

# The Records of an American Claimant

## THEODORE DREISER

American Diaries 1902-26.

Edited by Thomas P. Riggio,

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By ALFRED KAZIN

**T**HEODORE DREISER began these diaries in 1902 as a daily medical record, on the advice of a Philadelphia physician who had offered to cure his continuing "neurasthenia" after the failure of "Sister Carrie." Dreiser typically ascribed his troubles to "mental exhaustion from past excesses both of the sexual passion and mental labor." There is nothing here about what went into his once shocking first novel, nothing of the cuts he and his wife, Jug, made to make the book more publishable in the highly restrictive atmosphere of 1900, nothing of Frank Doubleday's refusal to promote the book when he found he could not get out of his contract with Dreiser. Nor is there anything about his relations with Jug, from whom he was to separate in 1910, about how close he came to suicide in 1903, about his ideas and hopes for the novels he would soon write — "Jennie Gerhardt," "The Financier," "The Titan," "The 'Genius.'" "

But Dreiser makes a humble and typically ill-written statement in February 1903, after describing his poverty and desperate mental state: "After writing the above I read in my chair in my room until six o'clock, feeling that I might as well use my time to improve my knowledge of current novels since I shall want to be writing another one myself some day."

What he generally put down here is an unrelievedly crass but oddly fascinating account, sometimes hour by hour, of his daily activities. He tells just when he got up, with whom he spent the night, that he bathed and shaved, where he went for breakfast and how much less he paid last week for breakfast at another joint, how many hours he spent on a story or article, how much he withdrew from the bank. Many of the entries are so self-absorbedly factual about eating, drinking, lovemaking and the cost of living that they take on a horrid interest. He notes that toilet paper is up 10 cents from the previous week and deplors that in 1917, at Nickells' on 97th Street, "4 Scotch highballs cost us \$1.40!" What he particularly notes is the "round" he had in the early afternoon with "Bo," the round he had a few hours later with "Lill," and his need to keep both from knowing about "Louise."

The boast of these diaries, which often read like a stud book interspersed with a record of daily expenditures, is that he was amazingly outside himself and his feelings. This was not really so, of course; he had recovered from his early breakdown and, though still hard up, was delighted to find that his growing literary reputation attracted women — especially if they shared the conviction (this was Greenwich Village, 1917-1918) that sex was necessary to his, and sometimes their, literary labors.

These diaries by one of the most-powerful novelists of the century have no intrinsic literary interest. They are so crude and even illiterate in style (the assiduous editor has bravely retained Dreiser's many misspellings, as well as footnoting the many mistresses and literary folk of the time) that they may well provoke

Alfred Kazin is at work on "An American Procession," a book about American writers from Emerson to Eliot.



Theodore Dreiser.

scorn among Dreiser's detractors.

Nevertheless, a novelist's diary is usually not so much a confession as an unwitting display — and practice — of narrative method. Stendhal, Gide, Woolf made superb books of their daily doings; Evelyn Waugh's is as deliberately limited as Dreiser's. But all these diaries, even when they leave out much we would like to know, reproduce the writer's professional habit of mind and gift of observation. Dreiser's is no exception.

Dreiser was crude, inadequately educated, often brutal (particularly as his confidence grew) in his contempt for both the leaders and victims of American society. But one has only to read "Sister Carrie" and "An American Tragedy" to know that what he put into his greatest characters was a vulnerability he saw as central to their destinies. The "tragedy of desire" (a phrase he uses here in an unusually generous note about a jealous mistress) found in him a perpetually starved and complaining soul. Many poor boys harshly brought up have "made it" by making themselves over; what is amazing about Dreiser is that the artist was always more intelligent, more interesting, more human than the man.

Dreiser the man was a perfect example of what Mark Twain called an American "claimant." He was one of your perpetually starved, rancorous, bigoted victims who usually hide their hatreds in the crowd. He did not have any money until "An American Tragedy" (1925), when he was in his middle 50's, and he had no real love in his life until he settled down with his second cousin, Helen Richardson, in 1919. He was not able to marry her until Jug died in 1942 and he was in his 70's. Jarring as his sexual record book is, his whining over every nickel and dime he spends, Dreiser reminds one of Hurstwood at the end of "Sister Carrie," just barely keeping his head above water.

In Savannah, Ga., 1916: "A bad day. Not very warm but bright. Breakfast at Plaza. Chicken Liver Omelet. Go to bank. Check hasn't come. No letters at P.O. . . . Eat at Geigers. . . . 30 cents is too much for pie, sandwich and milk. . . . This is a dull life for me. I despise life without a woman. Bed at ten P.M. Very cold in room. Put overcoat on in bed & wear old gray coat in bed. Still can't keep warm. . . . Feel lonely & wish for company, male or female. See how I live, day after day, with scarcely a word with anyone. The curse of life is loneliness."

His hunger for women Dreiser might have ascribed to his early feelings of being unattractive and unsuccessful. Here he doesn't ascribe it to anything — he just wants what he wants and even plainly enjoys letting the woman he lives with know that he is "playing" with another. Though the clinical style of the diary virtually precludes general statement, it is obvious from the most interesting section of the book — written in Greenwich Village during the First World War — that Dreiser felt sanctioned by the intellectual unrest of the time and place, with its revolt against "puritanism" and the dizzying way in which the liberated women of the day flocked to him in admiration of his work and sympathy for his many difficulties. He generally managed to combine a love affair with editorial help.

Dreiser felt about his many affairs as he did about his lifelong recoil from American good cheer — he had no choice in the matter. Life just took hold of him and dealt with him as it liked. He had been brought up in the strictest immigrant Catholicism, and like so many writers who came to fruition in the 20's, he had a horror of established religion. "Always life is no good,"

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he writes in 1917, "a horrible nothing." He submitted gratefully to every fresh claim by "science" that determinism was the answer to his intellectual questions.

Dreiser's belief that human beings are essentially passive is a clue to the dreaming inarticulateness of his characters and the extraordinary rhythm of fact he got into his best scenes. On a boat taking him from New York to Savannah, he noted that "nothing is more interesting to me than just the silent passing of moods in the mind, hour after hour, day after day, year after year though nothing is said. . . . I know life to be more or less of a perfect scheme of things (as good as well can be) as bad as I know it to be." The banality of this needs no comment. But Dreiser's conviction that human beings are always at the command of their "moods" actually gives a haunting forcefulness to his preoccupation with such detail. And it is here that the diaries, for all their clinical self-absorption, reveal the novelist who had nothing to say about his

own novels or other people's novels. He was relentless.

Greenwich Village, November 1917: "Go to corner and mail letters. Take 6th Avenue L to 53d and 8th and get off and walk to 518 West 52d (Day and Company). They sell me one gallon cider for 50c. Take 10th Avenue car to 42d and 10th and walk over to 9th and 42d. Take 9th Avenue to 14th. Get off, and carry jug to Petronelle at 303 West 4th. She is out. Stop in saloon and have one more gin rickey (25c). Come here. Find note in mailbox from Lewisohn saying he's been here. Write him and say I couldn't be here. Post these notes. Cold is making me feel wretched. Call up Bert. We decide to meet at Kloster Glocke. I go over on 8th Street car. Meet Bert going in. Upstairs we run into Lewisohn and his wife. Have to invite them over to our table. We talk of books and plays. She congratulates me on *The Hand of the Potter*. A mess of a woman. A Western, narrow, puritan turned semi-liberal and trying to seem worthy of her husband." ■