DREISER'S UTILIZATION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL IN HIS NOVELS

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DREISER'S UTILIZATION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL

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PREFACE

I first became interested in Theodore Dreiser's utilization of autobiographical material while doing two term papers on the novelist in the fall semester of 1957. The novels which I read at that time showed what I considered to be unmistakable utilization by Dreiser of materials from his own life. I decided then that a detailed study and analysis would be interesting and profitable. In this study I have attempted to show to what extent the novelist used the biographical material in his fiction.

In doing this thesis, I have used as a basis the novelist's autobiographies, A Hoosier Holiday, A Book About Myself, and Dawn. These books are Dreiser's factual accounts of himself, and they have proved to be enlightening. In addition, I have used My Life with Dreiser by Dreiser's widow, Helen Dreiser, a person who knew the author better than anyone else. I have found Mrs. Dreiser's book especially helpful in the study of her husband's last years. The above-mentioned sources have been used to trace the autobiographical line through five of Dreiser's novels: Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, The "Genius," An American Tragedy, and The Bulwark. I have attempted to show that in the first four novels Dreiser uses episodes from his life and characters from his circle of acquaintance, and that the fifth novel shows his arrival at a final compassionate phase in his philosophy.

I wish to thank Dr. Cecil B. Williams, my adviser, for helping me choose the subject and for his invaluable assistance and meaningful suggestions throughout this study; Dr. Clinton C. Keeler for helpful

criticisms as my second reader; Mr. Alton P. Juhlin for obtaining for me materials which were not available in the Oklahoma State University library; and to my wife Johnnie Faye for both tangible and intangible assistance and for showing me the truth of Euripides' statement, "Man's best possession is a sympathetic wife."

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CHAPTER I

Dreiser, Autobiography, and the Work of Art

When Theodore Dreiser was a young man about ready to begin his writing career, he was perplexed by the materials that his contemporaries were producing. As he read their literature, he felt that they were dealing with those phases of sweetness and beauty, success and goodness, that he rarely encountered in his daily experiences.[1] In fact, his spoken reaction was, "Perhaps, as I now thought, life as I saw it, the darker phases, was never to be written about."[2] It was the "dark texture of life"[3] which he had felt in his own experiences that he was concerned about--and which he sought to show as he began to write. The problem of this thesis is to determine how Dreiser used these autobiographical materials to create fiction. This problem must be introduced, however, by a discussion of three areas: (1) the background of Dreiser, (2) a treatment of the utilization of autobiographical materials by other novelists to show the relationship between autobiography and fiction, and (3) the present status of the problem as evidenced in scholarly publications.

Dreiser was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on August 27, 1871, the twelfth of thirteen children of Paul and Sarah Dreiser. His father was a fanatical German Catholic who tried to impose his beliefs upon his

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[1]Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York, 1922), p. 491.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Maxwell Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors (Boston, 1953), p. 292.

children. As a result, Dreiser ultimately came to hate all forms of traditional religion.[4] A good portrait of the elder Dreiser is presented in Dawn (1931), the author's autobiography:

> I have described my father as a religious enthusiast. At that time [Theodore's childhood] he was a morose and dour figure, forlorn and despondent, tramping about the house, his hands behind his back and occasionally talking to himself. One of his worst phases was the conviction that there was refuge in religion, more and more self-humiliation before a Creator who revealed himself only through the forms and ceremonies of the church. He believed implicitly that the least neglect or infraction of such forms and ceremonies as were ordered by the church was sufficient to evoke disfavor or at least neglect on the part of the Universal Ruler. This being true, the rather indifferent religious conduct of his wife and children was sufficient to convince him that they were evil to a degree and in need of driving.[5]

Mrs. Dreiser, on the other hand, was very different. She looked with understanding upon her children and their reactions against their father's strict Catholicism. She was of Mennonite background but gave up her religious affiliation when she married the elder Dreiser. She was an even-tempered woman who sought to understand her children's transgressions.[6] She was not well-educated, but she made painful sacrifices so that her son Theodore could read and study. In fact, she could read little and could not write at all until Dreiser and his sister Trina[7] began school and taught her. But she had a sympathetic understanding of this different child.[8] Dreiser devotes many flowery passages to acquainting the reader with his mother. There was truly a deep love between the two:

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[4]Clifton Fadiman, "Dreiser and the American Dream," The Nation, CXXV (October 19, 1932), 364-365.

[5]Theodore Dreiser, Dawn (New York, 1931), p. 25.

