison, ed., Modern Continental Criticism (New York, 1962), p. 100.

[5] Emile Zola, The Experimental Novel, trans. Belle Sherman, in Modern Continental Criticism, p. 109.

[6] See Horton, Rod & Edwards, Herbert, "Literary Naturalism" in Backgrounds of American Literary Thought (New York, 1952), pp. 246-261.

Charles Walcutt suggests 1890 as a convenient inaugural date of the naturalistic movement in America.[7] For around that date several novels appeared which introduced some of the themes on which many definitions of naturalism are based. In Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1883) and The Red Badge of Courage (1894), Stephen Crane published the first American naturalistic novels. In them we observe the helplessness of individuals against the forces around them, the objective portrayal of fear and the emphasis on determinism. Jack London adopted the 'struggle-for-survival' theme in his three most naturalistic novels, The Sea Wolf (1904), The Game (1905) and Burning Daylight (1910). His emphasis on the superman, the animal instinct in man, his amoral attitude and his pessimism (the idea of devolution) expanded the scope of the naturalistic novel. Neither of these novelists, however, was an avowed naturalist. They may have been influenced by Herbert Spencer, Darwin, Zola, Balzac and perhaps Hardy, but they never openly declared themselves indebted to any of them.

Frank Norris, on the other hand, was an avowed naturalistic novelist. Under the influence of Zola, whom he mentions often, he formulated his own brand of naturalism and sought to express it in McTeague: A Story of San

---

[7] Charles Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream (Minneapolis, 1956), p. 3.

Francisco (1899). His chief characters, McTeague and Trina, are obvious victims of forces outside themselves. They are controlled by their heredity and social environment. This similarity to Zola's characters has been noted by many commentators.

So far as scholars have been able to determine, none of these writers influenced Theodore Dreiser's work. While he knew Frank Norris personally, he had never read his novels nor, as he himself admits, had he ever read the works of Zola.[8] The chief literary influences in his life, as he declares in his two autobiographies, were Herbert Spencer and Honore de Balzac.[9] More than these, however, he tells us, his naturalistic philosophy was a lesson taught by life itself.

To realize the truth of that statement we must, as Phillip Gerber maintains

> -examine with some care the early life of this hulking German-American... not only because that life illustrates the deprivations over which a number of our national geniuses have had to triumph before they might contribute to our literature, but because that life is employed so extensively in the man's own fiction.

---

[8] George Snell, The Shapers of American Fiction (New York, 1961), p. 254.

[9] Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York, 1965), Chapters LXII & LXIX.

> His life is woven so inextricably into the fabric of his novels that even a sketchy knowledge of it clarifies for the reader a good portion of the attitudes, characterizations and prejudices that unify Dreiser's accomplishments.[10]

When one reads Dreiser's autobiographies and compares them with his novels one realizes the truth of Gerber's statement. Many of his novels are autobiographical and to understand fully his naturalism it is necessary to understand the existence that bred within him such a philosophy.

3.

Theodore Dreiser was born in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1871 to German-Catholic and Czech-Mennonite parents.[11] Shortly before Theodore's birth, his father, a weaver and owner of a woolen mill, suffered a series of misfortunes which left his family in poverty and kept it that way throughout Theodore's youth. John Paul Dreiser's woolen mill burned down. While he was helping to rebuild it, a heavy beam fell, struck his head and destroyed the hearing

---

[10] Phillip Gerber, Theodore Dreiser (New Haven, Conn., 1964), p. 22.

[11] The following account is based chiefly on Dreiser's two autobiographies, Dawn and A Book About Myself, and on two excellent biographies by Phillip Gerber and W.A. Swanberg.

in one ear. During his convalescence his wife was cheated out of the remainder of the family property by "Yankee trickery". Failure hung heavily over his father, whom Dreiser describes as a "thin grasshopper of a man, brooding wearily", and he, to Dreiser's lasting regret, retreated into religion. "Never have I known a man more obsessed by religious belief", declares Dreiser. "To him God was a blazing reality."[12] The family poverty, plus the religious bigotry of a father "trapped in the asinine teachings of the church", forced the family apart. The life stories of Dreiser's older brothers and sisters are, as several critics have put it, the stories of the continual delusion of the American dream of success. They are told by Dreiser in his autobiographies: stories of young men and women lured by the prospects of the big city, by the dream of easy money, whose lives end in failure, drunkenness, debauchery and poverty.

Dreiser's own early life, while still at home, reads like a ship's log; not an inappropriate metaphor since he once described himself as a "lone barque on a lone sea." There were many storms and many, but only temporary, ports of shelter. Continual movement from one town to another, from one house to another (each worse than the

---

[12] Theodore Dreiser, Dawn (New York, 1965), p. 7.

other); stealing coal to keep the family warm; begging food to keep fed; often almost miraculous survival; these are the recorded facts of his existence.

At fifteen he was "caught by the American spirit of material advancement" and went to Chicago where, like Carrie Meeber in Sister Carrie, he was frightened and awed by the bigness and impersonal nature of the city. After a succession of odd jobs, at all of which, as he himself admits, he was terribly inefficient, he received the chance to attend university. One of his former school-teachers, Miss Mildred Fielding, supplied the three hundred dollars necessary for a year at Indiana University in Bloomington. It was a year which, he claims, made little impact on his life at the time, but which he later saw as one of the most "vitalizing" periods of his life: vitalizing because of the introduction to literature, the knowledge of people he acquired and, most important, for the early lessons in naturalism. As Gerber succinctly has it: "the gulf between the have and the have-not was underscored. Others were accepted he felt because they wore finer attire on their backs or came from wealthy homes or were endowed by chance with magnetic personalities. In consequence, figures of genuine - but unperceived - worth were relegated to the limbo of the non-elect."[13]

---

[13] Gerber, Theodore Dreiser, p. 32.

With the death of his mother in 1890, all family ties were broken. Returning to Chicago he became, in turn, a laundry driver, a real-estate agent and a bill collector: jobs which took him all over the city and brought him into contact with all sorts of people. He began to learn about the slums, the vices, the secrets of the great city. "These jobs, as no book could, taught him the gullibility, the inescapable fate of the masses of 'blundering humanity' who are doomed by ignorance, stupidity, and poverty to a life spent squatting on the cellar steps of society."[14] They also gave him glimpses into wealthy homes, causing him to sentimentalize and daydream:

> And when night fell, and tired and hungry after a day of such brilliant life-pictures - but no work - I turned homewards, it was with the thought of all of the nice, comfortable homes that were being lighted and put in order to receive the day-workers of the world; of pretty women awaiting husbands and fathers and lovers with kisses; of well-laden tables set for them. What thousands of spirited youths would now dine and dress and then go out to see those girls whose pretty faces tortured me on every hand; what thousands of girls would now deck and primp to play around with these boys! And constantly my mind ran forward to the time when I should be better placed, when with money jingling in my pocket and handsome clothes on my back, I should be going out, too. When was that time to come? Must my youth slip away and I have none of it? Eighteen years had thus far been frittered away in longing and mooning, and here I was, once more on the streets, no trade, no profession, no job, my year at college wasted - or so I told myself - and, all in all, my life a failure![15]

---

[14] Gerber, Theodore Dreiser, p. 39

[15] Dreiser, Dawn, p. 487.

But, as he later learned, the pleasures of this dream world existed chiefly in the imagination. They would never be as pleasant as he dreamed them to be.

Dreiser's first autobiography, Dawn (1931), describes his youth. In it he resembles the weak-willed characters of his novels - groping, uncertain, unequal to life. His second autobiography, A Book About Myself (1922) (subtitled Newspaper Days), begins with Dreiser, at nineteen, feeling for the first time that he wanted to write and an account of his first job on a newspaper. The Chicago "Herald" was the first of many newspapers for which Dreiser wrote. Others were the Chicago "Daily Globe", the St. Louis "Globe-Democrat" and "Republic", the Pittsburgh "Dispatch" and the New York "Daily News" and "World". The period as newspaper reporter and feature writer, almost four years, opened his eyes to the world. He began consciously to soak up experiences and also to form conclusions about this "fierce, grim struggle" which he called life. He began to feel, even at this early stage, "that man is the victim of forces over which he has no control."[16]

It was Dreiser's career as a city newspaperman, as a matter of fact, that helped him formulate his naturalistic philosophy. "With a gloomy eye I began to watch how the

---

16 Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 59.

chemical - and their children, the mechanical - forces operated through man and outside him, and this under my very eye."[17] Man was, he concluded, "a waif amid forces", chemical and cosmic forces, none of which he could control. As a newspaperman he saw at firsthand the struggle for survival and always before him were "those regions of indescribable poverty and indescribable wealth."[18] Each city in which he worked confirmed his opinion that man was not in control of his own destiny.

It was not only the present that intrigued Dreiser. He had been born and had grown up in one of the blackest periods of American economic history. The tactics of Morgan, the banker, Armour, the packer, Jay Gould, the railroad man, Carnegie, the industrialist and countless others who resembled their prototypes in intention if not in ultimate success, were being made public. By coercion, economic persuasion and intimidation, utilities and other businesses, all across America, controlled city councils and state legislatures. Economic scandals had shocked the nation: the manipulation of stocks by Fisk and Gould in 1869; the Credit Mobilier scandal of 1872; the Black Friday episode of 1873. When Dreiser first arrived in Chicago that city was in a ferment. The bloody Haymarket Riot

---

17 Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 381.

18 Ibid.

(1886) had only recently taken place and the fates of several anarchists were still impending. Even though socialistic ideas were spreading and unions were expanding and increasing in numbers, the financial tycoon was still very powerful. The famous Charles Tyson Yerkes (1837-1905), for one, was gathering a prodigious fortune and succeeded in securing a monopoly for all the traction lines in Chicago.

While Dreiser, at the time, was unaware of the critical social issues which surrounded him, a few years later, taking advantage of his newspaper position, he did extensive research in these areas of economic corruption; absorbing the details in true Zolaesque fashion. Much of it, especially the Yerkes legend, he was later to use in his trilogy, The Financier, The Titan and The Stoic, which are set in the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Naturalism became for Dreiser, then, not a philosophy but a fact of life. "Essentially", remarks Malcolm Cowley, "the attitude forced upon newspaper men as they interviewed politicians, evangelists and convicted criminals was the same as the attitude derived from popular books on evolution. Reading and experience led them to the same convictions: that Christianity was a sham, that moral professions were false, that there was nothing real in the world but force, and, for themselves,

no respectable role to play except that of a detached observer gathering the facts and printing as many of them as their publishers would permit."[19] This is confirmed by Dreiser's own statement: "Most young men [reporters] looked upon life as a fierce, grim struggle in which no quarter was either given or taken, and in which all laid traps, lied, squandered, erred through illusion; a conclusion with which I now most heartily agree."[20]

But the picture of men he saw also evoked that pity and sympathy which so often permeates his novels, undermining his explicit naturalistic position. "What a queer, haphazard, disconnected thing this living was! ...As I wandered about I realized....that life was a baseless, shifting thing, its seeming ties uncertain, unstable and that which one day we hold dear was tomorrow gone to come no more." "The tangle of life, its unfairness and indifference to the moods and longings of the individual swept over me once more, weighing me down far beyond the power of expression."[21]

---

19 Malcolm Cowley, "Not Men" in Brown and Flanagan, eds., American Literature, p. 822

20 Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 451.

21 Ibid., pp. 312, 221 & 287.

During his newspaper period Dreiser attempted to rationalize his feelings and give them a quasi-scientific foundation. The greatest influence on his thinking at this time was the writings of Thomas Henry Huxley and Herbert Spencer. He describes the tremendous impression they made when he first read them:

> Up to this time there had been in me a blazing and unchecked desire to get on and the feeling that in doing so we did get somewhere; now in its place was the definite conviction that spiritually one got nowhere, that there was no hereafter, that one lived and had his being because one had to, and that it was of no importance. Of one's ideals, struggles, deprivations, sorrows and joys, it could only be said that they were chemic compulsions, something which for some inexplicable reason responded to and resulted from hope of pleasure and fear of pain....With a gloomy eye I began to watch how the chemical - and their children, the mechanical - forces operated through man and outside him, and this under my very eyes. Man was a mechanism, undevised and uncreated, and a badly and carelessly driven one at that.[22]

If his attitude was influenced by Huxley and Spencer, his journalistic, and later, novelistic style was influenced chiefly by Honoréde Balzac. As Dreiser tells it, he came across Balzac's works by the "merest chance." One afternoon, browsing in the Carnegie Public Library in Pittsburgh, he picked up Balzac's The Wild Ass's Skin and began reading:

---

[22] Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 342.

> A new and inviting door to life had been suddenly thrown open to me. He [Balzac] was one who saw, thought, felt. Through him I saw a prospect so wide that it left me breathless - all Paris, all France, all life through French eyes. Here was one who had a tremendous and sensitive grasp of life, philosophic, tolerant, patient, amused.... It was for me a literary revolution.[23]

Thomas Hardy and Leo Tolstoy also made similar deep impressions upon the young Dreiser.

Without really knowing it Dreiser had been drifting towards a philosophy of mechanistic determinism. His life's experiences and observations, as he saw them, pointed him that way and it was for that reason that these scientific expositions made such an impact on his mind. He applied the philosophical implications of Huxley and Spencer to his newspaper experiences and his impressions of life. "I was daily facing a round of duties," he claims, "which now more than ever verified all that I had suspected and that these books proved." The novels and scientific works "eternally verified [his] gravest fears as to the unsolvable disorder and brutality of life."[24] As Alfred Kazin succinctly remarks: "They [the novels and scientific treatises] gave him not a new insight but the authority to uphold what he had long suspected."[25]

---

[23] Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 380.

[24] Ibid., p. 381.

[25] Alfred Kazin, "Theodore Dreiser: His Education and Ours" in Kazin and Shapiro, The Stature of Theodore Dreiser (Bloomington, 1955), p. 155.

Dreiser's autobiography ends with his newspaper career. He went on to become a great revolutionary force in the literary world; went on to fictionalize the world he had seen as a newspaperman. For years he had cursed the editors who had cut his articles. Now he was free to write as he pleased about life as he saw it. Although his writing is influenced by Balzac and Spencer, his novels are based on real-life experiences. Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt are largely autobiographical, the 'Trilogy of Desire' is based on the career of Charles Yerkes and An American Tragedy on a newspaper account of a similar murder. Dreiser's naturalism was learned from life and he intended to show, in his novels, that this naturalism was not just a theory but a fact of life. It is perhaps for that very reason that he finally rejected it. He could never fully accept in his personal life the futility, the pessimistic determinism, the spiritual resignation which a naturalistic philosophy implied.

II. CARRIE MEEBER AND JENNIE GERHARDT: WISPS IN THE WIND

O fairest of creation, last and best
Of all God's works, Creature in whom excell'd
Whatever can to sight or thought be form'd,
Holy, divine, good, amiable, or sweet!
How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost,
Defac'd, deflower'd, and now to death devote?

- John Milton, Paradise Lost, IX

II. CARRIE MEEBER AND JENNIE GERHARDT: WISPS IN THE WIND

1. Sister Carrie

Theodore Dreiser's first novel, Sister Carrie (1900), has many of the characteristics of the naturalistic novel. It was written soon after his newspaper career, soon after he had come to the conclusion that "man was a victim of forces over which he had no control." Its general themes are the purposelessness of life and the helplessness of man caught in the grip of forces: chemical compulsions from within and cosmic forces from without. An outline of the story will show how these naturalistic themes are developed.

In August, 1889 Carrie Meeber, a girl of eighteen, leaves her small home town to live with her sister in Chicago. "Full of the illusions of ignorance and youth", "ambitious to gain in material things" she sets out to make a success of her life. She was "a half-equipped little knight...dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy, which should make it [the city] prey and subject - the proper penitent, grovelling at a woman's slipper."[1] On the train she makes the acquaintance of the well-dressed

---

[1] Dreiser, Sister Carrie (New York, [1932]), p. 2

Charles Drouet, a travelling salesman, who impresses her with his clothes and money. After several unsuccessful ventures as a Chicago factory worker, and feeling very depressed over her economic insecurity, she again meets Drouet. His kind, sympathetic manner comforts her and when he offers her money, seemingly with no ulterior motive, she accepts it. "She conceived a true estimate of Drouet. To her, and indeed to all the world, he was a nice, good-hearted man. There was nothing evil in the fellow. He gave her the money out of a good heart - out of a realisation of her want."[2] The suddenly acquired affluence and new clothes cannot reasonably be explained to her sister so, when Drouet suggests it, she moves into his apartment. She is relatively content in this quasi-married state until Drouet introduces her to George Hurstwood. He is strong, well-dressed and socially secure, the manager of a famous saloon and seems to her "more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways". Hurstwood has an unsatisfactory home life with a socially ambitious wife and is immediately attracted to Carrie. Not realizing that he is married, Carrie offers no resistance when he begins courting her favours.

Both Drouet and Mrs. Hurstwood soon learn that their partners are unfaithful. Drouet and Carrie part as

---

[2] Sister Carrie, p. 71.

easily as they had met but Mrs. Hurstwood, a "cold, self-centered woman", demands either a divorce or a property settlement. Carrie now learns that Hurstwood is married and refuses to see him again. Swearing never to be fooled again by men, she seeks a career as an actress but is unsuccessful.

Carrie's rejection and the impending legal battle with his wife extremely upset Hurstwood. One evening, in a disturbed state of mind, he drinks a little more than usual so that "his mind, though clear, was, nevertheless, warm in its fancies". It was this particular evening that the opportunity to extricate himself from his troubles presented itself.

It was his duty, as manager of the saloon, to check the premises and lock up. It was the responsibility of the cashier "who, with the owner, was joint keeper of the secret combination" to the safe, to lock up the day's profits. But on this night the safe was carelessly left open and no money had been taken to the bank. Hurstwood fondles the bills and considers stealing them. He "could not bring himself to act definitely...He was drawn by such a keen desire for Carrie, driven by such a state of turmoil in his own affairs that he thought constantly it would be best, and yet he wavered."[3] But while he

---

3 Sister Carrie, p. 268

debates whether or not to take it the safe door clicks shut. He steals the money and by lying to Carrie (pretending Drouet is hurt and wants to see her), he tricks her into fleeing with him to Canada. She is not as unwilling as she would seem, however, and shortly after arriving in Montreal they are married under a false surname. When Hurstwood realizes the trouble his former employers will make for him, he can find no alternative but to return the money, which he does. Newspaper reports of his theft, however, preclude the possibility of his ever returning to Chicago. The two lovers travel to New York where Hurstwood attempts to start over again but, virtually unknown, with little capital, no social prestige and dogged by ill luck, is unable to do so. Carrie, in the mean time, has had more success with a stage career and becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her companion who, she feels, is nothing but a drain on her income. She finally walks out on him and Hurstwood is reduced to begging and ultimately to suicide.

