

JEROME LOVING



# *The Last Titan*

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*A Life of Theodore Dreiser*

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duty except to label him a scamp.<sup>40</sup> (This family episode no doubt influenced Dreiser in the writing of the scene in *An American Tragedy* where Roberta Alden is similarly lectured by a doctor who performs abortions for more socially prominent citizens.) Later, when it became clear that Ashley was never to be seen again, Paul Dresser returned on one of his saving visits, though this time the family spirits were resistant to the usual effect of his glorious descents. It may have struck poor Sylvia as wickedly ironic—surely it did her precocious brother Theo—that Paul was now famous for the song, “The Letter That Never Came.”

Sylvia was mortified and angry. She may have tried to abort her fetus with various medicines, a vial of which her prying brother Theo had found hidden in one of her bureau drawers. Like Mame when she was threatened with becoming an involuntary mother, Sylvia had hidden the fact from her parents as long as she could. When the secret was finally out, Sarah—to avoid the raised eyebrows and stares of her Warsaw neighbors—quickly sent her daughter to New York, where Sylvia waited out her pregnancy at Emma’s flat on West Fifteenth Street. The infant, who was named Carl Dreiser, was soon sent to Warsaw because Sylvia did not want him. Dreiser remembered the five-month-old’s “endless care.” The man who would remain childless never forgot the infant’s “constant wailing” and the many hours he had been assigned to “‘mind’ it.” The family pretended to neighbors that the child was just another belated sibling, but their ears were burning with their neighbors’ gossip. Later, Dreiser described his nephew as “an extremely sensitive and ruminative child whose life was darkened by an intense and almost pathologic desire for affection which he never received” from his mother.<sup>41</sup> Around the same time, a third daughter, Theresa, broke up with her lover and arrived in Warsaw in tears. She, at least, had not become pregnant.

When Dreiser was in ninth grade, Sarah moved her enlarged family across the street to a brick house of fourteen or fifteen rooms known as “Thrall’s House.” Although it had ample room, it had no indoor plumbing, merely an outhouse covered over with grapevines. Even though John Paul was working and contributing what he could afford, there simply wasn’t enough money coming in. Having to support unwed daughters, however temporarily, and occasionally having to host the unwelcome Rome, Sarah found it necessary to find cheaper quarters and more space. Yet the house had a garden and fruit trees, and young Dreiser, lost in his own adolescent world of romance and reading, absolutely loved living there. At least he remembered it that way in *Dawn*.

At this time Dreiser encountered another teacher who was to stand out in his memory. Tall, gangling, and with protruding teeth, Mildred Fielding had grown up as poor as her student in the mill town of Malden, Massachusetts, but had managed to escape the poverty of her youth and become a teacher. At thirty-five or so, she was unmarried and considered in those days “an old maid.” Whereas the already divorced May Calvert may have been physically, as well as pedagogically, attracted to Dreiser, Mildred Fielding was more professional in her attentions and perhaps even more insightful in detecting her student’s extraordinary talent. Having come from an unstable family herself, she could empathize with Dreiser about his embarrassment over family scandals. One day, she pulled him aside and told him, “I can see that you are not like the other boys and girls here. You are different, Theodore. Very sensitive. Your mind is very different.”<sup>42</sup> She warned him not to become distracted by the petty gossip of Warsaw society, which sometimes targeted Sarah and her family—advice that no doubt contributed to Dreiser’s later disregard for social standards when it came to his private life or sexual behavior.

Miss Fielding was not alone in perceiving Dreiser’s difference from the other students. “A small paper I wrote in our literature class—a description of a local scene—brought me direct encomiums,” he remembered. He was even encouraged by the superintendent of schools in Warsaw, “a lean, pedagogic, temperamental and enthusiastic man” who advised him to read Shakespeare. Miss Fielding also encouraged his hunger to learn, which far surpassed her other students’ willingness to study for the usual social rewards. Like most great artists, his genius consisted of being a generalist about life. “Life,” he said, “did not appeal to me so much on its technical or purely structural and trade aspects as it did on its general forms and surface appearances.” He was made, he thought, to be a general, albeit close, observer of life—“of the form and motion of things, their effect upon and import to the individual as well as society at large.”<sup>43</sup> Yet it was not until many years later that he even dreamed of becoming a writer. In the long interlude, he fretted over his lack of a particular skill or talent with which to support himself.

