

T. K. Whipple.

“Theodore Dreiser.”

*New Republic*, 46

(March 17, 1926),

113-115.

---

Dreiser is one of those writers who are said to have historical importance, one of those trail-breakers, that is, who make a deep impress on their own time and who are known to later generations by reputation, but by reputation only. Dreiser's force and originality—great-

ness is not too strong a word—must become only more obvious with the passage of years; but surely that greatness will be taken more and more on faith. The labor of reading him, with the sense it brings of a grinding despair, as of being pursued in a nightmare over endless wastes of soft sand, is an experience, however profitable, that is too painful to be sought out by normal humanity.

To take the full measure of Dreiser's achievement, one must remember that *Sister Carrie* appeared in 1900 and *Jennie Gerhardt* in 1911, and that among the most popular and typical novels of those years were *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, *Graustark*, and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. No wonder that from the first Dreiser was treated either to invective or to apologetics, and that his apologists dwelt on his intentions and on his personal qualities almost to the exclusion of his work. At least, at a time when fiction was a kind of confectionery, he was not facile, conventional, pretty and optimistic: at least, he meant well. And the critics who approved of his purpose—to tell the whole truth about American life as he saw it, even though he saw it as unpleasant—could not afford, in the bitter war being waged with the censors and the moralists, to question his literary success. Furthermore, his granite-like steadfastness and integrity, his insistence on seeing for himself, were so striking and so admirable that it was natural to praise the man and forget the novelist.

All Dreiser's virtues are as evident as ever in *An American Tragedy*; if they no longer shine quite so brilliantly and all-sufficingly, it is doubtless because the contrasting background has disappeared, owing in part to the lesson which Dreiser has himself taught. Fif-

teen years ago, *An American Tragedy* would have been a portent; now it is another of Dreiser's novels, much like its predecessors. More successful than *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and the "Genius", less successful but also a more difficult undertaking than *Sister Carrie* or *Jennie Gerhardt*, it marks a return rather than an advance, a return from high finance and high society, from elaborate études de mœurs and minute accounts of social machinery, to the sort of topic which Dreiser is best fitted to handle: the sordid and pathetic story of a midwestern boy of the lower middle class whose weakness lands him in disaster. It shows development only in that Dreiser tries to reach higher emotional levels and greater intensity than he has attempted heretofore. Otherwise, it is another manifestation of his familiar merits and defects: in other words, it is a novel no other living American could have written—and also, probably, one which no other would have written.

*An American Tragedy* could have been written only by a man of unusual power and magnitude. Even on the harshest critic Dreiser's novels must leave an impression that the author has a kind of greatness. The cause of this impression and the source of Dreiser's greatness I take to be his emotional endowment—not so much an intensity as a tremendous, steady, unfailing flood of feeling. He is distinguished from ordinary men by extraordinary strength and volume of passion. Chiefly it shows itself in his tragic sense, in his profound consciousness of the tragedy inherent in all existence, in the very scheme of things—tragedy inescapable, essential, universal, perceived by man, but by very few so overwhelmingly felt. His brooding pity penetrates all life as he sees it, touching every human being.

from the most glittering superman to the forlornest prostitute, as in *An American Tragedy* it touches everyone from the bellboys of the Green-Davidson Hotel in Kansas City to the rich and beautiful Sondra Finchley, social leader of Lycurgus, New York. Especially acute is his perception of man's endless capacity for suffering, a trait which lends dignity to even the weakest and most contemptible of Dreiser's creatures, even to the elder Griffiths, the streetpreaching derelict who is the hero's father in *An American Tragedy*, just as Clyde's mother, for all her grotesqueness, in her grief for her son illustrates Dreiser's saying that "sometimes even the mediocre and the inefficient attain to a classic stature when dignified by pain."

Dreiser's emotional capacity shows itself not only in his tragic sense but also in his zest, his unflagging relish for actuality and his feeling of its mystery. His is a romantic love of reality, charged with wonder and awe. His love of life, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, is omnivorous; because it is all strange, to him it is all exciting. To a curiosity so voracious and an interest so insatiable as his, nothing whatever seems dull or tiresome. Hence come his amazing faculty of observation and his relentless heaping up of detail; hence also, therefore, the epic sweep often and rightly attributed to his novels, which have the range and vastness pertaining to any minute record of an enormous area of human life. This gusto, however, not content with imparting scope to his work, leads him into trouble, for because of it he can resist no temptation to wander off into by-paths and tedious digressions. Because he can bring himself to leave out nothing, he piles up mountains of pointless minutiae, irrele-

vant and insignificant, and produces an intolerable tedium. He can never learn to omit, for his latest novel is as over-weighted as his earlier; on page 78 of the second volume Clyde commits the murder which really ends his story; he is captured on page 145; his trial drags along to his conviction on page 330; and his execution takes place on page 405. Not even *The Financier* so abundantly illustrates Dreiser's ability to make ten pages do the work of one. His emotion, when it shows itself as all-inclusive love of reality, is a source of weakness as well as of strength.

Yet even these vast talus-heaps of detail are stirred by the tides of passion which surge under them. Somehow, in spite of everything, Dreiser manages to communicate something of his feeling, which burns, though dimly and feebly, even through the slag and dross of his writing. If many readers regard his emotionality as merely sentimental, it is partly because the childish crudity of his expression lends an appearance of falsity. When the "Genius" exclaims "What a sweet welter life is—how rich, how tender, how grim, how like a colorful symphony" and the author adds "Great art dreams welled up into his soul as he viewed the sparkling deeps of space," it is difficult, but also I think necessary, to believe that words so inadequate and so false could be called forth by true emotion. *An American Tragedy* contains some two hundred pages like the following:

But, God, what was that?  
Oh, that terrible sound!  
Like a whimpering, screeching spirit  
in this dark!  
There!  
What was it?  
He dropped his bag and in a cold sweat  
sunk down, crouching behind a tall, thick  
tree, rigid and motionless with fear.