Carrie's rapid rise to stardom and financial success is without the sense of triumph and accomplishment she had hoped would accompany it. She is lonely, having many acquaintances but no friends. "She could look about on her gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account. Friends there were, as the world takes it - those who would bow and smile in acknowledgement of her success...

and yet she was lonely".[4] While Hurstwood is being buried, unknown and unmourned, Carrie sits in her rocking chair by the window, contemplating this strange world in which fame and money have failed to bring her the happiness she had expected.

For Dreiser, the forces that would control man and shape his destiny are twofold: chemical forces within and social and cosmic forces without. In Sister Carrie the chief protagonists, Carrie and Hurstwood, are the victims of these forces. They are driven by instinct and impulse, rather than by reason, and their lives are governed by what Dreiser calls "magnetisms" and "chemical compulsions." The three primary, or at least most obvious, compulsions are the drives for money, power and sex.

Carrie Meeber feels the power of chemical compulsion, both in herself and in others. At the beginning she is "more drawn than she drew." But she soon becomes "an apt student of fortune's ways" and she is no longer entirely at the mercy of these compulsions for she learns to use the sexual impulse in others, notably in Drouet and Hurstwood, to achieve her own desires. As an actress her capacity to take advantage of her aptitude

---

[4] Sister Carrie, p. 554.

reaches its full potential. Yet even when she realizes that others are magnetically drawn to her and takes advantage of it, she cannot control the same compulsion when she is herself drawn to someone else. Witness the scene where Hurstwood persuades her to accompany him to Canada:

> She was still the victim of his keen eyes, his suave manner, his fine clothes. She looked and saw before her a man who was most gracious and sympathetic, who leaned toward her with a feeling that was a delight to observe. She could not resist the glow of his temperament, the light of his eye.[5]

Unlike Carrie, Charles Hurstwood is not an "apt student" and he is completely controlled by chemical compulsions. He naively believes that Carrie is "in love" with him and he with her. He does not realize that it is internal compulsion, the desires for sex, pleasure and security, which draw Carrie to him.

Perhaps one understands more clearly the emphasis which Dreiser places on this term, "chemical compulsion", especially in its sexual context, if one reads Helen Dreiser's description of him in her book, My Life with Dreiser. She comments that although Dreiser was not handsome by the accepted definition of that word, he did have that magnetism which, especially for women, was

---

[5] Sister Carrie, p. 222.

almost irresistible. The number of mistresses and female devotees whom he professed to have had and that biographers agree he did have, argues for that intangible, chemical attraction with which Helen Dreiser endows him. He himself often professed that he had no control over his most powerful chemical compulsion, sex. He disparaged the custom of marriage and contended, which is consistent with his naturalistic philosophy, that "love" was nothing more than a chemical alliance. Very few of his characters ever "fall in love": They are "magnetized" or "chemically drawn" to each other.

His use of the term "chemical compulsion" is not limited to sex; other physical states are the result of chemical action as well. In Hurstwood's social and economic decline they serve a more tragic purpose:

> Constant comparison between his old state and his new showed a balance for the worse, which produced a constant state of gloom or, at least, depression. Now, it has been shown experimentally that a constantly subdued frame of mind produces certain poisons in the blood, called katastates, just as virtuous feelings of pleasure and delight produce helpful chemicals called anastates. The poisons generated by remorse inveigh against the system, and eventually produce marked physical deterioration. To these Hurstwood was subject.[6]

Here the internal chemical compulsions, as they often do, combine effort with external cosmic and social forces to overwhelm and defeat the individual.

---

[6] Sister Carrie, p. 362.

In Sister Carrie the external forces operate against the individual chiefly through chance occurrence and coincidence. Chance or fate is the controlling force and though chance occurrences are not as obviously employed as, say, in Hardy's Tess of D'Urbervilles, they are just as significant. In the first scene of the novel fate begins its operations and Drouet comes into Carrie's life. Later when she is in despair because she has lost a job, Drouet again appears out of a sea of faces in Chicago's busy streets and ushers her into a splendid dining-room for dinner. This is the beginning of the many complications that follow.

The irony that so often characterizes fate in Hardy's novels is also present in Sister Carrie. Hurstwood, who has begun his subtle seduction of Carrie, attends a play with Drouet and Carrie. One of the scenes involves a wife who listens to the seductive voice of her lover in the absence of her husband. At the conclusion of the play Drouet comments that he had no pity for a man who would be such a "chump" as the husband was. He does not realize that he is already playing the role of "chump" in real life.

The same night, a scene, ironically foreshadowing Hurstwood's future, also takes place. After the trio had gone to the theatre exit, a gauntfaced man, "who looked the picture of privation and wretchedness", approached

Hurstwood and asked for the price of a bed. Hurstwood, preoccupied with Carrie, scarcely noticed him, but Drouet, with "an upwelling of pity in his heart", handed him a dime. This was the very situation in which Hurstwood was to find himself not many months from then.

Nor is Carrie exempted from this ironic treatment. She participates in an amateur theatrical group and has the lead in a charity play. In the play, "Under the Gaslight", she claims: "It is a sad thing to want for happiness, but it is a terrible thing to see another groping about for it, when it is almost within the grasp"[7] The reader, if Carrie does not, will remember that scene at the end of the novel, when Carrie is left alone, yearning for that happiness which had eluded her grasp.

Nowhere in the novel is the role of chance more dramatically illustrated than in the crucial scene depicting Hurstwood's theft from the safe. It is a magnificent study of a psychological crisis and a brilliant blending of accident and motive which is the pivotal act of Hurstwood's career. At closing hour, while checking the offices, he discovers that by some accident the door of the safe has been left unlocked. He picks up the parcels of bills and counts ten thousand dollars of ready money.

---

7 Sister Carrie, p. 205.

> Lo, the manager remembered that he had never had so much. All his property had been slowly accumulated, and now his wife owned that. He was worth more than forty thousand, all told - but she would get that.
>
> He puzzled as he thought of these things, then pushed in the drawers and closed the door, pausing with his hand upon the knob, which might so easily lock it beyond all temptation. Still he paused. Finally he went to the windows and pulled down the curtains. Then he tried the door, which he had previously locked. What was this thing, making him suspicious? Why did he wish to move about so quietly? He came back to the end of the counter as if to rest his arm and think. Then he went and unlocked his little office door and turned on the light. He also opened his desk, sitting down before it, only to think strange thoughts.
>
> "The safe is open," said a voice. "There is just the least little crack in it. The lock has not been sprung."[8]

While trying to decide whether to keep it or not, the money in his hands, the lock clicks. "It had sprung. Did he do it?" Accidentally, perhaps; intentionally, no!

In his depiction of Hurstwood's subsequent decline Dreiser is a true naturalist. Chance, sexual compulsion and an increasing resignation to these forces make his decline very rapid. He invests money in a saloon but the building in which he holds his lease is sold and he is not reimbursed. He becomes penniless, Carrie leaves him and he finally asks himself the inevitable question: "What's the use?" In one of his most beautiful and economically written passages Dreiser describes Hurstwood's last moments:

---

8 Sister Carrie, p. 285

> Hurstwood laid down his fifteen cents and crept off with weary steps to his allotted room. It was a dingy affair - wooden, dusty, hard. A small gas-jet furnished sufficient light for so rueful a corner.
>
> "Hm!" he said, clearing his throat and locking the door.
>
> Now he began leisurely to take off his clothes, but stopped first with his coat, and tucked it along the crack under the door. His vest he arranged in the same place. His old, wet, cracked hat he laid softly upon the table. Then he pulled off his shoes and lay down.
>
> It seemed as if he thought awhile, for now he arose and turned the gas out, standing calmly in the blackness, hidden from view. After a few moments, in which he reviewed nothing, but merely hesitated, he turned the gas on again, but applied no match. Even then he stood there, hidden wholly in that kindness which is night, while the uprising fumes filled the room. When the odor reached his nostrils, he quit his attitude and fumbled for the bed.
>
> "What's the use?" he said, weakly, as he stretched himself to rest.[9]

Hurstwood had been helpless against the forces which controlled his destiny. Life, for him, was a hopeless affair. He could find no answer to the question: "Why go on living?"

Dreiser would have us believe that the same is true for Carrie Meeber. Even though she becomes a successful actress and materially well-off, Dreiser makes it clear that she will never achieve the happiness for which she has sought throughout the novel:

---

[9] Sister Carrie, p. 554.

> Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart! Onward, onward, it saith, and where beauty leads, there it follows. Whether it be the lone tinkle of a sheep bell o'er some quiet landscape, or the glimmer of beauty in sylvan places, or the show of soul in some passing eye, the heart knows and makes answer, following. It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise. Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.[10]

Yet the very fact that she continues to hope and is not totally crushed by the forces around her makes the reader feel that her situation is not hopeless. Was she not an "apt student of fortune's ways"? She had yearned for better things at the beginning and achieved her desire. Might she not also ultimately attain that happiness for which she seeks? In Hurstwood's case Dreiser was a true naturalist, for there is no doubt about Hurstwood's resignation to the forces around him. But in Carrie's case, Dreiser leaves room for hope, and hope is an undermining factor in any naturalistic philosophy. Alfred Kazin asks a question which was certainly prompted by the same opinion and, indeed, sums up many attitudes towards Carrie Meeber: "May it be that in Carrie we see the human soul, though almost crushed by circumstances, nevertheless irreconcilably free of them, its own freedom

---

[10] Sister Carrie, p. 557.

made clear in the light of inarticulate longing?"[11]

The imagery of the novel brilliantly underscores the theme of man's helplessness in the grip of forces beyond his control. Life is often compared to a world of struggling animals and animal imagery, which impresses on us the ferocity of that struggle, recurs throughout the novel. When Hurstwood is confronted by the open safe he wavers between his desire for money and a fear comparable to "the animal's instinctive recoil at evil."[12] When he arrives in New York, "the sea was already full of whales. A common fish needs disappear wholly from view - remain unseen. In other words, Hurstwood was nothing."[13] Hungry men wait at a mission door "like cattle" and oppose Hurstwood with an "animal feeling of opposition" when he moves to the head of the bread line. When the door of the Bowery Mission is closed they "looked at it as dumb brutes look, as dogs paw and whine and study the knob."[14]

Even more extensively used are the images of helplessness from the sea. William L. Phillips, in an article entitled "The Imagery of Dreiser's Novels", has

---

[11] In his introduction to Sister Carrie (Dell, 1965), p. 20.

[12] Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 287.

[13] Ibid., p. 321.

[14] Ibid., p. 553.

done an excellent job of assembling these and other images. I have selected from his article passages that emphasize the theme of helplessness:

> The largest and most obvious group of images in Sister Carrie is that clustering around the sea, which was for the early Dreiser the symbol of modern urban life. This image is introduced at the end of the first chapter when Carrie's situation is summarized: She is alone "away from home, rushing into a great sea of life and endeavour . . . a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea." [p. 11] The hydrography is soon laid out: "the entire metropolitan centre possessed a high and mighty air calculated . . . to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep". [p. 17] The most terrifying quality of Dreiser's society - sea, however, is not the width of the gulf between poverty and success, but the suggestion that those who attempt a crossing are without power to advance or to remain anchored, that each traveller makes more perilous the plight of another, and that the port of success constantly shifts.
>
> The powerless travellers in this sea drift (the word is repeated at least a dozen times in the novel) on the tide; we are told that Carrie "felt the flow of the tide of effort and interest - felt her own helplessness without quite realizing the wisp on the tide that she was." [p. 28] Indeed, one survives in this sea only if he does not have too acute an idea of his condition of helplessness. Drouet clowns his way through the novel, "assured that he was alluring all, that affection followed tenderly in his wake", [p. 137] although Carrie seems "ever capable of getting herself into the tide of changes where she would be easily borne along"[p. 278]. . . In Chicago, Hurstwood strikes Carrie as one who easily controls the life around him; his apparent solidity and strength draw her to him. It soon appears that "in an ocean like New York", however, he is only "an inconspicuous drop" [p. 321]; there he finally becomes a derelict, one "of the class which simply floats and drifts, every wave of people washing up one, as breakers do driftwood upon a stormy shore," and he ends as a nameless

> corpse carried to his grave on "a slow, black boat setting out from the pier at Twenty-seventh Street" [p. 556].15

Like the sea and animal imagery, the rocking chair is employed by Dreiser so often that it too becomes a symbol. Biographers have noted that Dreiser was partial to rocking and his characters quickly adopt the habit. While it may suggest soothing and meditation, an attempt to forget one's cares, to literally 'rock' them away, in Sister Carrie many commentators have taken it as a symbol of activity which gets one nowhere: a symbol of life itself. At her sister's flat Carrie rocks and dreams of Drouet who will take her away from this tiresome life on West Van Buren Street. In Drouet's apartment she sits in her rocker, hungering after even greater luxury and social esteem. In New York it is the same. We find her rocking, thinking how "commonplace" her life is compared with "what the rest of the world" was enjoying. Almost always Carrie in her rocker is by the window dreaming: a vision of life unattainable. "Our last view of Carrie is appropriate", says Phillip Gerber.

---

15 Op. Cit., PMLA, Vol. LXXVIII, Dec. 1963, pp. 572-585. For convenience I have taken Phillips' page references to Sister Carrie, ed. Kenneth S. Lynn (New York, 1957), found the corresponding pages in Sister Carrie (Modern Library: New York, 1932) and placed them in square brackets.

> Rocking in her chair, successful but unhappy, accomplished but unfulfilled, she dreams of further conquests which will - must - bring her lasting joy; yet she is driven to acknowledge for the first time that happiness may possibly never be for her, that perhaps her fate is "forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world".[16]

It may be pointed out, however, that, as Dreiser uses them, there may be additional interpretations of the rocking chair scenes. They certainly have a functional value in that they always precede a change of situation. Almost immediately after the rocking scene in her sister's flat, Drouet appears to lead Carrie to the life she yearned after. She rocks and dreams of greater luxury in his apartment and Hurstwood makes her dreams come true. In New York her dreaming and rocking lead to stardom. Are we now to assume that suddenly, just because Dreiser says so, her rocking and dreaming will end in disillusionment? In keeping with my previous contention that the end of Sister Carrie leaves room for hope, I would suggest that the rocking chair itself, perhaps contrary to what most critics see, may well be the symbol of that hope.

This sense of hope which Carrie gives to the novel is not my only reason for calling Dreiser a 'reluctant

---

16 Theodore Dreiser, pp. 63-64.

naturalist'. Equally worth noting are the many contradictions and inconsistencies in the novel. The most significant of these, and those I will discuss, are implications of moral responsibility, social progress and ultimate free will, plus an obvious lack of objectivity on the part of the author.

Dreiser is constantly claiming that his individuals cannot be condemned for their actions. He explicitly maintains, for example, that Carrie Meeber is not responsible for the way she has acted throughout the novel since she is a mere pawn. But the following interpolation confuses the whole issue. He maintains here that man has an instinctive sense of right and wrong and implies that he can have a knowledge of 'true ethics':

> To those who have never wavered in conscience, the predicament of the individual whose mind is less strongly constituted and who trembles in the balance is scarcely appreciable, unless graphically portrayed. Those who have never heard that solemn voice of the ghostly clock which ticks with awful distinctness, "thou shalt," "thou shalt not", "thou shalt", "thou shalt not", are in no position to judge. Not alone in sensitive, highly organized natures is such a mental conflict possible. The dullest specimen of humanity, when drawn by desire toward evil, is recalled by a sense of right, which is proportionate in power and strength to his evil tendency. We must remember that it may not be a knowledge of right, for no knowledge of right is predicated of the animal's instinctive recoil at evil. Men are still led by instinct before they are regulated by knowledge. It is instinct which recalls the criminal - it is instinct (where highly organized reasoning is absent) which gives the criminal his

feeling of danger, his fear of wrong.[17]

Where does a statement such as that leave Hurstwood who, as a thief, "drawn by desire toward evil", felt that "sense of right" and failed to obey? It would certainly seem to be inconsistent with Dreiser's assertion that his individuals must not be held morally responsible for their actions. Is this inconsistency the yearning of a man who knows that the naturalistic point of view which he holds fails to answer the real questions of life? The following quotation would seem to support such a contention.

> In the light of the world's attitude toward woman and her duties, the nature of Carrie's mental state deserves consideration. Actions such as hers are measured by an arbitrary scale. Society possesses a conventional standard whereby it judges all things. All men should be good, all women virtuous. Wherefore, villain, hast thou failed?
>
> For all the liberal analysis of Spencer and our modern naturalistic philosophers, we have but an infantile perception of morals. There is more in the subject than mere conformity to a law of evolution. It is yet deeper than conformity to things of earth alone. It is more involved than we, as yet, perceive. Answer, first, why the heart thrills; explain wherefore some plaintive note goes wandering about the world, undying; make clear the rose's subtle alchemy evolving its ruddy lamp in light and rain. In the essence of these facts lie the first principles of morals.[18]

---

[17] Sister Carrie, pp. 286-287.

[18] Ibid., p. 101.

The essential question we ask ourselves at the end of the novel is: Can Carrie ever be happy? In the final paragraph of the book, which I have quoted earlier, Dreiser holds little hope for such a possibility. What, then, is the significance of the following passage with its implications of social and moral progress and development of "perfect understanding"?

> Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason. On the tiger no responsibility rests. We see him aligned by nature with the forces of life - he is born into their keeping and without thought he is protected. We see man far removed from the lairs of the jungles, his innate instincts dulled by too near an approach to free-will, his free-will not sufficiently developed to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance. He is becoming too wise to hearken always to instincts and desires; he is still too weak to always prevail against them. As a beast, the forces of life aligned him with them; as a man, he has not yet wholly learned to align himself with the forces. In this intermediate stage he wavers - neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself in harmony by his own free-will. He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve by the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other - a creature of incalculable variability. We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is light that cannot fail. He will not forever balance thus between good and evil. When this jangle of free-will and instinct shall have been adjusted, when perfect understanding has given the former the power to replace the latter entirely, man will no longer vary. The needle of understanding will yet point steadfast and unwavering

to the distant pole of truth.[19]

Is it possible for an individual to achieve the perfect understanding and complete free will which Dreiser seems to imply in that statement? He seems to deny such a pleasure to Carrie, and certainly does to Hurstwood. Yet, near the end of the novel, he introduces a Mr. Ames, one of Carrie's New York friends, who seems to have achieved an extreme personal contentment. One wishes Dreiser had given a clearer statement about this man. Carrie meets him one evening and in their brief conversation one gathers that he had achieved happiness without money or social prestige. At another point Dreiser implies that an individual who does achieve this state of "perfect understanding", such as Ames did, will find that personal contentment for which Carrie had sought:

> It is the higher mental development which induces philosophy and that fortitude which refuses to dwell upon such things [material well-being or lack of it] refuses to be made to suffer by their consideration. The common type of mind is exceedingly keen on all matters which relate to its physical welfare - exceedingly keen. It is the unintellectual miser who sweats blood at the loss of a hundred dollars. It is the Epictetus who smiles when the last vestige of physical welfare is removed.[20]

---

19 Sister Carrie, p. 53

20 Ibid., p. 303.

Many of those statements obviously contradict certain aspects of a definition of naturalism such as Parrington's. The apparent belief in a form of moral progress that these passages demonstrate, seems to be inconsistent with a view of life as purposeless. A final inconsistency in Sister Carrie is the inability of the author to be objective. The idea of novelist as disinterested observer is not adhered to. The book, as Malcolm Cowley points out, is "felt rather than observed from the outside".[21] Not all critics agree with this and Parrington, for instance, says that "in no other American writer, except Whitman, is such complete detachment achieved."[22] Many make the general assertion that he "stands outside" his novels. This cannot be true of Sister Carrie, for Dreiser, it seems to me, is deeply involved in his characters' emotional lives, particularly in Carrie's. It is in his many comments, moralizations and asides, that his personal involvement is most evident. While they may have been necessary in 1900 to defend such a heroine as Carrie, they are nevertheless extremely subjective elements. A novel that is so clearly based on personal experiences, and involves the writer's own family, cannot be as objective as a naturalist would wish it to be.

---

[21] Malcolm Cowley, "Sister Carrie: Her Rise and Fall" in Kazin & Shapiro, eds., The Stature of Theodore Dreiser (Bloomington, 1955), p. 171.

[22] Vernon Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, p. 356.

"Dreiser writes as a contemplative, one who finds the significance of the external scene through his personal attachment to it", writes Alfred Kazin.[23] Michael Millgate says much the same thing in his introduction to the New Oxford edition of Sister Carrie:

> If Dreiser's great limitation is his inability to objectify experience, to achieve aesthetic distance from his material, it remains true that his great strength derives from precisely the same source. He is not outside the world of his fiction, a self-conscious manipulator, but intensely within it, accepting, taking upon himself, the burden of its anguish. He writes thus because he can do no other; because such participation and identification is inseparable from his conception of the artist's role; because it is only in the tough engagement of reality that his imagination finds its fullest scope and power.[24]

Dreiser fails to achieve the detachment that his naturalistic theory demanded. He is an extremely keen observer of life, but at his best as an observer Dreiser is a very compassionate observer.

How can we account for Dreiser's reluctant naturalism in Sister Carrie? The reason must lie with the author himself. A reading of his autobiographies seems to have brought Robert Elias to the conclusion that Sister Carrie was "the story of Dreiser's own divided heart. On the one

---

[23] In his introduction to Sister Carrie (Dell, 1965), p. 15.

[24] Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, M. Millgate, ed. (O. U. P.: London, 1965), xxiv.

hand he regarded all struggle as fundamentally futile; on the other hand he could not reconcile himself to the prospect of failure."[25] One need not, however, follow Elias that far to realize that Dreiser is too emotionally involved, too sympathetic, too contradictory, too inconsistent and leaves too much room for hope, to be an ideal naturalist.

2. Jennie Gerhardt

The themes of Dreiser's second novel, Jennie Gerhardt (1911), are much the same as those of Sister Carrie: the helplessness of the individual against superhuman forces and the uselessness of struggle against these forces. The essential difference is that in Jennie Gerhardt, while fate still plays a part, the major role is played by social pressures. These pressures thwart the individual's natural desires and the consequent suppression of these desires is both tragic and pathetic. An outline of the novel will serve to introduce the themes.

Jennie Gerhardt, the chief protagonist of the novel, is the moral and financial support of a poverty-ridden family. The poverty of the family forces Jennie, at eighteen years of age, to work along with her mother,

---

[25] Robert Elias, Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature (New York, 1949), p. 169.

scrubbing floors at a Columbus, Ohio, hotel. Mrs. Gerhardt, to add to her income, does washing for a hotel patron, Senator George Brander, a successful politician of fifty-two. Since Jennie collects and returns the laundry, they often meet and Jennie, innocent and naive, is easily seduced. Brander promises to marry her but dies before he can fulfil his promise. His death is a cruel blow. Jennie sincerely believes, and the reader is convinced, that Brander would have married her. Now fate has changed her destiny.

When her father learns that she is pregnant, he mercilessly forces Jennie out of his house and she must have her child outside her home. Her mother, however, secretly visits her daughter and offers to take care of the child when Jennie decides she must try to find work in a larger city.

Moving to Cleveland, Jennie works as a servant to a lady of high social position. There she meets Lester Kane, "the son of a wealthy manufacturer" and, although she has sworn to avoid future liaison with men, she is drawn to him and he to her. When her father loses his job, the need for financial help forces Jennie into an affair with Lester. They live together, as Carrie and Drouet had done, in a quasi-married state. Lester, however, the son of a wholesale carriage builder of "great trade distinction", hesitates to marry beneath his social rank. A crisis develops when his family discovers his relationship with

Jennie and he is obliged to make a definite decision. Social and economic pressures, not the least of which is his father's threat that he will be left out of his will, force Lester to marry in his own circle, leaving Jennie, who "was never master of her fate", to live a lonely, yet quite resigned life. A further blow from "inconsiderate fortune", the death of her child by Brander, while adding nothing to the novel itself, gives added measure to Jennie's loneliness and confusion regarding this "strange, unstable" world.

The chemical forces within and the social and cosmic forces without control these pawns of fortune. Lester is an "essentially animal-man", Dreiser tells us, "pleasantly veneered by education and environment."[26] "This strong... bear of a man, son of a wealthy manufacturer, stationed, so far as material conditions were concerned, in a world immensely superior to that in which Jennie moved, was, nevertheless, instinctively, magnetically, and chemically drawn to this poor serving-maid. She was his natural affinity...."[27] Jennie, too, is a child of instinct, rather than reason. "She was a

---

[26] Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt (Cleveland, 1946), p. 133.

[27] Ibid., p. 131

product of fancy, the feeling, the innate affection of the untutored poetic mind of her mother...."[28] "Like a bird in the grasp of a cat", she, too, is at the mercy of "chemical compulsions."

It is the external forces, however, which really shape their destinies. For his depiction of the external forces in Jennie Gerhardt, Dreiser draws heavily on anthropology. He is not only concerned with equating man with the animal organically; not only biologically, but culturally and socially. He concludes, with many Darwinian anthropologists, that such things as loyalty and family attachments are based on environment or, more specifically, on being attached to a private territory. To attempt a shift from one piece of private territory to another is as disastrous for man as it is for the animal. For man, however, the territory is not as specifically geographical or physical as for the animal, but more cultural. That is, the boundaries are bloodlines, breeding and skin color. One may, with the protection of a fur coat, move from Florida to the Arctic, but one will rarely ever be able to become accepted into a social group into which he was not born. Money and social position may enable him to become superficially accepted, but there is always the knowledge, always the feeling, that "he is just not one of us". Dreiser makes this quite clear in the following passage:

---

[28] Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt (Cleveland, 1946), p. 1.

> In this world of ours the activities of animal life seem to be limited to a plane or circle, as if that were an inherent necessity to the creatures of a planet which is perforce compelled to swing about the sun. A fish, for instance, may not pass out of the circle of the seas without courting annihilation; a bird may not enter the domain of the fishes without paying for it dearly. From the parasites of the flowers to the monsters of the jungle and the deep we see clearly the circumscribed nature of their movements - the emphatic manner in which life has limited them to a sphere; and we are content to note the ludicrous and invariably fatal results which attend any effort to depart from their environment.
>
> In the case of man, however, the operation of this theory of limitations has not as yet been so clearly observed. The laws governing our social life are not so clearly understood as to permit of a clear generalization. Still, the opinions, pleas, and judgements of societies serve as boundaries which are none the less real for being intangible. When the men or women err - that is, pass out from the sphere in which they are accustomed to move - it is not as if the bird had intruded itself into the water, or the wild animal into the haunts of man. Annihilation is not the immediate result. People may do no more than elevate their eyebrows in astonishment, laugh sarcastically, lift up their hands in protest. And yet so well defined is the sphere of social activity that he who departs from it is doomed. Born and bred in this environment the individual is practically unfitted for any other state.[29]

So, while Lester and Jennie are instinctively drawn to each other, they cannot be happy. For Lester cannot break out of his prescribed territory and Jennie cannot break into it. "Against such powers", suggests Phillip Gerber, "love may hold out for a time but eventually stands defenseless.

---

[29] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 238.

Lester may choose to violate the decorum of the world he was born into, but if he does so choose, retribution will follow as the night the day."[30]

Although the external forces in Jennie Gerhardt operate through social pressures, greater cosmic forces are also at work and chance occurrences do play a part in determining the destinies of these individuals. Jennie, though pregnant, is happy and confident that Brander will marry her. His sudden death shatters her dreams and turns her world upside down. After her child is born she decides firmly to avoid another similar liaison, wishes to be independent, but then meets Lester Kane. It would seem that she has a choice, either to accept or reject him as a lover. She has almost made up her mind to stay away from him when the family receives word that Gerhardt has had an accident and will not be able to work at his trade. "She realized as she sat there, that fate had shifted the burden of the situation to her. She must sacrifice herself; there was no other way."[31] I feel we must emphasize the "must". While still seeming to make a decision, her course is actually made inevitable by her own feeling of responsibility to her family. While one may argue that she need not have had this feeling of responsibility, Dreiser suggests that it is part of her chemical nature.

---

30 Theodore Dreiser, p. 82

31 Jennie Gerhardt, p. 156.

Into this naturalistic world is introduced a strong sense of the 'survival-of-the-fittest' aspect of naturalism which later dominates the 'Trilogy of Desire'. The business world in which Lester Kane is so half-heartedly involved is a brief preview of what constitutes practically the whole world of The Financier, The Titan and The Stoic. In such a world Jennie loses, for Jennie is "the idealist, the dreamer."[32] Lester also loses, for he is too good-natured, with "a large vision...of life."[33] And where Jennie lacks "the ability to fight and scheme",[34] Lester lacks "the ruthless, narrow-minded insistence on his individual superiority which is a necessary element in almost every great business success."[35] The only person who seems to get anywhere in the novel is Lester's brother, Robert, who possesses the kind of qualities Jennie and Lester lack. We are left with a definite impression, then, that the 'fittest' are the cruel, ruthless, unfeeling and unscrupulous. They succeed, while persons of feeling, like Jennie and Lester, are destined to fail.

---

[32] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 15.

[33] Ibid., p. 146.

[34] Ibid., p. 371.

[35] Ibid., p. 303.

There is an obvious lack of struggle in this novel. The resignation of Jennie and Lester to their fates is summed up by Lester in his confession to Jennie at the end of the novel: "I was just as happy with you as I will ever be. It isn't myself that's important in this transaction apparently; the individual doesn't count much in the situation. I don't know whether you see what I'm driving at, but all of us are more or less pawns. We're moved about like chessmen by circumstances over which we have no control."[36] And a little later he continues: "After all, life is more or less of a farce.... It's a silly show. The best we can do is hold our personality intact. It doesn't appear that integrity has much to do with it."[37] The element of resignation has a profound effect on the novel. It means that conflict, an essential element in most novels, is absent.

This lack of struggle has been described by Alfred Kazin as a weakness in Jennie Gerhardt. "The weakness is in the novelist's own morality, as a point to be made about life, and it is even a greater weakness in the technical organization of the novel. Dreiser's essential theme... is the necessary resignation to forces in society that are

---

36 Jennie Gerhardt, p. 401.

37 Ibid.

as impersonal as those of nature. He seems to be saying that man can no more defeat society than he can defeat death."[38]

In my view, the resignation of the characters is the real strength of the novel. Dreiser builds up his case, showing the power of external forces, so successfully that any struggle would be incongruent:

> We live in an age in which the impace of materialized forces is wellnigh irresistible; the spiritual nature is overwhelmed by the shock. The tremendous and complicated development of our material civilization, the multiplicity and variety of our social forms, the depth, subtlety, and sophistry of our imaginative impressions, gathered remultiplied, and disseminated by such agencies as the railroad, the express and the post office, the telephone, the telegraph, the newspaper, and, in short, the whole machinery of social intercourse - these elements of existence combine to produce what may be termed a kaleidoscopic glitter, a dazzling and confusing phantasmagoria of life that wearies and stultifies the mental and moral nature. It induces a sort of intellectual fatigue through which we see the ranks of the victims of insomnia, melancholia, and insanity constantly recruited. Our modern brainpan does not seem capable as yet of receiving, sorting, and storing the vast army of facts and impressions which present themselves daily. The white light of publicity is too white. We are weighed upon by too many things. It is as if the wisdom of the infinite were struggling to beat itself into finite and cup-big minds.[39]

The passage just quoted, with its emphasis on "fatigue", is indicative of the tone of the whole novel.

---

[38] Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt (Dell, 1963). Introduction by Alfred Kazin, p. 10.

[39] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 132.

It would seem to refute a statement such as this by Phillip Gerber: "The novel's ending is replete with implications of happiness - or at least peace, contentment - which render it a far more optimistic work than Sister Carrie."[40] The inability of the individual to understand and stand up to the forces which defeat him and the lack of internal conflict make Jennie Gerhardt, it seems to me, a more pessimistic novel than Sister Carrie. In Sister Carrie people are bent and crushed by forces, but at least Carrie offers some resistance, and thus offers some hope. Life in that world only seems terrible. In Jennie Gerhardt it seems sad, pathetically sad. Lester is defeated by his environment: he simply cannot live outside his own social territory. It is useless to struggle and we hear Dreiser saying that if Lester had fought against society, "had married Jennie and accepted the comparatively meager income of ten thousand a year he would have maintained the same attitude to the end.... And Jennie in the end would not have been so much better off than she was now."[41] Lester, himself, reasons in much the same manner:

> Man, on his part, composed as he was of self-organizing cells, was pushing himself forward into comfort and different aspects of existence

---

[40] Theodore Dreiser, p. 84.

[41] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 416.

> by means of union and organization with other men. Why? Heaven only knew. Here he was endowed with a peculiar brain and a certain amount of wealth which he now scarcely believed he deserved, only luck had favored him. But he could not see that anyone else might be said to deserve this wealth any more than himself, seeing that his use of it was as conservative and constructive and practical as the next one's. He might have been born poor, in which case he would have been as well satisfied as the next one - not more so. Why should he complain, why worry, why speculate? - the world was going steadily forward of its own volition, whether he would or no. Truly it was. And was there any need for him to disturb himself about it? There was not. He fancied at times that it might as well never have been started at all. "The one divine, far-off event" of the poet did not appeal to him as having any basis in fact. Mrs. Lester Kane was of very much the same opinion.[42]

I have maintained that there is less struggle against the forces which would defeat man in Jennie Gerhardt than in Sister Carrie. For that reason it is a more pessimistic novel. But, as in Sister Carrie, Dreiser is again the reluctant naturalist, for Jennie Gerhardt is not entirely without hope. Like Hurstwood, Lester dies before the novel ends. Like Carrie, Jennie is still alive, still hoping that maybe life does have some purpose after all:

> She [Jennie] had seen a great deal, suffered a great deal, and had read some in a desultory way. Her mind had never grasped the nature and character of specialized knowledge. History, physics, chemistry, botany, geology, and sociology were not fixed departments in her brain. . . Instead there was the feeling that the world moved in some instable way. Apparently no one knew clearly what it was all about. People were born and died. Some believed

---

[42] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 404.

> that the world had been made six thousand years before; some that it was millions of years old. Was it all blind chance, or was there some guiding intelligence - a God? Almost in spite of herself she felt there must be something - a higher power which produced all the beautiful things - the flowers, the stars, the trees, the grass. Nature was so beautiful! If at times life seemed cruel, yet this beauty still persisted. The thought comforted her; she fed upon it in her hours of secret loneliness.[43]

Though Dreiser explicitly denies free will, there is that sense of yearning and longing as though he is not quite convinced of his denial. I believe he was not. I find my belief strengthened when I read F.O. Matthiessen's account of a later conversation between Dreiser and his secretary, Marguerite Tjader; a statement extremely similar to Jennie's thoughts quoted above:

> You know that summer I was down at Cold Spring Harbour - one afternoon, after I'd been working all day in the laboratory I came out in the sunshine and saw a little bunch of yellow flowers growing along the border of the park. I stooped over them. Here was the same beautiful design and the lavish, exquisite detail that I had been seeing all day through the microscope. Suddenly it was plain to me that there must be a divine, creative Intelligence behind all this. It was after that, that I began to feel differently about the universe. I saw not only the intelligence, but the love and care that goes into all created things.[44]

---

[43] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 405

[44] F.O. Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser (London, 1951), p. 241.

This close similarity suggests that Jennie's yearning is indeed Dreiser's own. It supports such a view as the one expressed by Robert Schneider:

> There can be little doubt that as a philosopher Dreiser denied free will. Yet in the very act of denial he frequently showed how torn he was between his philosophical convictions and his longing for human freedom....[45]

As in Sister Carrie, there are contradictions which also undermine Dreiser's explicit naturalistic position. Jennie has an illegitimate child. Though never married, she enjoyed the intimate experiences of the marriage bed. She was a child of passion and instinct, rather than reason and common sense. For these reasons the world would have her wear the scarlet letter of Hester Prynne but Dreiser does not condemn her. He explicitly maintains that because she is denied free will she is not morally responsible for her actions. "No process is vile, no condition is unnatural. The accidental variation from a given social practice does not necessarily entail sin. No poor little earthling, caught in the enormous grip of chance, and so swerved from the established customs of men, could possibly be guilty of that depth of vileness which the attitude of the world would seem to predicate so

---

[45] Robert Schneider, Five Novelists of the Progressive Era (New York, 1965), p. 200.

inevitably."[46] In fact, Dreiser considers Jennie much better than the society which condemns her:

> Although her punishment was neither the gibbet nor the jail of a few hundred years before, yet the ignorance and immobility of the human beings about her made it impossible for them to see anything in her present condition (pregnancy) but a vile and premeditated infraction of the social code, the punishment of which was ostracism. All she could do now was to shun the scornful gaze of men, and to bear in silence the great change that was coming upon her. Strangely enough, she felt no useless remorse, no vain regrets. Her heart was pure, and she was conscious that it was filled with peace. Sorrow was there, it is true, but only a mellow phase ot it, a vague uncertainty and wonder, which would sometimes cause her eyes to fill with tears.[47]

Perhaps Dreiser is here being contradictory. He denies sin in Jennie's actions, yet he laments a society which could inflict such unnecessary laws upon her. "'Conceived in iniquity and born in sin', is the unnatural interpretation put upon the process by the extreme religionist, and the world, by its silence, gives assent to a judgement so marvelously warped."[48] He fails to recognize that, according to his naturalistic logic, society should not be held responsible because of its

---

[46] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 405.