Despite the fact that Dreiser’s reputation for being somehow gifted now went beyond the family and was even acknowledged by his peers at school, he decided to quit and go to work. Without influential family connections in a small town such as Warsaw, however, his chances for success in any line of business were sharply limited. Furthermore, his family’s dubious reputation wouldn’t have helped advance him locally. To escape his family’s

Chicago. By 1889 preparations were underway for the city's world's fair to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of the New World. When the celebration, which held up grand visions of the coming twentieth century, arrived a year late in 1893, the excitement was such that no one seemed to notice. At the same time John D. Rockefeller was turning a small Baptist school into the University of Chicago, and Yerkes was taking his streetcar lines to the West and North sides. The young Dreiser was not alone in imagining that one—almost anyone—could actually rise and take part of this material splendor, if only he were good enough or smart enough.

Yet for Dreiser, the most poetic sight remained that of his mother, now in her mid-fifties—overweight and graying—and long divested of “the delicacy of her youth.” To her son, however, her soul shone through as sweetly as “any girl’s.” Dressed in her modified “Moravian habit of black, with the nun-like collar,” she moved from the dark of early morning to the dark of night about their rented rooms performing her “servant-like labors.” The character of “Sister” Sarah would contribute to the portrait of “Sister Carrie,” the girl next door whose innocence is lost in the crush of the mundane. Carrie never stops dreaming of a better life even when down, but Sarah’s hopes for a “superior home” were fading away by this time. To some extent, despite the sympathy he could feel for him, Dreiser blamed his father. “I can see him now,” he bitterly recalled, “in his worn-out clothes, a derby or soft hat pulled low over his eyes, his shoes oiled (not shined) in order to make them wear longer, . . . trudging off at seven or eight every morning, rain or shine, to his beloved mass.”<sup>10</sup> He took to religion, his son thought, the way others took to drink or drugs.

Even as he felt sadness at his parents' plight, their brightest son was also beginning to look at their never-ending dilemma philosophically, matching it up with life around him, its twists and turns of fate that seemed to order success or failure for no apparent reason. Curiously, indeed almost perversely in view of his family's failed dreams, he began to think that life was more dramatic than any fiction could paint it. He worked on at Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett & Company with no real future in sight until the summer of 1889, rising six days a week at 5:45 A.M. and getting home at dusk. The working conditions were marked by poor ventilation, and his weak lungs were hurting from cleaning out dusty bins. His health, he told a friend back in Warsaw, was “decidedly” poor.<sup>11</sup> Then, reminiscent of Paul's jubilant appearances out of nowhere during bleak times, Dreiser relates in his autobiography that relief and salvation now arrived in the person of Mil-

dred Fielding, his teacher in Warsaw. She had become a principal in one of Chicago's outlying high schools, but she had not forgotten the dreamy boy in Warsaw who so impressed her with his intellectual curiosity and obvious potential. Hearing that the family had relocated to Chicago, she went to Flourney Street, where she found Sarah. She had an idea, a plan, that had perhaps been simmering in her mind since the Warsaw days.

Miss Fielding was prepared to send her former student to college and, as reported in *Dawn*, to pay all the expenses. "Now Theodore," she said to him after going to the warehouse and drawing him aside, "I have come here especially to do this, and you must help me. I have the money." He was to attend the Indiana State College in Bloomington, her alma mater; she knew its president personally and would see that Theodore was admitted as a special student in spite of the lack of a high school diploma. In the published autobiography, Dreiser remembers being offered a "year or two," but the manuscript version says "one year," which is probably right. He wrote in both the manuscript and the published version that Fielding agreed to pay the yearly tuition of \$200 and provided her scholar with a monthly allowance of \$50 for room, board, and all other expenses. This intervention of an English teacher in the development of literary genius, however, may be as much romantic fancy and distorted memory as fact. Much earlier than the composition of his autobiography, he remembered it differently. Writing to a friend in 1901, he said that while working at the hardware store, "I discovered I could go to college for a year for \$200, and made an arrangement with a friend of mine to advance me half of this. The rest I earned and in 1889 adjourned to Bloomington."<sup>12</sup> Though the friend may well have been Mildred Fielding and he may have gained admission through her intervention, this is a more mundane rendition. Whatever the case, Sarah ruled that he could expect no family support for such an enterprise, even though she must have been delighted that, unlike his siblings, her son was—for a while at least—finding an intellectual way out of the workaday world.

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Whenever he reflected on his year at what is now Indiana University, Dreiser wrote in *Dawn*, "I have to smile, for aside from the differing mental and scenic aspects of the life there as contrasted with what I had left, its technical educational value to me was zero, or nearly so." But this is perhaps best seen as the bitter reflection of one to whom college was barely avail-