[6]Malcolm Cowley, "Sister Carrie's Brother," New Republic, May 26, 1947, p. 24.

[7]Dreiser gave his sisters "for reasons of my own" fictitious names.

[8]Dawn, p. 53.

As I think of mother, she reminds me of a pale, spindling flower left to vegetate in a dark room, yet earnestly struggling to reach the light. Yet her efforts were so groping, and for the most part futile: not sufficiently retroactive, alas, and yet in the main so like nature's own. To her very last year, indeed, and in spite of a marked physical if not mental degeneration, she sought to retain her enthusiasm for life, an enthusiasm lovely because altogether child-like in quality. It was not that she personally wished to appear so well before the world as that she strongly desired to have her children succeed in a definite way, since, alas, and as she now knew, neither the understanding nor the direction of herself or their father had been sufficient to aid them to any great extent.[9]

As far as material wealth is concerned, Dreiser came from the wrong side of the tracks. His family was poor and was looked down on socially. They moved from house to house--city to city--always seeking to become more successful, more respectable.[10] Dreiser's father often did not follow the remainder of the family as they moved from place to place. But the novelist tells us in Dawn that

. . . my father, the moment he appeared on the scene, and with his usual zeal for the welfare of our souls, sought out the nearest German Catholic church and forthwith enrolled the entire family as communicants. Think of a man who had already made a botch of his life, a man whose theories of prevailing justice and reward had been gainsaid and battered by every form of accident and circumstance, being so deeply concerned over the immortality of not only his own soul but the souls of others![11]

The imposing of the old man's religion ultimately severed any contact with the church that young Dreiser might otherwise have had. Even by the time he had reached the age of ten, he had grown weary of religion. Any religiosity on his part at this time was prompted by fear. He tells of volunteering to pump the organ pedals for the church services so that he would not be expected to participate otherwise. But even in that concealed place behind the organ, when the Host was elevated, he felt the

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[9] Ibid., p. 188.

[10] James T. Farrell, "Theodore Dreiser: in Memoriam," Saturday Review of Literature, January 12, 1946, pp. 16-17.

[11] Dawn, p. 127.

compulsion to kneel--"not because I felt it to be so sacred or spiritual a moment but because of the fear that if I did not I might die in the act of committing a mortal sin and so be consigned to eternal fire."[12]

As a child, Dreiser saw little but failure, poverty, defeat. He thought about the world and travel as he and his brother Ed had to pick up coal from between the railroad tracks and as they stole it from the cars.[13] Finally, when he entered the seventh grade, Dreiser was relieved to be from under the domination of a Catholic school. His father was not living with the family in Warsaw, Indiana, at the time, and an older brother Paul persuaded Mrs. Dreiser to enter the three youngest children, Trina, Theodore, and Ed in a public school.[14] At this time

> . . . Dreiser was shy, innocent and emotional, and if his instructors had been sufficiently imaginative they would have caught him, perhaps, in their celestial mouse-trap. He spent his earlier years, as he recalls them, in a nebulous dream, scarcely dispelled until he had passed out of his teens. Very early he was on fire with the sweet mysteries of sex, though his bashfulness long kept him virginal.[15]

The first book that was to influence Dreiser came into his possession during these formative years. A peddler, who later became enamored of Amy, Dreiser's sister, came to the door selling Hill's Manual of Etiquette and Social Forms. Although it sold at $3.50, a large sum in those days, Mrs. Dreiser was persuaded to buy it. She was willing to do anything that she thought would help her children. Dreiser found the book to be a fascinating and illuminating one. And he was engrossed with it any time he

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[12] Ibid., p. 129.

[13] Ibid., p. 262.

[14] Ibid., p. 189.

[15] Robert L. Duffus, "Dreiser," American Mercury, VII (January, 1926), 72.

could get it from Trina's clutches.[16]

As he went into his teen-age years, he got a brighter glimpse of the outside world, from which poverty concealed him, as he saw his sisters Amy and Janet in fur coats flutter out for carriage rides into the big city.[17] Actions on the parts of his wayward sisters created much tension in Dreiser's home life. Old Dreiser often turned on his wife with the reprimand, "It is you, with the way you think and the excuses you make for them, that are the cause of all our troubles with our children!" Such an exclamation always started a new argument. And then for hours at a time, there would be charges and countercharges.[18]

That the Dreiser family was always moving--house to house, city to city--has been mentioned. It was these repeated moves, with their resulting differences in experiences, that furnished Dreiser with an education.[19] He became accustomed to such a life and one day, at the age of seventeen, decided that he could not endure the boring life in Warsaw any longer. He announced to his mother that he was going to Chicago to secure a job.[20] Things did not turn out quite so well as Dreiser had expected. There he became a dishwasher in a Greek restaurant, a checker in the freight yards, a hardware clerk, a laundry driver, a real estate agent, while he began to learn about the slums, the vices, the secret workings of the great city. "Was there no end to the subtlety and depravity of people?"[21]

Before long, Mrs. Dreiser and the two youngest children were reunited

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[16] Dawn, p. 104.