[47] Ibid., p. 99.

[48] Ibid., p. 98.

inability to exercise its will; because whether it will or not society must act according to the direction of the forces which shape its destiny. Society must make these laws because, whether they are right or wrong, it is so led by forces over which it has no control.

There are other instances as well where it seems that Dreiser is being inconsistent. Lester, although seemingly forced into accepting his eventual position in life, suffers from "that painful sense of unfairness which comes to one who knows that he is making a sacrifice of the virtues - kindness, loyalty, affection - to policy."[49] He became soured on life because he felt that in forsaking Jennie he had done the first ugly, brutal thing in his life. The following statement would seem to imply the moral responsibility which Dreiser denies. "Jennie deserved better of him. It was a shame to forsake her after all the devotion she had manifested. Truly, she had played a finer part than he. Worst of all his deed could not be excused on the grounds of necessity. He could have lived on ten thousand a year; he could have done without the million and more which was now his. He could have done without the society, the pleasures of which had always been a lure. He could have, but he had not, and he had complicated it all with the thought of another woman."[50]

---

[49] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 369

[50] Ibid., p. 374.

Senator Brander, too, seems to be made morally responsible for his actions. It is during his seduction of Jennie that Dreiser wrote: "There are crises in all men's lives when they waver between the strict fulfillment of justice and duty and the great possibilities for personal happiness which another line of conduct seems to assure. And the dividing line is not always clear."[51] This is not the language one would expect from a writer who excuses man from moral responsibility by denying free will but it is typical of Dreiser.

Dreiser is again in Jennie Gerhardt involved in his character's lives. The reason for his lack of objectivity may be because the characters are so close to his heart. The novel, in fact, seems to be the most autobiographical of Dreiser's fictional works, illustrating just how deeply affected he was by the poverty and rootlessness of his early life and by the misadventures of his sisters. According to several biographers, such as Swanberg, Elias and Matthiessen, the experiences of both Carrie Meeber and Jennie Gerhardt are analogous to the careers of Emma and Mamie Dreiser.[52]

---

[51] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 75.

[52] Dreiser is, incidentally, a prodigious autobiographer. He is the author of three autobiographies: A Hoosier Holiday (1916); A Book About Myself (1922), reprinted as Newspaper Days (1931); and Dawn (1931). A Traveller at Forty (1913) is a record of a trip to Europe he took in 1912-13. Dreiser Looks at Russia (1928) is an account of his visit to, and impressions of, Russia in 1927-28.

Certainly the analogy between the Gerhardt and Dreiser families is borne out by a comparison of Jennie Gerhardt and Dreiser's autobiography, Dawn. In Dawn Dreiser speaks of his family as having "...a particularly nebulous, emotional, unorganized and traditionless character",[53] a tragic group which "... had somewhere before my birth taken on the complexion of poverty and failure, or, at least seeming failure".[54] "The destitution Dreiser shared as a boy," declares Phillip Gerber, "is utilized to full impact... There is John Paul Dreiser in the guise of William Gerhardt, a glassblower out of a job, a Lutheran of near-fanaticism with whom 'religion was a consuming thing', God a tangible personality, 'a dominant reality'. There is the mother, gentle, resourceful in poverty, concerned first, last and always with her children's welfare, reduced to scrubbing floors and taking in washing... And there, gleaning lumps of coal beside the railroad tracks, are the children, not so numerous [six] as their real-life counterparts [ten] ... but quite a house-filling brood nevertheless.... The Gerhardts exist beneath a shadow of poverty as under a precipitous cliff of shale which threatens with the slightest earth tremor to thunder down upon them."[55]

---

53 Dreiser, Dawn, p. 10.

54 Ibid., p. 14.

55 Theodore Dreiser, p. 78

I pointed out in my introduction that Dreiser's naturalism was learned from life and that he intended to show that it was not just a theory but a fact of life. In Jennie Gerhardt this approach seems to have backfired, for the autobiographical element, instead of supporting his naturalistic position, undermines it. In using his family, he becomes emotionally involved, sympathetic and critical of the society which thwarts their desires. He is often too impetuous, too hasty to judge, and one of the criteria of the literary naturalist given by Parrington was that he is not a judge, but merely an objective reporter.

Having read Dreiser's autobiographies and knowing something of the man through Helen Dreiser and Marguerite Tjader, one must realize that Jennie Gerhardt is a product of Dreiser's heart, not his head. What his head often suggests, his heart, in fact, rejects. He is again a reluctant naturalist.

3. Summary

In Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt Dreiser expresses these points of view: man is a helpless creature, controlled by forces, unable to exert his will; struggle against these forces is useless; man is not responsible for his actions and the standard of social and Christian ethics

by which the world would judge his characters is totally inadequate.

Dreiser attempts to represent the world as he sees it: a world in which, as Charles Walcutt had it, "luck is more important than careful planning, and 'goodness' does not appeal to the unknown or nonexistent controllers of destiny. ...Dreiser shows that the will is not free to bring its impulses to fulfillment.... In a world so envisaged, good intentions do not necessarily bear good results. Nor is what is conventionally called evil punished.... It would be useless to blame someone for conditions beyond his control."[56]

If one could rely on such an outline to judge these novels, the only conclusion would be that they are truly naturalistic in the accepted sense of that word. But a close reading reveals contradictions and inconsistencies which demand a reappraisal.

Dreiser is not objective. His overwhelming pity for these 'brothers and sisters' who are alone and confused permeates the novels. I have counted in these two novels over thirty long interpolations: personal, sometimes very emotional, comments on such things as the plights of his characters, the cruelty of society and the yearning for a recognizable design in the universe. His greatness as a

---

[56] Charles Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream, p. 196-7.

novelist especially in his first two novels, cannot be accounted for by his naturalism. Rather, I would agree with Walcutt: "His greatness is in his insight, his sympathy and his tragic view of life."[57]

The naturalist's view of life must, according to the accepted definitions, be pessimistic. These novels, superficially read, are pessimistic. But one is always aware of that deep yearning of both author and his creations for some other, more transcendental, meaning to life. His characters, while depicted as mere mechanisms, have a capacity for hope which is the essence of optimism. Burton Rascoe would almost seem to have paraphrased what I have taken pages to elaborate:

> Dreiser is a tragic optimist, trembling with profound pity over the dismal contortions of life, but ever hopeful that somehow, some time, man's burden will be lightened and his afflictions healed.[58]

---

[57] Charles Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream, p. 269

[58] Burton Rascoe, Theodore Dreiser (New York, 1925), p. 65.

III. FRANK COWPERWOOD: LOBSTER OR SQUID?

He is not wise, that is not wise for himself. Wealth and honour...Prompt action... Boldness, eloquence, and winning manners lead to success...The power of gold...Self-confidence...Be serpent and dove, lamb and wolf (The Lion and the Fox)...Lose not time.

- Gabriel Harvey, "The Cult of Virtu"

FRANK COWPERWOOD: LOBSTER OR SQUID?

1.

In his first two novels Dreiser portrayed weak-willed individuals whose failure and resignation to the forces which controlled them was inevitable. In The Financier (1912) and The Titan (1914)[1] he portrays a physical and mental 'strong man'. Frank Cowperwood is, from the beginning, everything that Carrie Meeber and Jennie Gerhardt were not: strong-willed, ruthless, domineering and financially successful. Yet Dreiser maintains that, no matter how successful Cowperwood becomes, no matter how much will-power he seems to possess, he too is at the mercy of chemical compulsions and external forces as much as Carrie or Jennie. At the end of each of these two novels Dreiser prophesies that Cowperwood will bow, at last, to the forces of nature. The superman is as much at the mercy of forces as the weakling.

According to the terms set out in my "Introduction",

---

[1] These novels are only the first two of Dreiser's 'Trilogy of Desire'. Although the third, The Stoic (1947), is officially part of the 'Trilogy' and is often examined with the first two, to study it here would confuse the picture of Dreiser's development as a naturalist. It was written after he had rejected naturalism and is, in no way, naturalistic. I will discuss The Financier and The Titan together in this chapter and reserve The Stoic for later treatment.

The Financier and The Titan are more naturalistic than Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt. The author is here more objective, less emotionally involved and the background imagery is now more predominant. But Dreiser, as I shall endeavour to show, is still inconsistent and contradictory. The same sense of yearning which pervaded the earlier novels is again evident in these.

In this chapter I shall first outline Cowperwood's career in the novels, taking special care to show Dreiser's 'survival-of-the-fittest' philosophy in action. It will then be shown how the naturalistic tenor of the novels is supported by the imagery throughout and by the prophecies at the end of each novel. After making as strong a case as possible to support these novels as naturalistic, I shall then show where that case falls down. It is my contention that Dreiser does not succeed in showing Cowperwood to be the victim of forces that the prophecies in these novels declared him to be. There are many contradictions and inconsistencies which demonstrate the philosophical uncertainty of the author. Dreiser can still, in these novels, be called a 'reluctant naturalist'.

2.

The career of the protagonist, Frank Cowperwood, is based on that of Charles Tyson Yerkes (1837-1905), "a

financial wizard non-pariel who recognized no law but the self-decreed" and who forced his way "into supremacy over Chicago's street-railway networks, buying city councils and mayors as he would bonbons at a confectionery counter."[2] That the novels follow very closely the career of Yerkes, sometimes incorporating verbatim newspaper accounts of his exploits, is verified by a reading of Yerkes' career in The Dictionary of American Biography[3] and by Dreiser's biographers. It is not necessary, however, to know the life story of Yerkes in order to appreciate these novels. The most important point about the biographical element is that it demonstrates that Dreiser looked on naturalism not merely as a theory but as a fact of life; in other words, as a practical philosophy which could be applied to objective experience. To illustrate the validity of his beliefs he had only to fictionalize the 'true-life' story of a naturalistic strong-man; a ruthless, calculating financier, who by sheer Nietzschean 'will to power' became a financial tycoon; whose boyhood lesson in a typical Spencerian drama of 'the survival-of-the-fittest' determined his philosophy.

---

2 Gerber, Theodore Dreiser, p. 87. I have mentioned Dreiser's interest in the Yerkes legend in the "Introduction" but see Gerber, pp. 94-97, for a detailed account of the Yerkes-Cowperwood comparison.

3 Vol. 20, pp. 609-611.

Such a man, in real life, was Charles Tyson Yerkes and such a man, in fictional life, was Frank Algernon Cowperwood.

The Financier records Cowperwood's successful entry into and eventual domination of the Philadelphia business world, his financial failure as a result of the 1871 fire in Chicago and his imprisonment for misuse of city funds. The hero's first business coup, completed at the age of thirteen, is indicative of future successes. He bought soap at an auction for thirty-two dollars and sold it to a local grocer for sixty-two. At seventeen he quit school to enter the business world where his rise is meteoric. Cowperwood is a "financier by instinct" and learning the trade comes easy. He quickly apprehends the basics: always risk the capital of others, not your own; have no sympathy until you have won; recognize that money buys popularity, privileges and votes ("Money was the first thing to have - a lot of it....Then you secured the reputation"); have no inward concern for conventional ethics, but always maintain an outward guise of conformity to such ethics. "Buying and selling stocks, as he soon learned, was an art, a subtlety, almost a psychic emotion. Suspicion, intention, feeling - these were the things to be long on. You had to know what a certain man was thinking of - why, you could not say - and suspect that he was going to buy or unload a given amount - why, you could not say. If you had a big buying

or selling order, it was vitally important that your emotions, feeling, or subtlest thought should, by no trick of thought transference, telepathy, facial expression, or unguarded mood on your part be conveyed to any other person."[4] Able to take advantage of both situations and people, Cowperwood soon pulls many of the financial strings in the city.

Coupled with Cowperwood's obsessive desire for power is an equally obsessive desire for women. At nineteen he is charmed by the "soft-skinned" Lillian Semple and he knew he "wanted her physically". He marries her but as her beauty fades he quickly tires of her and takes up with a colleague's daughter, Aileen Butler. When Lillian, with her two children, is finally discarded by Cowperwood, Dreiser comments: "You have seen fish caught ruthlessly in a net and cast indifferently on a sandy shore to die. They have no value save to those sea-feeding buzzards which sit on the shores of some coasts and wait for such food. It is a pitiable spectacle - a gruesome one; but it is life."[5]

In 1871 a serious fire in the commercial district of Chicago causes panic on the nation's stock exchanges. Prior to the panic Cowperwood, as financial agent to Butler, Mollenhauer and Simpson (the controllers of the Philadelphia

---

4 Dreiser, The Financier (New York, 1912), p. 83

5 Ibid., p. 483.

municipal government), had been using both their securities and the city's for his own purposes. Forgetting a basic lesson of his philosophy, that in moments of panic the instinct for self-preservation, the survival instinct, is strongest, he appeals to Butler for moral and financial support. This is a mistake. Butler is concerned with saving himself. Since each member of the political triumvirate has done so much speculation with city stocks and since a municipal election is impending, the three welcome Cowperwood's predicament and use him as their scapegoat.

Cowperwood is not indicted for the $500,000 of municipal funds which he had used as collateral for his own investments (the others had done the same) but for a cheque for $60,000 which, as a last-ditch effort to save himself financially, he had wheedled out of the city treasurer. His trial was nothing more than a political frame-up. Even in the lawcourts the survival instinct and the jungle atmosphere is obvious. "During the trial of Cowperwood," remarks Maxwell Geismar,

> moral issues are invoked to destroy a competitor in the moment of his own instability. Ethics is a club, not a code, to finish him off while he is still struggling, and its efficiency depends merely upon the amount of power behind its judgements.[6]

---

[6] Maxwell Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors (Cambridge, 1953), p. 314.

During his thirteen month incarceration, Cowperwood had been accumulating money through his financial agent, Wingate. He leaves jail, more determined than ever to succeed, again becomes a broker and gets his big chance to become rich again when the second 'Black Friday' in United States history, September 19, 1873, precipitated the well-known panic of 1873. " He would give them [his agents] orders to sell - everything - ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty points off if necessary, in order to trap the unwary, depress the market, frighten the fearsome who would think he was too daring; and then he would buy, buy, buy, below these figures as much as possible, in order to cover his sales and reap a profit....This was his hour. This was his great moment. Like a wolf prowling under glittering, bitter stars in the night, he was looking down into the humble folds of simple men and seeing what their ignorance and their unsophistication would cost them."[7]

In a few days of shrewd gambling in stocks he is again a millionaire. "'I have had my lesson', he said to himself, ... 'I am as rich as I was, and only a little older. They caught me once, but they will not catch me again.' He talked to Wingate about following up the campaign on the lines in which he had started, and he himself intended to follow them up with great energy; but all the while his mind

---

7 The Financier, p. 770.

was running with this one rich thought: ' I am a millionaire. I am a free man. I am only thirty-six and my future is all before me.'"[8]

The second volume of the trilogy, The Titan, describes Cowperwood at the height of his financial career. Aware that he could not achieve the desired social prestige in Philadelphia because of his jail experience, he moves to the freer air of Chicago with Aileen Butler, whom he had married. He becomes immensely successful in his financial endeavours, very self-satisfied and feels that he has most of the answers about life. "To him the most noteworthy characteristic of the human race was that it was strangely chemic, being anything or nothing, as the hour and the condition afforded."[9]

Cowperwood consolidates the small traction companies and visualizes the day when the whole transportation system of Chicago would be under his control. To achieve this aim would require ruthless means. "Who could resist? Starve and beat a dog on the one hand, wheedle, pet and hold meat in front of it on the other, and it soon can be brought to perform. Cowperwood knew this."[10] His tactics

---

8 The Financier, p. 775.

9 Dreiser, The Titan (New York, 1914), pp. 11-12.

10 Ibid., p. 222.

are the same as his competitors' but in the end they combine their efforts to deprive him of ultimate success. Maxwell Geismar describes it this way:

> The closing sections of the novel describe the great municipal battle in which the crooked politicians, the hungry mob and the bought press are brought to bear against Cowperwood by his rivals, while the Financier himself, reaching out toward a giant monopoly of the transit systems with the tentacles of an octopus, pleads in all sincerity the virtue and justice of his cause, the rights of property and established institutions, the benefits to stockholders....In the barbaric grandeur of finance capitalism in the New World, the descendants of predatory animals and scaled fishes continued to seek their prey in the dark of the social jungle or the depths of the fiscal sea.[11]

In The Financier Cowperwood concentrates on making a financial success of his life; the number of women he seduces is small. In The Titan the gallery of women who are "chemically drawn" to him expends to huge proportions. New Cowperwood mistresses parade through this novel, so much so that Stuart P. Sherman has observed that the novels are "a sort of huge club-sandwich composed of slices of business alternating with erotic episodes."[12]

---

11 Rebels and Ancestors, p. 325.

12 Stuart P. Sherman, "The Barbaric Naturalism of Theodore Dreiser" in Kazin & Shapiro, The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 78.

Many of these "chemic unions", as Dreiser calls them, are explicitly detailed and nearly all Cowperwood's mistresses are chosen from among wives and daughters of his business associates, one important reason why his competitors and former colleagues sought so fiercely to crush him. There was Rita Sohlberg, wife of an artist friend; Stephanie Platow, daughter of an influential furrier; Cecily Haguenin, daughter of an editor, until then Cowperwood's most earnest journalistic supporter; Florence Cochrane, daughter of the president of the Chicago West Division Company; Carolyn Hand, wife of a director of several finance houses in the city. "He also had been intimate with other women for brief periods," remarks Dreiser, "but to no great satisfaction - Dorothy Ormsby, Jesse Belle Hinsdale, Toma Lewis, Hilda Jewell; but they shall be names merely."[13] In the case of each it is as Aileen thinks: "He was too passionate, too radiant, too individual and complex to belong to any one single individual alone."[14] He was, as Thomas Hardy would have it, one of those "who love too hotly to love long and well." Cowperwood thinks of his women as "poor little organisms growing on the tree of life - they would burn out and fade soon enough. He did not know the ballad of the roses of yesteryear, but if he had it

---

13 The Titan, p. 202.

14 Ibid., p. 250.

would have appealed to him. He did not care to rifle them, willy-nilly; but should their temperaments or tastes incline them in his direction, they would not suffer vastly in their lives because of him."[15] Cowperwood is, however, unwise in his choice of women. He does not go out of his way to avoid affairs, nor does he seek an affair with a woman whose husband is not either an associate or competitor of his. The result is that his competitors, whose wives and daughters he seduces, "looked upon Cowperwood as a dark and dangerous man - one of whom Chicago would be well to be rid."[16]

Cowperwood and Aileen had left Philadelphia because they could not achieve the social prestige they desired. It is the same in Chicago and it provides Cowperwood with an excuse to desert his second wife: "When he realizes she has become a liability to him, when indeed all her precious virtues, her crude animal vitality, flamboyance, even her 'glowing health and beauty' simply antagonize the matrons of Chicago society - and those traits which had made her so desirable as a mistress operate against her as a wife - he deserts her."[17]

---

15 The Titan, p. 210.

16 Ibid., p. 265

17 Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors, p. 323.