That sound!

But only a screech-owl! He had heard it several weeks before at the Cranston lodge. But here! In this wood! This dark! He must be getting on and out of here. There was no doubt of that. He must not be thinking such horrible, fearful thoughts, or he would not be able to keep up his strength or courage at all.

But that look in the eyes of Roberta! That last appealing look! God! He could not keep from seeing it! Her mournful, terrible screams! Could he not cease from hearing them—until he got out of here anyhow?

Finally the author's agitation grows insufferable in the chapters devoted to Clyde's experience in the death house, which rival a Hearst paper's account of a popular murderer's last agonies. Dreiser's understanding of Clyde, his pity and sympathy, his remarkable imaginative power, are rendered all but vain by the terms in which they are expressed, terms which disgust fully as much as they move the reader.

Most of Dreiser's warmest champions, such as Mencken, grant that he cannot write, grant that he has no narrative sense and no sense of words or of style, that he is prolix and irrelevant, that his sentences are worse than chaotic, that he violates English and even American idiom; these foibles, however, they regard as but petty irritations which must be overlooked. But how can such writing be negligible? Dreiser could not write as he does, mixing slang with poetic archaisms, reveling in the cheap, trite and florid, if there were not in himself something correspondingly muddled, banal and tawdry. Furthermore, since a writer works through words alone and words are his only means of communication, a failure in writing is necessarily a failure in communication—and of Dreiser's failure the best that can be said is that it is

incomplete. Somehow he contrives to give a sense of reality and veracity, as of a tremendous story which actually happened told by an inept, loquacious stut-terer, himself deeply stirred, who sometimes unintentionally misrepresents the facts. In *An American Tragedy* he has particularly difficult problems in carrying the reader's belief—that so feeble a creature as Clyde would prove a social success and carry out a murder. I cannot doubt Clyde's story in the main, but I cannot believe that it happened precisely as Dreiser has recounted it.

Dreiser's characterization suffers, and must inevitably suffer, from his incapacity to handle words. As in *The Financier* and *The "Genius"* he asserts that his heroes are brilliant and irresistible, yet shows them as vulgar dullards because he is unable to write good conversation, so in *An American Tragedy* he misses success because he cannot so use language as to communicate intense feeling. Not that the reader is unaffected—but the disparity between the author's perturbation and the inadequacy of his expression is almost grotesque. If Clyde and Roberta and the rest were not half concealed by a deluge of inept verbiage, *An American Tragedy* might well be one of the world's great novels.

Perhaps Dreiser's incompetence in the management of his medium is partly accounted for by the striking resemblance of his writing to the world which he depicts, a world chaotic and tawdry, without plan, purpose, or sense, lacking even the rudimentary organization of a wolf pack, a world offering no valid reasons for living, no reward which would appeal to a rational or civilized being, no prize save an economic success which can buy only physical lux-

ury, inane display and vulgar snobbery. It is a brutal world, a free-for-all of personal aggrandizement, no more humane than the aboriginal jungle of sabre-toothed tiger and woolly elephant, a world seeking meretricious and gaudy in the absence of genuine satisfactions. Not only futile and wasteful, it is also tragic and passionate, for its inhabitants are endowed with desires and possibilities for which it affords no possible means of fulfillment. The strongest and coarsest are dissatisfied victors; the weak mill helplessly about, kicked and trodden upon. Dreiser's books are the stammering utterance of this pathetic and flashy disorder trying to speak.

Similarly, one might say that Dreiser's philosophy is this world trying to think. Being able to conceive nothing else, he assumes that human life everywhere has always been and must always be like the life he has himself known at first hand. His thought is simply a formulation of the beliefs which he has discerned in the practice of those about him. The official and avowed creed of his world—the taboo morality and silly ostrich-like optimism with which it oils the wheels of progress—he never tires of attacking; but the creed implicit in its actions he has exalted into universal philosophy. He regards human existence as inevitably a bestial anarchy never under any circumstances capable of yielding better gratifications than the joy of fighting, sensual pleasure, and the parade of money. For all his onslaughts on the pious camouflage with which his compatriots conceal their motives and doings even from themselves, he has essentially accepted American life as he found it in the midwest of his younger years. He has felt and experienced his world too fully to be able to detach him-

self from it and try it by any other standards than its own. He has identified himself with it, and the union has brought forth the misbegotten Leviathans of his novels. Through this union he has taken into himself and so into his art the anarchy and the cheap barbarity of his surroundings.

Yet what a tremendous emotional pressure has gone into this identification, what power of realization! Of that power, the basis of life as well as of literature, surely Dreiser has more than any other living American. Furthermore, in the making of this vital contact with American life, Dreiser was the first, the pioneer. Herein lies the debt which all other writers owe to him—herein lies his greatness and his significance. No doubt it was necessary that someone should be sacrificed by being merged and sunk, and that he was chosen was Dreiser's fortune and misfortune. His real achievement is to be found in the work of others, work which he has helped make possible. And his contribution is not to literature alone; he has done more, directly and indirectly, than any other individual to rouse Americans to a consciousness of what American life is like and if an American civilization ever emerges, Dreiser's share in its making will not be small. That is what it is to have historical importance. Perhaps it is more than being a good novelist.