[17] Fadiman, p. 364.

[18] Dawn, p. 203.

[19] Literary History of the United States (New York, 1953), revised edition, p. 1200.

[20] Dawn, p. 294.

[21] Geismar, p. 289.

with that part of the family that had migrated to Chicago.[22] But Dreiser was making no progress in the big city. It was about this time that Miss Fielding, one of his former high school teachers in Warsaw, appeared and suggested that he attend the University of Indiana. She knew that he was dissatisfied with his position with the hardware company, and she was willing to pay all his expenses for one or two years so that he could discover if he had any particular aptitude. She told him, "You are too young, really, to know the importance of finding yourself. A year or two at college, if it doesn't do anything else, will make you think."[23] He was finally persuaded, but after having been in the college surroundings almost a year, he was unable to detect much value: "I began to realize that outside of general impressions and a somewhat less vague understanding of colleges and the character of the men who thought them valuable, I was no further than when I came."[24]

Early in life Dreiser had partially given up his church affiliation when it seemed that he must either discontinue it or the reading of books.[25] In fact, his father was so vehemently opposed to his thirst for knowledge that he often told his son, "You will go to hell with your books. You will come to some bad end with them."[26] But it wasn't until he entered newspaper work, beginning with the Chicago Globe in 1892, that he

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[22] Dawn, p. 312.

[23] Ibid., p. 369.

[24] Ibid., p. 456.

[25] Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York, 1952), p. 283.

[26] Helen Dreiser, My Life with Dreiser (New York, 1951), p. 290.

completely severed all connections with Catholicism.[27] It was John Maxwell, a copy reader for the Globe, who influenced Dreiser in formulating a philosophy of life. When he tried to show his appreciation for the much-needed assistance of Maxwell, the young newspaperman was advised:

"Cut the gentle con work, Theodore. I know you. You're just like all other newspaper men, or will be: grateful when things are coming your way. If I were out of a job or in your position you'd do just like all the others: pass me up. I know you better than you know yourself. Life is a God-damned stinking, treacherous game, and nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of every thousand are bastards. I don't know why I do this for you," and he cut some more of my fine writing, "but I like you. I don't expect to get anything back. I never do. People always trim me when I want anything. There's nobody home if I'm knocking." . . . I stared, nervous, restless, resentful, sorrowful, trying to justify myself to life and to him.[28]

One can imagine what an influence such a theory of life would have on such a young person--and especially on one so naive as Dreiser. And for a time he "was still sniffing about the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes, expecting ordinary human flesh and blood to do and be those things."[29] But before long, he was reading Herbert Spencer, Huxley, Tyndall, Balzac, and others.

Hitherto, until I read Huxley, I had some lingering filaments of Catholicism trailing about me, faith in the existence of Christ, the soundness of his moral and sociologic deductions, the brotherhood of man. But on reading . . . and discovering that all I deemed substantial--man's place in nature, his importance in the universe, this too, too solid earth, man's very identity save as an infinitesimal speck of energy or a "suspended equation" drawn or blown here and there by larger forces in which he moved quite unconsciously as an atom--all questioned and dissolved into other and less understandable things, I was completely thrown down in my conceptions or non-conceptions of life.[30]

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[27] Wagenknecht, p. 283.

[28] A Book About Myself, p. 59.

[29] Ibid., p. 70.

[30] Ibid., pp. 457-458.