Thus there are three good reasons why Cowperwood should have been discouraged: he had failed to establish any lasting love relationship, failed to break into high society and failed to consolidate, under his absolute control, all the traction lines of the city. But he is still very rich and, like Carrie, is undaunted. He now turns towards Europe, speculating on the possibility of increasing his fortune in London. His disappointment is further eased, for another promising love affair is in the making. Some years previously he had undertaken to finance the art education of sixteen year old Berenice Fleming, the daughter of one of his lady friends. He had tried, unsuccessfully, since that time to make her his mistress. On the very night of his failure to win his monopoly, she informs him of her decision. She accepts him because, as she herself puts it, she far prefers unhappiness in wealth to happiness in poverty. Their affair and Cowperwood's London venture is the subject of The Stoic and will not be discussed at this point.

3.

Following the same procedure as in my discussion of Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, I shall now comment briefly on the role of chemical compulsion and external

force in these novels. This will be followed by a discussion of the 'survival-of-the-fittest' philosophy, the imagery and the prophecies. I shall conclude with a discussion of the inconsistencies, contradictions and the intellectual uncertainty which undermine Dreiser's naturalism.

In The Financier and The Titan "chemical compulsions" again exert control over the individual. "Theory or no theory", claims Dreiser, "the basic facts of chemistry and physics remain. Like is drawn to like. Changes in temperament bring changes in relationship. Dogma may bind some minds; fear, others. But there are always those in whom the chemistry and physics of life are large, and in whom neither dogma nor fear is operative."[18]

In these novels Dreiser has coined a specific word to cover what, in Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, he had referred to as "chemical compulsions" and "magnetisms". "Chemism" is the term and it refers chiefly to the sexual impulse. "Next to self-interest, which to Dreiser always ruled supreme, sex was the most tremendous of forces goading the human creature, and here Frank Cowperwood is as precocious as he is at coining money."[19] Woman are magnetically drawn to Cowperwood, all of them feeling "some intense pull in him". Aileen Butler was "drawn as some

---

18 The Financier, p. 261.

19 Gerber, Theodore Dreiser, p. 102.

planets are drawn by the sun. Moral speculations really had nothing to do with it....This emotion rose quickly like a swelling tide, and drowned thoughts of family training and everything else. The passions are never concerned with the rules of life anyhow."[20] Cowperwood cannot resist the chemic compulsion which is aroused by the figure of a pretty girl. He attempts to rationalize his obsession by comparing his women with objects of art and referring to his attachments as kinships of minds and souls. These relationships are, however, almost always based on physical stimuli.

In Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt Dreiser was concerned to show us the external forces, social and cosmic, which made life so unbearable for those individuals. In The Financier and The Titan we must take the presence of these forces for granted because Dreiser is here more concerned with showing us an individual who, like Carrie (only much more so), is "an apt student of fortune's ways"; who can succeed where the weak, like Hurstwood, fail. That social and cosmic forces are still at work is obvious when one looks at the minor characters in the two novels. They are obviously pawns and their failures, like Hurstwood's, can be contrasted with Cowperwood's success.

---

20 The Financier, p. 251.

George Stener, the city treasurer, who so unwisely gave Cowperwood the cheque for $60,000 is indicted as his accomplice in the embezzlement. He also spends thirteen months in jail, but comes out a beaten man, who can never recapture his former success. He "did not know that he was an implement - a tool in the hands of people." Describing his life Dreiser writes: "If life presents a more painful spectacle than this, one would like to know it. The damnable scheme of things which we call existence brings about conditions whereby whole masses suffer who have no cause to suffer, and, on the other hand, whole masses joy who have no cause to joy. It rains on the just and the unjust impartially. We suffer for our temperaments, which we did not make, and for our weaknesses and lacks, which are no part of our willing or doing....Creations, achievements, distinguished results always sink back into so many other things. They have their roots in inherited ability, in environment, in fortune, in a lucky star."[21]

Edward Butler, Aileen's father is another such pawn. He "was mistrustful of people in general, looking on them as aimless forces rather than self-regulating bodies..."[22] But he himself is just such an aimless force whose attempt

---

21 The Financier, p. 479.

22 Ibid., p. 498.

at self-assertion, an attempt to force his daughter out of an affair with Cowperwood, fails miserably. Finally Frank's own father, Henry, is also helpless to control the ebb and flow of his existence. His success in life is regulated by the career of his son. When Frank rises financially, so does his father; the reverse is true as well. He has no capacity to help himself. The women in the two novels are the same. Any effort to escape involvement with Cowperwood is useless; they are magnetically drawn to their fates. While there is little attempt by any one of them to avoid the illicit affairs, Dreiser makes us feel that any such attempt would have been foiled by forces beyond their control.

Compared to these men and women, Cowperwood is a superman. In the business world, endowed with a keen perception of life and a dulled conscience, he becomes a financial demi-god. We have seen that he was ruthless, both in love and business. He learned that to succeed one had to be unscrupulous and unfeeling. This he learned as a boy when he observed a struggle between a lobster and squid in a local fishmarket. It taught him a lesson in survival which he followed in matters of business and love throughout his whole life. This episode is the keystone in the novels' 'survival-of-the-fittest' theme:

> There was a fish-market not so very far from his own home; and there, when he went to see his father at the bank, or when he took his brothers on after-school expeditions for mail or errands for his father, he liked to look at a certain

> tank in front of one store where they kept odd specimens of sea-life which the Delaware Bay fishermen would bring in. . . One day he saw a jelly-fish put in, and then a squid, and then a lobster. The lobster and the squid came well along in his fish experiences; he was witness of a familiar tragedy in connection with these two, which stayed with him all his life and cleared things up considerably intellectually. The squid, it appeared from the talk of the idle bystanders who were always loafing about this market, was considered the rightful prey of the lobster; and the latter had no other food offered him. The lobster lay at the bottom of the clear glass tank on the yellow sand, apparently seeing nothing - you could not tell in which way his beady, black buttons of eyes were looking - but apparently they were never off the body of the squid. The latter, pale and waxy in texture, looking very much like pork fat or jade, was moving about in torpedo fashion; but his movements were apparently never out of the eyes of his enemy, for by degrees small portions of his body began to disappear, snapped off by the relentless claws of his pursuer. The latter, as young Cowperwood was one day a witness, would leap like a catapult to where the squid was apparently idly dreaming, and the squid, very alert, would dart away, shooting out at the same time a cloud of ink, behind which it would disappear. It was not always completely successful, however, Some small portions of its body or its tail were frequently left in the claws of the monster below. Days passed, and, now fascinated by the drama, young Cowperwood came daily.

He does not see the final attack, the inevitable destruction of the squid, but he knew what the outcome would be.

> "That's the way it has to be, I guess," he commented to himself. "That squid wasn't quick enough. He didn't have anything to feed on." He figured it out. The squid couldn't kill the lobster - he had no weapon. The lobster could kill the squid - he was heavily armed. There was nothing for the squid to feed on; the lobster had the squid as prey. What was the

> result to be? What else could it be? "He didn't have a chance," he said, finally, tucking his books under his arm and trotting on.
>
> It made a great impression on him. It answered in a rough way that riddle which had been annoying him so much in the past: "How is life organized?" Things lived on each other - that was it. Lobsters lived on squids and other things. What lived on lobsters? Men, of course! Sure, that was it! And what lived on men? he asked himself. Was it other men? Wild animals lived on men. And there were Indians and cannibals. And some men were killed by storms and accidents. He wasn't so sure about men living on men yet; but men did kill each other. How about wars and street fights and mobs? He had seen a mob once. It attacked the Public Ledger building as he was coming home from school. His father had explained what for, too. There was great excitement. It was about the slaves. That was it! Sure, men lived on men.[23]

Cowperwood learned that among men "There were the weak and the strong, physically and mentally. Some were destined for success by their temperament - that he could see; others were cut out for failure by the same token.... Men, as he saw them, were starred by fortune to succeed or fail....Look at the squid he had seen. Was it its fault that it had been put in the tank with the lobster with no chance ultimately of saving its life? Some great, curious force was at work here throwing vast masses of people into life; and they could not all succeed. Some had to fail - many."[24] But Frank Cowperwood apparently succeeds.

---

23 The Financier, pp. 11-14 passim.

24 Ibid., p. 40.

The 'survival-of-the-fittest' theme is re-inforced by other means, particularly the imagery of the novels. It creates a distinctive jungle atmosphere. Business life and politics, seemingly civilized, have the ferocity of animal life. "The surface might appear commonplace - ordinary men of the state of Illinois going here and there - simple farmers and small-town senators and representatives conferring and meditating and wondering what they could do - yet a jungle-like complexity was present, a dark, rank growth of horrific but avid life - life at the full, life knife in hand, life blazing with courage and dripping at the jaws with hunger."[25] The jungle imagery is used extensively by Dreiser to describe a world where social Darwinism is manifestly in operation. "It's a case of dog eat dog in this game," states Cowperwood. Traders on the stock exchange are "like a lot of hungry gulls or stormy petrels, hanging on the lee of the wind, hungry and anxious to snap up any unwary fish"[26] and "like hawks watching for an opportunity to snatch their prey from under the very claws of their opponents.."[27] One political and business failure had his carcass "as rapidly and as effectively picked clean and bare of the bones as this particular flock of political

---

25 The Titan, p. 516.

26 The Financier, p. 84.

27 Ibid., p. 82.

buzzards knew how to pick him".[28] A group of financiers is described: "short and long men, lean and stout, dark and blond men with eyes and jaws which varied from those of the tiger, lynx and bear to those of the fox, the tolerant mastiff, and the surly bulldog",[29] and they have a regard for each other "as sincere as that of one tiger for another".[30]

The comparison of men to animals is most evident in the descriptions of the characters in the novels. "They were all hawks - he and they", thinks Frank Cowperwood. "They were all tigers facing each other in a financial jungle...wolves at one moment, smiling, friendly human beings at another. Such was life. He had no illusions."[31] His business rivals describe him as "a ravening wolf", "slippery as an eel", "with the heart of an hyena and the friendliness of a scorpion." Some of these images were brought together by William L. Phillips in his excellent article, "The Imagery of Dreiser's Novels". He goes on, in his article, to comment on other animal imagery which is not strictly naturalistic and his whole article is worth reading.[32]

---

28 The Financier, p. 470

29 The Titan, p. 10.

30 The Financier, p. 317.

31 Ibid., p. 355.

32 PMLA, Vol. 78, pp. 577-78.

In this business jungle Cowperwood proves himself to be the 'fittest'. He is capable of immense success but, in his prophecies at the end of each novel, Dreiser makes it very clear that, in his eyes, Cowperwood is no more in control of his destiny than was Carrie, or Jennie or Hurstwood. In a section entitled "The Magic Crystal" at the end of The Financier Dreiser prophesies sorrow and bitter failure for his hero:

> The three witches that hailed Macbeth upon the blasted heath might in turn have called to Cowperwood, "Hail to thee, Frank Cowperwood master of a great railway system! Hail to thee, Frank Cowperwood, builder of a priceless mansion! Hail to thee, Frank Cowperwood, patron of arts and possessor of endless riches! Thou shalt be famed hereafter." But like the Weird Sisters, they would have lied, for in the glory was also the ashes of Dead Sea fruit - an understanding that could neither be inflamed by desire nor satisfied by luxury; a heart that was long since wearied by experience; a soul that was as bereft of illusion as a windless moon.[33]

In the final pages of the second volume Dreiser maintains that "god or the life force....is an equation". An individual such as Cowperwood, may rise up and appear to be master of all he surveys, for a while, but then the mass will rise up to subdue him and restore the eternal equation. In Cowperwood's case he states it as follows:

---

33 The Financier, p. 780.

> Rushing like a great comet to the zenith, his path a blazing trail, Cowperwood did for the hour illuminate the terrors and wonders of individuality. But for him also the eternal equation - the pathos of the discovery that even giants are but pygmies, and that an ultimate balance must be struck.[34]

He may try to exert his will but Dreiser feels that he will never succeed.

> And this giant himself, rushing on to new struggles and new difficulties in an older land, forever suffering the goad of a restless heart - for him was no ultimate peace, no real understanding, but only hunger and thirst and wonder. Wealth, wealth, wealth! A new grasp of a new great problem and its eventual solution. Anew the old urgent thirst for life, and only its partial quenchment. In Dresden a place for one woman, in Rome a second for another. In London a third for his beloved Berenice, the lure of beauty ever in his eye. The lives of two women wrecked, a score of victims despoiled; Berenice herself weary, yet brilliant, turning to others for recompense for her lost youth. And he resigned, and yet not - loving, understanding, doubting, caught at last by the drug of a personality which he could not gainsay.
>
> What shall we say of life in the last analysis - "Peace, be still"? Or shall we battle sternly for that equation which we know will be maintained whether we battle or no, in order that the strong become not too strong or the weak not too weak? Or perchance shall we say (sick of dullness): "Enough of this. I will have strong meat or die? Or live?[35]

In Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt it was an easy task to show those relatively weak characters at the mercy of forces over which they could exercise no control. There

---

[34] The Titan, p. 551.

[35] Ibid.

Dreiser loaded the dice by making Carrie, Jennie, Lester Kane and Hurstwood weak characters. We can pity their inevitable failures. But in The Financier and The Titan he attempted a much more ambitious task: to depict a man with energy, dynamism and ability; a man who is in every way successful; a man just the opposite in temperament to a man like Lester Kane, as nevertheless a victim of forces beyond his control. Did Dreiser succeed in his attempt? Does he really make us feel that Cowperwood is without free will?

Before I answer that question it is necessary to admit two arguments that could be advanced to prove that Cowperwood is without free will and is controlled by forces as much as the weaker characters of the earlier novels.

First, one realizes that simply because a man succeeds in business or any other activity he need not necessarily owe that success to his ability to choose his own destiny. It is only reasonable to believe that Fate, as capricious as she is supposed to be, does not always utterly crush a man as she did Hurstwood. By the chance that one fails, another succeeds. It is worth stressing that the same Fate which doles disease to one house, doles bread to another. So Cowperwood may succeed and yet still be governed by forces beyond his control. His eventual downfall, while made less inevitable, would therefore be more ironic.

Secondly, the prophecies at the ends of the two novels clearly show where Dreiser stands. He intended, as I have shown earlier, that Cowperwood should be deluded into thinking himself master of his fate. He intended him to feel absolutely self-sufficient. When nature then strikes the balance the meaninglessness of life is more brilliantly underscored. In Dreiser's view, then, Cowperwood, though successful, will eventually bow before the forces that control him. Despite his success he is a pawn, though a very successful one, and Dreiser had planned a third, climactic novel to show that he was.

We are faced with the curious contradiction, then, that, even knowing Dreiser's intention and knowing that a man does not have to suffer as Hurstwood does to be a victim of forces, we still feel that Cowperwood is the master of his own destiny. Once again it is the contradiction between Dreiser's expressed philosophy, in his interpolations and comments, and the dramatic presentation of his characters. With Eileen Howell, I feel "that Cowperwood is not pushed by chance the way Carrie or Jennie is but that he himself brings these things [financial success] to pass. He is so forceful, dominant, powerful, that one cannot help feel that he is pulling the strings while the whole world jumps."[36] Cowperwood seems to do everything because he wants to do it.

---

36 Eileen Howell, "Theodore Dreiser's Development as a Naturalist", M.A. Thesis, New York University, 1950.

The whole logic of the story seems to indicate that he rose to fortune because of his own abilities. "He could, should, and would rule alone. No one must ever again have the least claim on him save that of a suppliant....By right of financial intellect and courage he was first, and would so prove it. Men must swing around him as planets around the sun."[37] He is ruthless, individualistic and determined to be master of his destiny.

Similarly, one might easily say that to a large extent he caused his own financial downfalls. It is his relationship with the wives and daughters of his business partners that cause them to combine forces against him. "It was not until the incidents relating to Cowperwood and Mrs. Hand," declares Dreiser, "...that things began to darken up." One may argue that the sexual "chemism" is too strong to be controlled, but it is inconceivable that the only women by whom he could have been sexually stimulated are the wives and daughters of the men who can ruin him. He wilfully makes some very stupid mistakes by alienating worthwhile friends.

Dreiser's portrayal of Cowperwood, then, is often ambiguous. "It is one thing to envisage Cowperwood," remarks F.O. Mathiessen, "and quite another for him to enable the reader to respond to his hero in anything like

---

37 The Titan, p. 27.

these dimensions....Dreiser's desire to exalt his hero has in a sense raised him above the level of being affected by victory or defeat."[38]

In other words, Dreiser finds it difficult to create a man of power and intelligence who is, nevertheless, at the mercy of forces beyond his control. To stress his intended purpose he relied on commentary; chiefly the prophecies at the end of the novels. The fulfillment of these prophecies was to have been The Stoic's task, but since it did not do this we have to base our answer to the question whether Cowperwood is a victim of forces or has free will on the two novels as we have them. While Dreiser meant to have placed him in the same ultimate position as Carrie and Jennie, the reader is compelled by Dreiser's dramatic presentation to believe that Cowperwood possesses more free will and controls his destiny more than either of those characters.

Dreiser's portrayal of Cowperwood as an amoral man is also not fully convincing. Cowperwood's motto is "I satisfy myself", and he is never troubled by moral qualms or reservations. What he wants he goes after, be it a franchise or another man's wife. "He saw no morals anywhere - nothing but moods, needs, greeds. People talked and talked but they acted according to their necessities and desires,"[39]

---

[38] F.O. Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser (London, 1951), p. 146.