After this break with religion, however, Dreiser was in a state of despair. In a sense, he was like the Apostle Paul before his conversion. The difference was that for him no light shone on the Damascus road.[31]

From that time, and possibly before, Dreiser insisted that he was unable to make up his mind about anything and expected to die confused and dismayed. His entire life seemed to be a search, at the end of which he expected to find the "why" and "wherefore" of life.[32] This passage helps the reader to understand his philosophy:

> I can make no comment on my work or my life that holds either interest or import for me. Nor can I imagine any explanation or interpretation of any life, my own included, that would either be true--or important, if true. Life is to me too much of a welter and play of inscrutable forces to permit, in my case at least, any significant comment. In short, I catch no meaning from all I have seen, and pass quite as I came, confused and dismayed. Life cannot be put into any mold, and the attempt might as well be abandoned at once.[33]

Dreiser, after leaving the Globe, continued his newspaper work in St. Louis, Toledo, Pittsburgh, and New York. While employed by the St. Louis Republic, he was sent, along with twenty-five young schoolmistresses who had been chosen as favorites in a state teachers' popularity contest, to the World's Fair in Chicago. He was to act as traveling correspondent for the Republic. It was his duty to report the daily events in the lives of this charming group. While on the Chicago trip, he first met Sallie White, one of the teachers, who was to become his first wife.[34] He immediately fell in love with Miss White and she with him. By the end of 1898, he felt

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[31]Duffus, p. 74.

[32]Wagenknecht, p. 283.

[33]Theodore Dreiser, as quoted by Oscar Cargill in Intellectual America (New York, 1941), pp. 107-108.

[34]A Book About Myself, p. 233.

that he was financially able to marry "Jug," as he nicknamed her. He was somewhat dubious about entering into matrimony with this lady who was five years his senior, however. He felt that he might not be ready to remain with one who was so conventional as she.[35] Dreiser's closing comments in A Book About Myself (1922) are:

> Four years later, having by then established myself sufficiently to pay the rent of an apartment, secure furniture and convince myself that I could make a living for two, I undertook that perilous adventure with the lady of my choice--and that, of course, after the first flare of love had thinned down to the pale flame of duty. Need anything more be said? The first law of convention had been obeyed, whereas the governing forces of temperament had been overridden--and with what results eventually you may well suspect. So much for romance.[36]

As Dreiser had feared, the marriage did not work out well. He was a struggling young writer by that time. He found Jug unsympathetic with the type of writing he was trying to do and also much too possessive, too domineering. Before long, he wanted to be free of her.[37] However, the marriage dragged out for several years, with many separations. Finally, by 1914, they were permanently separated, and Dreiser was freed from constant reminders of his obligations. Jug would not consent to any kind of divorce, but he was glad to be unattached.[38]

In September, 1919, Dreiser met his young cousin Helen Richardson, with whom he enjoyed a long pleasant relationship.[39] Not long after their meeting, they began to live together.[40]

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[35]Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature (New York, 1949), p. 95.

[36]A Book About Myself, p. 502.

[37]Elias, pp. 122-123.

[38]Ibid., p. 170.

[39]Helen Dreiser, p. 3.

[40]Ibid., p. 26.

By 1925, Dreiser had written the last novel that he was to write until in 1944 when he decided to finish The Bulwark and The Stoic. In 1926, dissatisfied with the conditions about him, Dreiser and Helen visited Europe. In 1927, he was invited by an official of the USSR to visit Russia. He accepted the invitation and arrived there on November 7, 1927.[41] He returned to America very much impressed:

> He simply approved what seemed to coincide with his view of man's nature and rejected what did not. He liked the fact that Russia distributed the wealth and recognized the possibilities of the human mind freed from dogma. He liked the improved working and living conditions, the social approach to knowledge, the easy rules concerning divorce and marriage, and the feeling that Russia had a plan.[42]

As a result of his visit to the Soviet, for the next ten years, Dreiser led in a series of specific social causes, the purpose of which was to help the underdog.[43] He served as chairman of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, a committee set up to oppose political persecution, lynchings, and deportations of labor organizers, to inform the public, and to help workers to build their own organization.[44]

Dreiser also proposed an American League for National Equity, which would benefit societies like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. His purpose in proposing such a league was to convene those who were in a position to demand social justice. He proposed that the oppressed should come together, discuss their problems, and present society with a collective demand.[45]

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[41] Elias, pp. 234-235.

[42] Ibid., p. 236.

[43] Ibid., p. 242.

[44] Helen Dreiser, p. 224.

[45] Elias, p. 267.