[39] The Financier, p. 432.

and "... when it came to women and morals, which involved so much related to beauty, happiness, a sense of variety and distinction in living, he was just now beginning to think clearly that there was no basis, outside of convention and theory, for the one-life, one-love idea....It was not for him to bother about the subtleties of evolution, which even then was being noised abroad, or to ferret out the curiosities of history in connection with this matter. He had no time."[40]

As far as conventional moral standards are concerned Cowperwood rejects them. "Morals - those who had them had them; those who hadn't hadn't....One found oneself in a given social order, theory, or scheme of things. For purposes of social success, in order not to offend, to smooth one's path, make things easy, avoid useless criticism, and the like, it was necessary to create an outward seeming - ostensibly conform. Beyond that it was not necessary to do anything. Never fail, never get caught."[41]

Yet if Cowperwood's attitude towards life is so amoral why does he "burn with a kind of angry resentment" and think Stephanie Platow a "lying prostitute" when she confessed to him that she was "an inconsequential free lover

---

40 The Financier, pp. 242-243.

41 Ibid., p. 527.

at twenty-one"?[42] Even though she recants and admits that she had only experienced sexual love once, his "gorge" still rose. He could not "forgive her for not loving him perfectly." Cowperwood is even jealous after he has discarded Aileen when he finds out that another man is mildly interested in her. He does not stop to rationalize this contradiction between his expressed moral philosophy and his feelings of jealousy, but such a contradiction makes him more human for all that.

Dreiser shares Cowperwood's amoral attitude. He claims that there are elements of the physico-chemical nature of man that cannot be bound by arbitrary rules of conduct. He, therefore, cannot blame his characters for their breaches of the conventional codes of ethics. Commenting on the illicit love affair between Frank and Aileen he says:

> How shall we explain these subtleties of temperament and desire? Life has to deal with them at every turn. They will not down, and the large placid movements of nature outside of man's little organisms would indicate that she is not greatly concerned. We see much punishment in the form of jails, diseases, failures and wrecks; but we also see that the old tendency is not visible lessened. Is there no law outside of the subtle will and power of the individual to achieve? If not, it is surely high time that we knew it - one and all. We might then agree to do as we do; but there would be no silly illusion as to divine regulation. Vox populi, vox Dei.[43]

---

42 The Titan, p. 234.

43 The Financier, p. 254.

And later commenting on the conventional one-life, one-love idea:

> Life cannot be put into any mold, and the attempt might as well be abandoned at once. Those so fortunate as to find harmonious companionship for life should congratulate themselves and strive to be worthy of it. Those not so blessed, though they be written down as pariahs, have yet some justification. And, besides, whether we will or not, theory or no theory, the basic facts of chemistry and physics remain. Like is drawn to like. Changes in temperament bring changes in relationship. Dogma may bind some minds; fear, others. But there are always those in whom the chemistry and physics of life are large, and in whom neither fear nor dogma is operative.[44]

Thus, for his attempt to force some meaning into his life by seeking to become a financial superman and for his unconventional love affairs, Cowperwood is not blamed. Indeed he is often praised, for he has been true to his instincts. He has ignored the conventional rules which bring disharmony into life. The women in his life are the same. Victims of their own chemical natures, they are not held responsible for their actions any more than Carrie Meeber or Jennie Gerhardt.

But again, this is contradictory. Dreiser explicitly condemns society for the laws which bind these individuals and implicitly blames anyone who makes an avowal to these laws as Edward Butler does. Butler does everything

---

[44] The Financier, p. 261.

in his power to force Aileen to break off her relationship with Cowperwood, even to the point of hiring detectives to seek out their place of rendezvous. In his appeal to her he cites the conventional codes, the beliefs of the Catholic Church and the risk of scandal. Dreiser blames him for this, yet can he be blamed for doing this if he, like the rest, is a mere mannikin? Can society be blamed since, in this naturalistic world, it must also be a tool of forces? Cowperwood and Aileen break all the laws of society: Butler adheres to them. Who is right? Who is wrong? According to Dreiser's logic, nobody is. Our wills are paralyzed so that we do things that we would not do and omit those things that we would do. Dreiser, then, is being inconsistent; he is playing favourites, which a true naturalist should not do.

These denunciations of social mores and Christian ethics would seem to set Dreiser up as a judge, contrary to Parrington's criterion: "a naturalist is not a judge". For, as we have seen, Dreiser judges society and any individual who upholds its moral laws. Again, no one is naive enough to think that a judge will always condemn. When Dreiser says of Frank Cowperwood, "not guilty", he is, in fact, judging both him and the society which has made the indictment against him.

Dreiser has become in these novels less sentimental, less sympathetically involved but he is still not the

detached observer that the definition of naturalism demands. There are still many philosophical comments which mar the naturalistic tone and there is still that same sense of yearning and longing after some spiritual significance to life. Here, as in Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, it would seem to indicate, on Dreiser's part, a dissatisfaction with or at least a lack of faith in his naturalistic philosophy.

Cowperwood, seeking some meaning in life, adopted a philosophy of self-assertion based on his experience with the lobster and squid. "A man, a real man, must never be an agent, a tool...he must employ such."[45] He often appears as a man who is confident that his adopted philosophy is anchor-sure. But this is not true. Sometimes he wonders, or at least Dreiser wonders for him. "He was seeking the realization of an ideal, yet to one's amazement our very ideals change at times and leave us floundering in the dark. What is an ideal, anyhow? A wraith, a mist, a perfume in the wind, a dream of fair water."[46] Cowperwood was often "intellectually uncertain", sorrowing "for life - its tangles of desire and necessity".[47] "Life was surely

---

45 The Financier, p. 85.

46 The Titan, p. 209.

47 Ibid., p. 317.

strange", he thought and he felt that perhaps "by no means had his true aims been achieved."[48] "What, after all, was life, wealth, fame, if you couldn't have the woman you wanted - love, that indefinable, unnamable coddling of the spirit which the strongest almost more than the weakest crave?"[49]

This "love" is certainly not the sexual "chemism" previously discussed. It is of the spirit, as the passage suggests, and Dreiser has mentioned it before:

> The love of a mother for her children is dominant, leonine, selfish, and unselfish. It is concentric. The love of a husband for his wife, or of a lover for his sweetheart, is a sweet bond of agreement and exchange - fair trade in a lovely contest. The love of a father for his son or daughter, where it is love at all, is a broad, generous, sad, contemplative giving without thought of return, a hail and farewell to a troubled traveller whom he would do much to guard, a balanced judgment of weakness and strength, with pity for failure and pride in achievement. It is a lovely, generous, philosophic blossom which rarely asks too much, and seeks only to give wisely and plentifully.[50]

This emphasis on a "love" which is different from mere "chemical compulsion" lifts Dreiser's individuals above the pawns he so often pictures. And it looks forward to the day when he will reject naturalism, in The Stoic and The

---

48 The Titan, p. 430.

49 Ibid., p. 461.

50 The Financier, p. 363.

Bulwark, in favour of a philosophy of brotherly love.

Considering the "wondering uncertainty", the sense of self-will which Cowperwood manifests and the inconsistencies and contradictions in these two novels, one can again call Dreiser a 'reluctant naturalist'.

IV. CLYDE GRIFFITHS: A TRAGIC AMERICAN

What is man that the electron should be mindful of him! Man is but a foundling in the cosmos, abandoned by the forces that created him. Unparented, unassisted and undirected by omniscient or benevolent authority, he must fend for himself, and with the aid of his own limited intelligence find his way about in an indifferent universe.

- Carl Becker, The Heavenly City

IV. CLYDE GRIFFITHS: A TRAGIC AMERICAN

1.

An American Tragedy (1925) is, without a doubt, Dreiser's most ambitious, most artistically successful and his most truly naturalistic novel. Though in this chapter I shall follow my earlier pattern of pointing out inconsistencies within Dreiser's naturalistic framework, they are, quite frankly, insignificant. Gone are the explicit expressions of sympathy, yearning and longing which, in the previous novels, undermined Dreiser's naturalistic position. In this novel he is more artistically sure of himself, is more detached, more an observer and less a judge than in any of his previous novels. In An American Tragedy Dreiser cannot be called a reluctant naturalist; in this novel he is a literary naturalist par excellence.

2.

The story of Clyde Griffiths is the story of the individual subjected to and conditioned by a materialistic world. Clyde is not a Cowperwood, not the extraordinary, unique individual. He is, rather, more like Carrie and Jennie, endowed with no special intellectual or physical

qualities, but meant to be an ordinary, 'average American', for whom, as Gerber puts it, "many fates are possible. What happens to Clyde will happen not only because of the drives with which he has been naturally endowed, but because of the influences which mold him and the direction from which the indifferent winds of chance happen to blow."[1]

The novel is divided into three "Books": the first describes Clyde's childhood and youth in Kansas City; the second describes his later struggles, ending with the accidental murder of his sweetheart; and the third tells of his trial and execution.

Clyde Griffiths' parents are evangelists who operate "The Door of Hope Mission" and we first meet him on a street corner, with the rest of the family, proselytising in an 'open-air' meeting. Clyde inwardly rebels against this type of life, the squalor of the neighbourhood and a religion that keeps them poor. "If only he had a better coat, a nicer shirt, finer shoes, a good suit, a swell overcoat like some boys had!"[2] Like Carrie and Jennie, he forlornly and yearningly views the glittering spectacle, from the outside. As a bellhop in a "swanky" hotel, he has his first real glimpse of the life of the rich. Peeking into a hotel room, he sees

---

1 Theodore Dreiser, p. 134.

2 Dreiser, An American Tragedy (London, 1926), Book I, p. 15.

"young fellows and girls...not so much older than himself, laughing and talking and drinking" and it was like "looking through the gates of paradise."[3] The thought of the money they spent overwhelmed him: "This, then, most certainly was what it meant to be rich, to be a person of consequence in the world - to have money. It meant that you did what you pleased. That other people, like himself, waited upon you. That you possessed all of these luxuries. That you went how, where and when you pleased."[4]

The other bellhops' "larger experience with the world and with the luxuries and vices of such a life", set him "agape with wonder". Overcoming religious or family scruples, he joins them in drinking parties and visits to a local brothel. When his friends invite him for a ride in a "temporarily stolen" car, in a fit of bravado he accepts. The fast ride ends when a pedestrian is struck and the car is wrecked. Panic-stricken and dazed by the accident Clyde sneaks away from the scene and from Kansas City.

> Clyde began crawling upon his hands and knees at first in the snow south, south and west, always towards some of those distant streets which, lamplit and faintly glowing, he saw to the southwest of him, and among which presently, if he were not captured, he hoped to hide - lose himself and so escape - if the fates were only

---

3 Dreiser, An American Tragedy (London, 1926), Book I, p. 45.

4 loc. cit.

> kind - the misery and punishment and the unending dissatisfaction and disappointment which now, most definitely, it all represented to him.[5]

Similar scenes of escape recur throughout the novel. They indicate Clyde's cowardice in the face of responsibility. He never attempts to oppose the forces which would dominate him; he cannot even face them stoically as did Carrie and Jennie. He must, in fact, seek to escape them, to retreat from life.

In Book II Clyde, having been offered a job by his uncle, moves to the small town of Lycurgus where he works at Samuel Griffiths' Collar and Shirt Company. This improves his financial situation but socially he is as badly off as before. For Lycurgus is a town of sharply divided social castes: "...the lines of demarcation and stratification between the rich and the poor...was [sic] as sharp as though cut by a knife or divided by a high wall."[6] His rich relatives are extremely snobbish and rarely invite him to their home. He often walks Wykeagy Avenue, admiring his uncle's lavish residence, "impressed by the significance of so much wealth" and longing to be accepted into such a society. The rare visits that he does pay to the Griffiths' home creates within him a determination to make his dream come

---

5 Dreiser, An American Tragedy (London, 1926), Book I, p. 147.

6 Ibid., p. 255.

true. He dresses well, avoids unfavourable companions, but has to remain content with merely reading the 'society notes' in the local paper and dreaming. Such slow progress in achieving social acceptance dampens his spirits and he allows himself to drift into a clandestine affair with Roberta Alden, a poor country-girl, who works in his office. The affair results in her becoming pregnant.

Ironically, just at this time, Clyde gets his chance to enter his 'dream world', through the favour of a society belle, Sondra Finchley. Their acquaintance is accidental, for on one of his walks down Wykeagy Avenue she mistakes him for his cousin Gilbert. He is as well-dressed and perhaps better looking than his cousin and, although she realizes her mistake, she nevertheless invites Clyde to ride in her car. She subsequently attaches herself to him partly because she feels masterful and superior in his shy presence and partly to spite Clyde's cousin Gilbert, whom she dislikes. Clyde is utterly infatuated with this girl and hopes to marry her, which would mean the fulfillment of his dreams. Sondra gives no definite answer, but leads Clyde on, making him believe that eventually he will be accepted.

But Roberta, who has been mild and yielding, suddenly becomes demanding. After an abortion fails, she demands that Clyde marry her and threatens to expose him to his relatives. When it becomes obvious that she means this, which would destroy any hope of his ever achieving wealth and social

esteem, Clyde thinks of an escape. A chance reading of a newspaper report of a double drowning where neither body was recovered, stirs him to plan an 'accidental' drowning. Promising to marry Roberta, he takes her to a lake resort and persuades her to join him in a boat ride. We never really know whether Clyde, whom we know to be a coward, would have been able to carry through his intended plan to drown Roberta, for accident and chance force the issue.

> At this cataclysmic moment, and in the face of the utmost, the most urgent need of action, a sudden palsy of the will - of courage - of hate or rage sufficient; and with Roberta from her seat in the stern of the boat gazing at his troubled and then suddenly distorted and fulgurous, yet weak and even unbalanced face - a face of a sudden, instead of angry, ferocious, demoniac - confused and all but meaningless in its registration of a balanced combat between fear (a chemic revulsion against death or murderous brutality that would bring death) and a harried and restless and yet self-repressed desire to do - to do - to do - yet temporarily unbreakable here and now - a static between a powerful compulsion to do and yet not to do.[7]

Roberta, puzzled by Clyde's expression, rises suddenly to approach him, capsizes the boat and falls into the water. Clyde fails to help her and crawls ashore, in his mind "the thought that, after all, he had not really killed her". "The effect of this careful description," Charles Walcutt says

> ...is to show that Clyde is not master of his fate, that only under particular conditions is he able to 'choose' the 'evil' course that he desires to carry

---

7 Dreiser, An American Tragedy, Book II, p. 76

> out. He does not really choose to abandon Roberta; it would be more accurate to say that he is conditioned by his weeks of planning so when the situation enables him to overcome his scruples he is carried along by the impetus of this conditioning to commit the act he had planned. Thus from an objective point of view one can hardly blame Clyde for an action in which he was largely a weak and helpless participant.[8]

Book III records the arrest and trial. The actual crime which he is supposed to have committed is only a minor consideration in the course of events which send Clyde to the electric chair. He lives in a world of legal and political traps as much as did Frank Cowperwood. Orville Mason, the prosecuting attorney, for instance, saw the trial as a chance to ensure his political future in the county. The prosecutor's case itself was based as much on Clyde's transgression of sexual morality as on the girl's death. The fact that he was a "singing and praying boy from a mission" caused as much or more scandal and excitement than the trial itself. Just as the newspapers had helped to send Frank Cowperwood to the penitentiary, so with their sensational and highly melodramatic stories of brokenhearted parents and innocent maidenhood, they turned a whole county against Clyde. Added to this is the fact that he had been courting a 'high society' girl (money had changed Sondra Finchley's name to an anonymous "Miss X") while betraying the poor country-girl. Even the Christian churches, to whom Mrs. Griffiths appeals for moral

---

8 American Literary Naturalism, pp. 307-308.

support, are turned against him. The general feeling is summed up by one "irate woodsman": "Why don't they kill the God-damned bastard and be done with him."

Clyde is found guilty and is sentenced to death, convinced of his own innocence: "Because I didn't really kill her. That's right. I didn't." He is certain that his judges had not understood him; had not understood that he was an unfortunate victim of circumstances.

The novel ends with the suggestion that Clyde's tragedy is not unique; it will happen again and again. It is again "dusk of a summer night" and "the tall walls of the commercial heart of the city" close in on a group of missionaries singing and preaching to an indifferent throng of loafers. Clyde's nephew, Russell, while half-heartedly participating, is already responding to the lure of the society which had trapped Clyde. At the very end we see young Russell running toward the corner drugstore and the rest of the missionary group retreating inside the doors of "The Star of Hope Mission." The drugstore, with its lively crowds, smart talk and flow of money would, like Clyde's hotel rooms, merely whet Russell's appetite. In such a society the more one gets, the more one wants. Desire increases desire and is never satisfied. "So long as American society persists in organizing itself the way it has, Dreiser appears to be cautioning the reader, the American tragedies he

portrayed .... will repeat themselves."[9]

3.

An American Tragedy is, in many ways, different in treatment from any of Dreiser's preceding novels and some of the differences account for its being a more naturalistic novel.

It is, first of all, much more objectively written. In his previous novels Dreiser showed us man as a pawn controlled by inexplicable and inexorable forces. But he would also, through interpolated comments, re-iterate this point and remind us that under these circumstances man is not to be judged by conventional standards of morality. In An American Tragedy, instead of explicitly propounding his philosophical tenets, Dreiser dramatizes them. We are not told that Clyde's actions are predictable or inevitable because of social pressures; instead, we are made to see and feel that they are. The whole of Book I, depicting Clyde's early years and development, pictures for us the forces which later cause him to act as he did. Phillip Gerber makes this point very well:

> The sheer weight of detail elaborating Clyde Griffiths' boyhood is precisely what is called

---

9 Gerber, Theodore Dreiser, p. 146.

> for to buttress the actions of books Two and Three, making credible - even predictable - Clyde's actions in the love triangle at the heart of the book.... This book's mass of detail establishes Clyde's personality with such precision that we can chart the boy's reactions to later events with slide-rule accuracy. We know Clyde's hopes, dreams, ambitions. We know Clyde's limitations, blindnesses, fears. We have seen how a carrot dangled before Clyde's hungry eyes will stimulate his salivary glands and set him leaping, and we have seen that a crisis will trigger a rush for escape.[10]

Clyde's actions, then, which result in Roberta Alden's death by drowning are inevitable. He has been forced, Dreiser demonstrates, by his environment and his chemic compulsions to act in this way and therefore he is not to be blamed. "He performs now," continues Gerber, "in precisely the manner one has been led to expect, enhancing the action with an inevitability which neither shocks nor surprises but satisfies a preconceived notion of this new 'waif amid forces'."[11]

The crucial drowning scene, with its skilful blending of motive and accident, is, it may be observed, very similar in treatment to the equally crucial scene in Sister Carrie where Hurstwood steals the money from the safe at Fitzgerald and Moys. As in that scene, the issue of choice is obscured because chance and accident play the key role. "This critical moment in Clyde's life, which might have become a

---

10 Gerber, Theodore Dreiser, pp. 134-135.

11 Ibid., p. 138.

dramatic revelation of the inner man, becomes another example of how chance circumstance entraps the individual."[12] Just as we never know whether Hurstwood would have stolen the money of his own accord, so we never know whether Clyde was capable of deliberate murder.

Dreiser's intensified objectivity is evident in another way. Although no one would label this novel "autobiographical", there are incidents in it which remind one of similar scenes in Sister Carrie and even more of certain autobiographical passages in Dawn. Like Carrie and like Dreiser himself, Clyde Griffiths views the tantalizing world of the rich from the outside, longing to be part of it. The passage, already quoted, describing Clyde peeking into hotel rooms, seeing "young fellows and girls....laughing and talking and drinking", is very similar to that in Dawn where Dreiser catches glimpses into the wealthy homes from which he collected laundry. He thought of those "thousands of girls" who would "deck and primp" for him and his mind constantly "ran forward to the time when [he] should be better placed, when with money jingling in [his] pocket" he would share this life which now he must merely watch.

Where such scenes based on autobiographical detail occur in Sister Carrie or Jennie Gerhardt their personal significance is emphasized by highly personal comments in

---

12 Blanche Gelfant, The American City Novel, p. 91

which Dreiser sympathizes with or attempts to justify the behaviour of his characters. Here, in An American Tragedy, such scenes are presented with complete detachment and without comment.

In the earlier novels, whenever Dreiser portrayed some religious aspect of society he would weaken the objectivity of his description by including derogatory comments and bitter denunciations. In An American Tragedy, where religion plays a dominant part in the life of Clyde Griffiths, Dreiser remains personally detached. When he describes the religious home from which Clyde came, the churches which refused to help him, the fervent religiosity of Clyde's mother and Reverend McMillan who try to save his soul, there are no personal comments. While biographers point out that Dreiser, in his later life, became tolerant of religion and the Catholic Church, it is more significant that here, as a novelist, he has not allowed himself to become involved. He has become an objective observer, is not a judge and thus is more successfully naturalistic.

The sea and animal imagery, so extensively employed in Dreiser's earlier novels, has almost entirely disappeared from An American Tragedy. Dreiser used such imagery in those novels to underscore the naturalistic themes; man is explicitly compared to squids, lobsters and wolves. By using such imagery, however, the author is not observing man as objectively as he might. In An American Tragedy Dreiser

has so skilfully shown the animal-like nature of man, and the animal indifference of society, that the explicit sea and jungle comparisons are no longer needed to emphasize his point.

In achieving this objectivity Dreiser has come very close to the ideals which another great naturalist set for himself. Gustave Flaubert says that an artist should not appear in his work; he should try to observe his characters objectively, try to get inside their souls and see them as they are. Madame Bovary was to be composed "without a single agitated page, and not a single observation of the author....No lyricism, no observations; personality of the author absent."[13]

An American Tragedy seems far more pessimistic than the previous novels. Dreiser describes society in such relentless and consistent detail that the reader is overwhelmed. The lengthy and detailed description of the environmental and social pressures which crush the individual serves its purpose well, for then we see Dreiser's individuals as he really believes they are, subservient to the material forces which shape and guide their destinies. It is as Blanche Gelfant asserts:

> He painted the environment as a fatally irresistible force. His people, caught up in the stream of urban life, and carried along in its rushing currents, are powerless to find their own direction or even to struggle against the running tide. Dreiser assumed that because society set

---

13 Quoted in Horton and Edwards, Backgrounds of American Literary Thought, p. 249.

> up material success as man's highest goal, the individual was helplessly and irresistibly conditioned to pursue it. In inspiring this pursuit, society had of course duped the individual, for it had set before him false ideals and given him a direction that could only lead to spiritual disunity and moral defeat.[14]

The pessimistic tone of the novel is accentuated by the lack of struggle against these social pressures. Telling him how to behave in the courtroom, Clyde's attorney cautions: "You understand, just a pleasant, gentlemanly, and sympathetic manner all the time." "Yes sir, I understand.... I will do just as you say," answers Clyde. He has, in fact, been behaving this way all his life: to his bellhop friends, to his cousin Gilbert, to Sondra Finchley and others. And it has brought him to just this predicament. Much more than this, Clyde has been retreating from all responsibility. In Book I we saw him retreating from the wreck of a borrowed car, hoping to "lose himself and escape". He had hoped to escape his responsibility by proposing an abortion to Roberta Alden. After her drowning he flees into the woods and away from the lake, "making his way through a dark, uninhabited wood, a dry straw hat upon his head, a bag in his hand, walking briskly and yet warily - south - south."[15] And when he is convicted he thinks: "...how blessed to be able to conceal his face upon a pillow and not let anyone see -."[16]

---

14 The American City Novel, p. 88

15 Dreiser, An American Tragedy, Book II, p. 79

16 Ibid., p. 333.

In Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt the characters showed at least some traces of inner strength and dignity in their resignation to the forces which overwhelmed them. Clyde Griffiths lacks any such dignity. He is described as a "moral and mental coward", with a "soul that was not destined to grow up". Such a weak, cowardly creature, maintain many critics, can never be a truly tragic figure. Thus they have questioned the validity of Dreiser's title, An American Tragedy. "An American Tragedy," claims Robert Shafer, "...is more skilfully, faithfully, and consistently executed on the naturalistic level....and precisely for that reason it contains no single element of tragedy in any legitimate sense of the word...."[17] This is a fair indictment, one with which F.O. Matthiessen concurs. Clyde Griffiths, he contends, is not a tragic hero in any classical sense of the word and, moreover, Dreiser "sees man so exclusively as that overwhelmed victim that we hardly feel any of the crisis of moral guilt that is at the heart of the tragic experience."[18]

To be sure, Clyde Griffiths is not a tragic figure in the grand manner of Oedipus or Othello, nor could An American Tragedy be described as "tragedy on the grand scale." It is

---

17 "An American Tragedy: A Humanistic Demurrer", in Kazin & Shapiro, The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 124.

18 F.O. Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser, p. 206.

for Dreiser a tragedy of the human situation; society prevents the individual from achieving the dignity prerequisite to the classical tragic hero. Clyde's tragedy is that "of the individual without identity, whose responsible self has been absorbed by the great machine of modern industrial secularized society."[19]

Although Dreiser does not explicitly deny Clyde any moral responsibility he has shown him so overwhelmed by the social and cosmic forces which surround him that we feel such is his intention. "Clyde had become the prisoner of larger economic, political and social forces in American life about which he knew nothing....those forces having molded his life and then demanding his death-, so the artist implied, had to assume equal responsibility in this 'crime'...."[20] In the same way, though he nowhere explicitly attacks society, it is not difficult to realize that he is implicitly condemning the society which creates and destroys Clyde Griffiths. Robert Elias makes the point very well:

> The indictment implied by the career of Clyde Griffiths was not of Clyde or of nature but of a society in which Clydes were so often inevitable. Not only were obstacles constructed that weaklings could not surmount, but men and women were brought up in an ignorance that assured them they would remain weaklings. It is the attitude and customs of society that force Clyde to embrace Roberta

---

19 R.P. Warren, "An American Tragedy", Yale Review, Vol. LII, 1962-63, p. 14.

20 Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors, p. 360.

> secretly, and it is Clyde's 'ignorance, poverty and fear' that render himpowerless to deal with the consequences of his actions.[21]

Though Dreiser does not state this explicitly, he also seems to hold responsible those persons, such as Sondra Finchley, whose careless acceptance of the responsibility which goes with money and social position is partly to blame for Clyde's tragedy. They are responsible because they allow Clyde to think he is accepted; to think he is actually 'one of them' and then coldly detach themselves, as if they never knew him. The Lycurgus Griffiths family do lend financial support, but only to try and spare their family name and business. Morally and emotionally they withdraw support and remain practically as anonymous as Sondra Finchley. If Dreiser does blame these persons for their behaviour, he is, once more, being contradictory, for they are the tools of society as much as Clyde was. But we must remember that this is a contradiction by implication only, for since the novel is so objectively written it is the reader who passes judgement.

The question remains then: Does Dreiser hold any hope for such a society? Many critics point out the socialistic purpose of the novel in words similar to those of Charles Walcutt: "Dreiser the socialist demonstrates the evils of our society in such a way that may lead the reader

---

21 Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature, p. 223.

to think about correcting them."[22] Perhaps this was Dreiser's purpose, but it seems to me that critics who advocate such a purpose are doing so in the knowledge of subsequent events in Dreiser's life; in the knowledge that he did become an avowed socialist. I feel that this is reading more into the novel than was intended, for, it seems to me, that Dreiser is saying "here is a picture of our society; it cannot be corrected".

The only hope the novel seems to offer is for the individual who can withstand or at least turn a blind eye to the enticements of society. There are two such individuals in An American Tragedy and, ironically, they are both zealously religious. Clyde's mother and the Reverend McMillan, a non-denominational minister who visits Clyde in jail, seem to possess a sense of inner direction akin to that "perfect understanding" which Dreiser talked of in Sister Carrie and which, in that novel, only Mr. Ames attained.

The tragedy of Clyde Griffiths is that there are so many of him. We have seen them in the earlier novels: Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt, George Hurstwood and Lester Kane. Some, like Frank Cowperwood, succeed in erecting a facade and surrounding themselves with a wall of self-delusion but most meekly submit to the forces which dominate their lives. Yet it seems that Mrs. Griffiths and Reverend McMillan are truly non-conformists; they need no facade; they

---

22 American Literary Naturalism, p. 211.

have a sense of inner direction, vague though it be. Neither belongs to an organized church; they are not part of the religion which conforms to the demands of society. They are blind to the attractions of wealth and social esteem. In the dark world which Dreiser pictures they are the only ones who offer hope for the individual. I am not claiming that Dreiser offers this as a solution to the problems of society but it is worth noting that while writing An American Tragedy he told a Los Angeles reporter: "I don't care a damn about the masses. It is the individual that concerns me."[23]

An American Tragedy marks the culmination of Dreiser's effort to write a truly naturalistic novel. The clear delineation of the environmental and social forces which control the individual, without personal comment by the author, who is now more an observer and less a judge, creates a picture of pessimistic determinism of which any literary naturalist would be proud. Dreiser is artistically no longer a reluctant naturalist. But personally he was still dissatisfied with his naturalistic view of life. This dissatisfaction, evident in his earlier novels, finally led to a rejection of naturalism and an acceptance of a quasi-Christian philosophy. The brief chapter which follows will

---

23 Quoted in John Lyndenberg, "Theodore Dreiser: Ishmael in the Jungle", Monthly Review, p. 133.

discuss Dreiser's last two novels which contain his final philosophic statement in which naturalism is finally renounced.

V. SOLON BARNES AND BERENICE FLEMING: NATURALISM REJECTED

'Happy is he who lives to understand,
Not human nature only, but explores
All natures, - to the end that he may find
The law that governs each; ...

Such converse, if directed by a meek,
Sincere and humble spirit, teaches love:

- Wordsworth, The Excursion, IV

V. SOLON BARNES AND BERENICE FLEMING: NATURALISM REJECTED

1. The Bulwark

The twenty years between An American Tragedy and The Bulwark (1945) were spent by Dreiser in a conscious search for an end to his intellectual uncertainty. He abandoned literature to devote himself to this task and the intensity of his search, as described by those who were close to him,[1] was nothing short of fanatical.

F.O. Matthiessen quotes Dreiser as saying in 1934 that he was against "mechanisms" and he talked frequently of the "totality" which "we refer to as the Universe, God, or the vital force". Matthiessen had access to an unpublished essay, "My Creator", in which Dreiser constantly referred to the "design" that he now saw everywhere. "He declared that he was 'moved not only by awe but reverence' for the inevitable Creator of such divine and harmonious patterns."[2]

Most of those who knew Dreiser intimately during those years affirm that, while he did not undergo the conventional religious "conversion", his beliefs about life

---

1 See Marguerite Tjader, Theodore Dreiser: A New Dimension (Norfolk, Conn., 1965).

2 Theodore Dreiser, p. 241.

changed profoundly. He was now gentler and more tolerant of formal religions. He refused to subscribe to any formal doctrine but he believed in a vague sort of pantheism and advocated the universal practice of brotherly love. "What the world needs", he told Robert Elias, "is more spiritual character. The true religion is in Matthew."[3]

It was in this religious frame of mind that Dreiser completed The Bulwark. In it he presents what most critics accept as his final philosophic statement.

Solon Barnes, the hero, is a Quaker who all his life rigidly adheres to the moral codes set down by the Society of Friends. He grows up on the outskirts of Philadelphia, marries the girl of his choice, prospers as a banker, raises a family and is a successful citizen. It is only when his children grow up that he is confronted with problems. They feel restricted by the Quaker religion which specifies "simple dress" as "an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace" and which considers "dancing, singing, music, the theater, show in dress, books and pictures of an entertaining or free character and any undue accumulation of wealth" definitely sinful. The five children resent their father's attempts to make them live by such a code. In the same way that Clyde Griffiths rebelled against a religion that kept him poor and denied him access to that glittering world enjoyed by the other bellhops, so Solon's children rebel. His youngest son,

---

3 W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser, p. 518.

Stewart, like Clyde, is eager for pleasure and soon is living a wild and reckless existence. One of the girls that he and his companions pick up has, unknown to them, a heart ailment. The boys, to make her more susceptible to their advances, drug her coffee and she dies. After they are arrested, Stewart, overcome with guilt and panic, commits suicide.

Not only do his children rebel and turn against him, but Solon works in a Cowperwood world of finance. At the bank "a lust for wealth and power was in the air", yet he is able to keep his hands clean. When he becomes aware of the shady deals, the underhanded tactics his business colleagues use he resigns from his position expressly to denounce his associates and to say that he wants no further part in the kind of acquisitive society they represent.

The behaviour of his children, the death of his son and the unscrupulousness of his business associates make him question his religious beliefs. Was his strict adherence to what he believed worth the estrangement of his children? Could there be a divine purpose in all the tragedies of life? There is a period of doubt but in the closing chapters Solon regains his faith in God through a continual contemplation of flowers, trees and, indeed, all vegetative life. This contemplation leads him to an awakened awareness of the "Creative Divinity" which moves purposefully throughout nature. Walking through his garden he stops and ponders:

> Why was this beautiful creature, whose design so delighted him, compelled to feed upon another living creature, a beautiful flower? ...And now so fascinated was he by his meditations on this problem that he not only gazed and examined the plant and fly, but proceeded to look about for other wonders....Then, after bending down and examining a blade of grass here, a climbing vine there, a minute flower, lovely and yet as inexplicable as his green fly, he turned in a kind of religious awe and wonder. Surely there must be a Creative Divinity, and so a purpose behind all of this variety and beauty and tragedy of life.[4]

Later, walking in the same garden, he encounters a puff-adder about to strike. He talks to it, pacifies it and lets it go its way. He describes the experience to his daughter:

> "I mean that good intent is of itself a universal language, and if our intention is good, all creatures in their particular way understand, and so it was that this puff adder understood me just as I understood it. It had no ill intent, but was only afraid. An then, my intent not only being good but loving, it understood me and had no fear, but came back to me....And now I thank God for this revelation of His universal presence and His good intent toward all things - all of His created world. For otherwise how would it understand me, and I it, if we were not both a part of Himself?"[5]

Solon Barnes dies at peace with the world; his personal integrity has triumphed over his doubts. He has exemplified much the same sort of inner direction which in An American Tragedy only the Reverend McMillan and Mrs. Griffiths

---

4 Dreiser, The Bulwark, (New York, 1946), p. 317.

5 Ibid., p. 319

possessed. His life affirmed "a simple Christian faith, and a kind of practical mysticism, and the virtues of self-abnegation and self-restraint, and the belief in and submission to the hidden purposes of higher powers."[6] Perhaps more significantly, the novel leaves the impression that the example of his life may bring some of his children to a humble understanding of the philosophy by which he lived. Observing him just before he died "they felt... that the Inner Light was truly a reality and was within him, releasing him from the profound misery which had engulfed him."[7]

The interpretation of nature given at the close of The Bulwark in which snakes discover good intentions and flies eat flowers for the good of both is vastly different from that of the fishmarket in which Cowperwood had watched the lobster and the squid. But according to many biographers it gives us an accurate picture of Dreiser's new vision of life. Solon's experience with the puff-adder reflects one which Dreiser himself had had. Robert Elias writes that one day Dreiser was walking near his home. On encountering a puff adder

> ...He had attempted to speak to it reassuringly, saying he intended it no harm. As it... begun

---

6 Lionel Trilling, "Reality in America" in Kazin & Shapiro, The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 143.

7 The Bulwark, p. 316

> to slip away, Dreiser had followed...whereupon the snake had coiled and puffed out its neck again. Again Dreiser had spoken to it, promising he would not harm it, and having stepped back...he had observed the snake then uncoil and come toward him, passing by the toe of his shoe as it had crawled away into the grass. Dreiser had been sure the snake had understood - indeed, Dreiser had soon decided man could talk with animals or birds, perhaps even with the grass and the flowers.[8]

That the philosophy of Solon Barnes is a reflection of Dreiser's new vision of life also becomes apparent when one realizes that in Solon Barnes Dreiser is offering a final estimate of his own father. He had in his autobiographies carelessly labelled his father a religious bigot. Much of his mistaken attitude, he now admitted, had been based on a lack of understanding of his father's personality and his way of life. Helen Dreiser insists that such is the case, and the confession of Etta supports her view. Etta, Solon's youngest daughter, finally "realized...the strain under which they had lived ever since the time she had deserted their home! Her love-seeking youth! Her complete lack of understanding of her father's spiritual ideals."[9] Dreiser had for the first time, claims F.O. Matthiessen "made a sympathetic study of the father image, of its transformation from austerity to loving tenderness. Dreiser seems also to have been aware that his creation of Solon involved in a

---

8 Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature, p. 288.

9 The Bulwark, p. 336.

sense a personal act of forgiveness, since he spoke of dedicating this novel to his own father's memory."[10]

The Bulwark, then, is a rejection of naturalism. The lobster and squid have now been replaced with the flower and fly. Dreiser's animal world is no longer a savage jungle; it is a "peaceable kingdom" where "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid."[11]

In Sister Carrie Dreiser looked forward with yearning to the time when man should be "in harmony with nature". In The Bulwark Solon Barnes is such a man. "The whole book", maintains Charles Walcutt, "asserts that man must be guided - that is, man in modern America - by powerful attachments to an Authority that he accepts on faith. The rigid morality of Quakerism dampens spontaneity and snubs impulse. To the early Dreiser such repression was bad. Now it is good, for it is a discipline that strengthens the will and quickens the spirit. Dreiser had turned from materialistic monism to Christian dualism, from impulse to control, from nature to spirit....Having brooded long and sadly over the materialist's world, he turns away from it in the end."[12]

Granville Hicks supports this view. With this novel, he states, Dreiser sounded "the death-knell of literary naturalism." He claims that Dreiser, like Zola, however

---

10 Theodore Dreiser, p. 248.

11 Isaiah, XII, 6.

12 American Literary Naturalism, p. 248.

enthusiastically he might endorse the theories of Spencer or Darwin, could never in practice limit himself to them.[13]

2. The Stoic

When Dreiser wrote The Financier (1912) and The Titan (1914) he had planned a third volume which would fulfil the prophecies made at the conclusion of the first two. But since these two novels sold so poorly he postponed (for thirty years) the completion of the trilogy. In 1922, during a lag in the writing of An American Tragedy, he commenced work on The Stoic but suspended it to complete the former. In 1926, after An American Tragedy was published, he even took a second trip to Europe to "sightsee" and collect additional material about Yerkes (his model for Cowperwood) whose financial career had taken him to London. But Dreiser kept getting involved in so many other projects that he found little time to finish The Stoic. Obviously he had kept it in mind for he had, in fact, promised to deliver the novel to Liveright in 1935 and had received an advance; in 1937 Liveright sued and Dreiser was ordered to pay $12,789. in default of his agreement.[14] After publishing The Bulwark in 1946 he finally made a determined effort to complete The Stoic but died before he could do so. The final chapter and

---

13 "Theodore Dreiser and The Bulwark", in Kazin & Shapiro, The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 223.

14 See W.A. Swanberg, Dreiser, p. 442.

a half, based on his notes, was completed by his editors and the novel was published posthumously in 1947.

If Dreiser had completed The Stoic when he began it in 1922 or had returned to it immediately after An American Tragedy (1925), it might very well have been a great naturalistic novel. For it was Dreiser's intention that this third part of his trilogy should show that Cowperwood, powerful though he was, would have to bow to the forces of nature. The final volume was to make clear that the superman, the man who believes himself possessed of free will, is as much a victim of forces beyond his control as the weakling like Hurstwood and Lester Kane. The Stoic, as Phillip Gerber remarks, "with its ironic smashing of Cowperwood's dreams...[demonstrating] that Nature, having used her implement to accomplish whatever purpose he was created for, discards him on the rubbish heap" should have been the greatest of the three novels; an extended picture of the fall of Hurstwood.[15]

But Dreiser was now old and apparently lacked the energy and concentration that would have been needed to recapture the naturalistic tone of The Financier and The Titan. More than this, he no longer believed in naturalism; in The Bulwark he had rejected it in favour of a philosophy of universal love.

---

15 Theodore Dreiser, p. 108.

The early part of the book, written in the late 1930's, seems to indicate that Dreiser realized that, in spite of his new beliefs, he was still an artist and that the novel should be naturalistic. Cowperwood, "ruddy, assured, genial, a gardenia in his lapel, gray hat, gray shoes and swinging a cane", is much the same at sixty as he was at forty. He invades London full of ambition, determined to unify and control the subway systems of that city. And he has the beautiful Berenice Fleming as his mistress! The reader, remembering the prophecies of The Financier and The Titan, anticipates a dramatic and detailed description of his successes and a dramatic reversal of fortune. But, with little hint of failure or doom, Dreiser suddenly and arbitrarily 'kills off' his hero with Bright's disease. The reader is disappointed, feeling that Dreiser has artistically failed. What might have been an overpowering image of insecurity, emphasizing the meaninglessness of life, is barely described. For now Dreiser, with his new 'vision of life' has determined to redeem the blankness of Cowperwood's world. He now knew "that the ending would go beyond his original plan, beyond the reflection that all was vanity.... It would now bring forth a redeeming aspect."[16]

This "redeeming aspect" is the spiritual conversion of Cowperwood's mistress, Berenice Fleming, to the mysticism

---

16 Robert Elias, Theodore Dreiser, p. 304.

of Bhagavad-Gita. After four years in India, studying under a Guru, she concludes that "one must live for something outside of one's self, something that would tend to answer the needs of the many as opposed to the vanities of the few." She realizes that Frank Cowperwood's life and her life with him had been meaningless:

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

But she also realized that there was a meaningful way to live. Her "spiritual awakening" enabled her to see this very clearly. "She must go on...and acquire...a real, a deep understanding of life and its spiritual import."[17]

Thus Dreiser "allows his heroine in these closing chapters to leap to pure Spirit, to Brahma, and to the contemplation and realization of Divine Love. And Dreiser too seems to make the leap, because it appears beyond any question that Berenice carries his thoughts and convictions."[18]

Along with The Bulwark, then, The Stoic demonstrates that Dreiser's reluctance to accept naturalism as a final

---

17 The Stoic, p. 305.

18 Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, p. 214

answer to the significance of life has led to a rejection of that philosophy. In the novel "we have no sense of exhaustive documentation, of the patient methodical accumulation of all the facts needed to understand a great personal and social condition. The tired and grainy fragments of the story fall apart. The architectonics of naturalism have disappeared."[19]

Dreiser's career as a novelist has come full circle. In Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt we noted his naturalism beset by inconsistencies; an unconvinced Dreiser is questioning his own beliefs and is feeling with Jennie that "there must be something - a higher power which produced all the beautiful things - the flowers, the stars, the trees, the grass. Nature was so beautiful! If at times life seemed cruel, yet this beauty still persisted. The thought comforted her."[20] In The Financier and The Titan Dreiser is more artistically objective but the yearning and inconsistencies are still there. Only in An American Tragedy, his one truly naturalistic novel, does he achieve complete personal detachment. In The Bulwark and The Stoic he is back where he began, again searching for some spiritual significance to life. The mixture of Quakerism and Hindu mysticism in these novels leaves one with the impression that Dreiser is still as confused as ever.

---

19 Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, pp. 214-217 passim.

20 Jennie Gerhardt, p. 390.

VI. CONCLUSION

VI. CONCLUSION

In this study I have tried to demonstrate that Theodore Dreiser's conception of life was too large to be consistent with or confined to a philosophy of pessimistic determinism. In all his major novels he shows a reluctance to accept naturalism as an absolute and final interpretation of human existence. A scientific approach to literature, in the tradition of Flaubert, Zola and Balzac, abandons, in Dreiser's words, "every hope of an answer to the why of things and has concentrated on the how of what it sees going on about us."[1] And it is the "why of things" that is the haunting question in all Dreiser's novels.

The theory behind Dreiser's major novels is obviously one of biological and social determinism. His characters are driven by bodily processes (impulses and compulsions) and by external conditions (social and cosmic forces) which they do not fully comprehend and cannot resist. He constantly refers to them as 'wisps in the wind', 'waifs amid forces' and 'victims of circumstances'. The whole human struggle seems so insignificant in the light of cosmic

---

1 Theodore Dreiser, "The Living Thoughts of Thoreau" (New York: Longmans, Green, 1939), p. 1. Quoted by Florence Leaver, "Theodore Dreiser, Beyond Naturalism", Mark Twain Quarterly, IX, 9.

vastness, life seems so futile and the characters are so powerless to control their destinies that the novels are extremely pessimistic.

The experiences of his youth, his career as a newspaperman and his reading of Spencer, Balzac and Hardy almost convinced him that a naturalistic philosophy explained life, yet he yearned after some more happy transcendental meaning to it. In the novels, as I have shown, this yearning leads Dreiser into absurd inconsistencies and he often dramatically contradicts the naturalistic philosophy he explicitly propounds. Moreover, his sympathy with and pity for his individuals cause him to become involved, to interpolate his personal feelings into his novels. He does not, as the ideal objective artist supposedly should, annihilate his own personality; when he wrote of the people he observed, tears dimmed his objective vision. His characters are more than human guinea pigs to be studied, analyzed and experimented with. In the final analysis one must agree with F.O. Matthiessen when he writes: "He never really adhered to the pitiless implications of the Darwinian universe. As he admired the strong and sympathized with the weak he became deeply involved with both. As he kept groping to find more significance in their lives than any his mind could discover, he dwelt on the mystery of the inexplicable as no rigorous mechanist would

have done."[2]

In Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, Dreiser's first two novels, we saw the two key figures, Carrie and Jennie, mercilessly tossed about by every wind of chance. Though Dreiser explicitly maintains that they were mere pawns, his dramatic presentation of them makes us feel and hope that such is not ultimately the case. He may tell us that he believes that life has no meaning, but the yearning and searching of characters, which reflects Dreiser's own, does not leave us with the impression of complete hopelessness. We see Carrie and Jennie, in spite of Dreiser's expressed philosophy, as Alfred Kazin states, "though almost crushed by circumstances, nevertheless irreconcilably free of them, [their] freedom made clear in the light of inarticulate longing."[3]

Frank Cowperwood, the hero of The Financier and The Titan, achieves immense success based on a jungle philosophy set forth in the sequence where, as a child, he watches the battle between the lobster and the squid. Yet even when one struggles and wrestles, asserts Dreiser, the end is still oblivion. "In Dreiser's universe...even those who survive to become king of the hill are left without trophy."[4]

---

2 Theodore Dreiser, p. 241.

3 Dreiser, An American Tragedy, Introduction by Alfred Kazin (New York, 1962), p. 18

4 Gerber, Theodore Dreiser, p. 63.

Dreiser intended to show that Frank Cowperwood is no more in control of his destiny than are Carrie and Jennie. But he does not succeed in portraying the dominant and forceful Cowperwood as a victim of forces in these two novels. And since The Stoic, which was to have demonstrated this, fails to fulfil Dreiser's original intention, there is no real basis for denying Cowperwood free will. In these novels, as in the first two, Dreiser's naturalistic philosophy is further confused and weakened by contradictions, inconsistencies and philosophical interpolations which voice a dissatisfaction with a naturalistic view of life and a yearning for some spiritual significance.

In An American Tragedy there are very few contradictions, few undermining factors in Dreiser's naturalistic technique. Dreiser, in the ideal naturalistic manner, has portrayed Clyde Griffiths, the 'average American', as utterly crushed by an indifferent society. Yet even in this novel rays of hope penetrate the darkness of Dreiser's materialistic determinism. Mrs. Griffiths, Clyde's mother, and the Reverend McMillan are impervious to the onslaughts of the social pressures which overwhelm Clyde. Their existence in an otherwise naturalistic novel looks forward to Dreiser's final creation, Solon Barnes.

The Bulwark's Solon Barnes through a belief in a "Creative Divinity" demonstrates that religion, based on anti-materialistic philosophy, can come to terms with an

American society which, in essence, is un-Christian. His triumph is a personal one and, as such, implies that hope for society rests with the individual. The naturalistic philosophy of which Dreiser was "intellectually uncertain" in the early novels, but with which he successfully created his greatest novel, was finally rejected in favour of an equally confused mystical belief in an "intelligent creative force."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES

The first section is a list of Dreiser's novels with dates of first publication and arranged in chronological order. The second section is a list of Dreiser's novels used in other than first editions. The third section lists other works by Dreiser, in the edition used, which have been found indispensable to this study.

1.

Sister Carrie. New York: Doubleday, 1900.

Jennie Gerhardt. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911.

The Financier. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1912. Completely revised edition; New York: Boni & Liveright, 1927.

The Titan. New York: John Lane Co., 1914.

The "Genius". New York: John Lane Co., 1915.

An American Tragedy. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925.

The Bulwark. Garden City: Doubleday, 1946.

The Stoic. Garden City: Doubleday, 1947.

2.

Sister Carrie. New York: Modern Library, 1932.

Sister Carrie. Edited by Michael Millgate. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.

Jennie Gerhardt. Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1946.

The Financier. Revised edition. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961.

An American Tragedy. London: Constable & Co., 1926.

An American Tragedy. Introduction by Alfred Kazin. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962.

3.

Dawn. New York: Liveright, 1931.

A Book About Myself. New York: Fawcett World Library, 1965.

Letters of Theodore Dreiser. Edited by Robert Elias. 3 Vols. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959.

II. SECONDARY SOURCES

This is a selective bibliography. I have listed only books and articles which have been quoted or which have been found very useful in the preparation of this thesis.

1. Bibliographical sources

Brown, Paul A & Messerole, Harrison T., compilers. MLA International Bibliography of Books and Articles on the Modern Languages and Literatures, 1921-63. New York: New York University Press, 1965.

Godhes, Clarence, ed. "Articles on American Literature Appearing in Current Periodicals", in American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography. Published quarterly. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

.....Bibliographical Guide to the Study of the Literature of the United States. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1959.

Jones, Howard M. & Ludwig, Richard M. Guide to American Literature and its Background Since 1890. 3rd edition. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964.

Kazin, Alfred & Shapiro, Charles. "A Selected Bibliography of Dreiser Biography and Criticism". The Stature of Theodore Dreiser. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955.

Spiller, Robert E., et al. Literary History of the United States. 4 Vols. New York: MacMillan, 1948.

Woodres, S.L. Dissertations in American Literature, 1891-1955. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1957.

2. Background

Ahnebrink, Lars. The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction. New York: Russell & Russell, 1961.

Blair, Walter, et al. The Literature of the United States. Chicago: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1957.

Cunliffe, Marcus. The Literature of the United States. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964.

Hicks, Granville. The Great Tradition. New York: International Publications, 1935.

Hofstader, Richard. Social Darwinism in American Thought. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960.

Horton, Rod W. and Edwards, Herbert W. Backgrounds of American Literary Thought. New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1952.

Malone, Dumas, ed. Dictionary of American Biography, Vol. 20. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.

Spencer, Herbert. First Principles. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1902.

Tindall, William York. Forces in Modern British Literature, 1885-1946. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949.

Zola, Emile. "The Experimental Novel" in Modern Continental Criticism. O. Hardison, ed. New York: Century-Crofts, 1962.

3. Biography

Elias, Robert H. Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949.

Dreiser, Helen. My Life with Dreiser. Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1951.

Gerber, Phillip. Theodore Dreiser. New Haven: College & University Press, 1964.

Matthiessen, F.O. Theodore Dreiser. London: Metheun & Co., Ltd., 1951

Swanberg, W.A. Dreiser. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965.

Tjader, Marguerite. Theodore Dreiser: A New Dimension. Norwalk, Conn.: Silvermine Publishers Inc., 1965.

4. Criticism

Berthoff, Warner. The Ferment of Realism, 1884-1919. New York: The Free Press, 1965.

Cowley, Malcolm. After the Genteel Tradition. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959.

....."Not Men" in American Literature: A College Survey. Brown, Clarence A & Flanagan, John T., eds. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961.

Gardiner, Harold C. Fifty Years of the American Novel. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952.

Geismar, Maxwell. "Theodore Dreiser: The Double Soul". Rebels and Ancestors. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1953.

Gelfant, Blanche. "Theodore Dreiser: The Portrait Novel". The American City Novel. Norman, Oklahoma: Oklahoma University Press, 1954.

Howell, Eileen. "Theodore Dreiser's Development as a Naturalist". Unpublished M.A. Thesis, New York University, 1950.

Kazin, Alfred & Shapiro, Charles, eds. The Stature of Theodore Dreiser. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955.

Lynn, Kenneth S. "Theodore Dreiser: Man of Ice". The Dream of Success. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1955.

Millgate, Michael. American Social Fiction. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1965.

Parrington, Vernon L. Main Currents in American Thought. Vol. III. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1930.

Rascoe, Burton. Theodore Dreiser. New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1925.

Rideout, Walter Bates. The Radical Novel in the United States. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956.

Schneider, Robert W. "Theodore Dreiser: The Cry of Despair". Five Novelists of the Progressive Era. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.

Shapiro, Charles. "A Critical Study of the Novels of Theodore Dreiser". Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Indiana University, 1959. Later published as Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962.

Snell, George. "Theodore Dreiser: Philosopher". The Shapers of American Fiction, 1798-1947. New York: Cooper Square Publishers Inc., 1961.

Spiller, Robert E. The Cycle of American Literature. Toronto: The New American Library, 1963.

Taylor, Walter F. The Story of American Letters. Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1956.

Thorp, Willard. "The Presistence of Naturalism in the Novel". American Writing in the Twentieth Century. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.

Trilling, Lionel. The Liberal Imagination. New York: Viking Press, 1951.

Wagenknecht, Edward. "Theodore Dreiser: The Mystic Naturalist". Cavalcade of the American Novel. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965.

Walcutt, Charles. "Theodore Dreiser: The Wonder and Terror of Life". American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956. Previously published as "The Three Stages of Theodore Dreiser's Naturalism", PMLA, LV, 266-289 (March, 1940).

Whipple, T.K. Spokesmen. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963.

Willen, Gerald. "Dreiser's Moral Seriousness: A Study of the Novels". Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. University of Minnesota, 1955. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms.

Wilson, Edmund. The Shock of Recognition. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1955.

5. Periodicals

Ahnebrink, Lars. "Dreiser's Sister Carrie and Balzac". Symposium, VII (November, 1953), pp. 306-322.

Becker, George T. "Theodore Dreiser: The Realist as Social Critic". Twentieth Century Literature, I (October, 1955), 117-127.

Geismar, Maxwell. "Dreiser and the Dark Texture of Life". American Scholar, XXII (Spring, 1952), 215-221.

Goodfellow, Donald M. "Theodore Dreiser and the American Dream". Six Novelists. (Carnegie Series in English, No. 5). Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute of Technology, 1959.

Kwiat, Joseph J. "The Newspaper Experience of Crane, Norris and Dreiser". Nineteenth Century Fiction, VIII (Sept., 1953), 490-493.

Leaver, Florence. "Theodore Dreiser, Beyond Naturalism". Mark Twain Quarterly, IX (Winter, 1951), 5-9.

Lyndenberg, John. "Theodore Dreiser: Ishmael in the Jungle". Monthly Review, VII (August, 1955), 124-136.

Millgate, Michael. "Theodore Dreiser and the American Financier". Studi Americanus, VII (1961), 133-45.

Phillips, William. "The Imagery of Dreiser's Novels". PMLA, LXXVIII (December, 1963), 572-585.

Richman, Sidney. "Theodore Dreiser's The Bulwark: A Final Resolution". American Literature, XXXIV (1962-63), 229-245.

Ross, W.O. "Concerning Dreiser's Mind". American Literature, XVIII (1946), 233-246.

Sillen, Samuel. "Notes on Dreiser". Masses & Mainstream, VIII (Dec., 1955), 12-19.

Steinbrecher, George, Jr. "Inaccurate Accounts of Sister Carrie". American Literature, XXIII (Jan., 1952), 490-493.

Warren, Robert Penn. "An American Tragedy". Yale Review, LII (Oct., 1962), 1-15.

Williams, Phillip. "Chapter Titles of Sister Carrie". American Literature, XXXVI (1964-65), 359-365.

Wilson, William Edward. "The Titan and the Gentleman". Antioch Review, XXIII (Spring, 1963), 25-34.