A fitting climax to Dreiser's life came in the spring of 1944. He received a letter from Dr. Walter Damrosch, president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, in which he was told that once every five years the Academy presented to an American novelist the Award of Merit Medal, together with a cash prize of one thousand dollars. The Academy president continued with the announcement that Dreiser had been chosen for such books as Sister Carrie, An American Tragedy, Twelve Men, and others, as well as "for his courage and integrity in breaking trail as a pioneer in the presentation in fiction of real human beings and a real America."[46]

Dreiser showed his devotion for and appreciation of Helen when he later presented the medal to her with the words, " . . . it is as much yours as mine. I want you to have it. I am only sorry you were not with me when I received it."[47]

Dreiser and Helen were married on June 13, 1944, after having lived together twenty-five years. Jug's death had occurred on October 1, 1942, thus making possible this marriage for "convenience sake," as Dreiser called it.[48]

Not long before his death, Dreiser joined the Communist Party. He was asked whether he intended to submit to party discipline or whether he planned to conduct himself as he always had. His reply was that he would

say what he pleased whenever he pleased, and that if the party did not like that, they could throw him out. He did not care. He was interested

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[46]Helen Dreiser, p. 295.

[47]Ibid., p. 298.

[48]Ibid., pp. 296, 299.

only in their objective, which seemed to him selfless in a way that proved of greatest advantage to the greatest number of selves. . . . The principles of communism were, as the Dean of Canterbury had explained, like the principles of Christ. "What the world needs is more spiritual character," Dreiser said. Then he added: "The true religion is in Matthew."[49]

Dreiser died at his home in Hollywood on December 28, 1945, of a kidney disease. He left his entire estate to his wife, but he requested that upon her death she should bequeath whatever was not given to designated relatives to some home for Negro orphans.[50]

The second area to be discussed is the relationship of autobiography and fiction. The problem of explaining a work of art in relation to the life and circle of acquaintance of the author has long been one of the best-established methods of literary study. However, new schools of thought, for instance the ideas expressed by René Wellek and Austin Warren (1949), have sprung up:

> And this [that a person cannot draw any valid inference as to the biography of the writer from his work] is true not only of dramatic characters in a novel but also of the "I" of the lyrical poem. The relation between the private life and the work is not a simple relation of cause and effect. . . . Even when a work of art contains elements which can be surely identified as biographical, these elements will be so rearranged and transformed in a work that they lose all their specifically personal meaning and become simply concrete human material, integral elements of a work. . . . Even when there is a close relationship between the work of art and the life of the author, this must never be construed as meaning that the work is a mere copy of life. A work of art may rather embody the "dream" of an author than his actual life, or it may be the "mask," the "anti-self" behind which his real person is hiding, or it may be a picture of the life from which the author wants to escape. Furthermore, we must not forget that the artist may "experience" life differently in terms of his art; actual experiences are seen with a view to their use in literature and come to him already partially shaped by artistic traditions and preconceptions.[51]

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[49] Elias, p. 306.

[50] Ibid., p. 308.

[51] René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York, 1949), pp. 70-72.

But although they advance the above ideas, they do not try to prove that the autobiographical-centered study has no value. They admit that still there are what they choose to call

> connecting links, parallelisms, oblique resemblances, topsy-turvy mirrors. The poet's work may be a mask, a dramatized conventionalization, but it is frequently a conventionalization of his experiences, his own life. If used with a sense of these distinctions, there is use in biographical study. First, no doubt, it has exegetical value: it may explain a great many allusions or even words in an author's work. The biographical framework will also help us in studying the most obvious of all strictly developmental problems in the history of literature--the growth, maturing, and possible decline of an author's art. Biography also accumulates the materials for other questions of literary history such as the reading of the poet, his personal associations with literary men, his travels, the landscape and cities he saw and lived in: all of them questions which may throw light on literary history, i.e., the tradition in which the poet was placed, the influences by which he was shaped, the materials on which he drew.[52]

Wellek and Warren have pointed out in this passage that the type of endeavor that we are concerned with will illuminate a work of art. Its full relevance to the study of Dreiser is yet to be determined. Perhaps looking at the views of Thomas Wolfe, Willa Cather, and Somerset Maugham, writers who admit the importance of the autobiographical element in fiction, will also be useful.

Of all American novelists, Wolfe is reputed to be the most heavily autobiographical. In fact, when he wrote Look Homeward, Angel, some of his former associates were outraged. They felt that he had betrayed his family, his friends, the South, and his hometown, Asheville, North Carolina. Their feelings were vented in bitter letters; some even threatened to ride him out of town on a rail if he ever dared to enter Asheville again.[53] Wolfe at one time wrote:

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[52]Ibid., p. 73.

[53]Edward C. Aswell, "An Introduction to Thomas Wolfe," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Richard Walser (Cambridge, 1953), p. 104.

It has been said of much that I have written . . . that it was autobiographical. I cannot answer such a very debatable and complicated word in the short space that is allotted here and I shall not attempt to. I can only say that it seems to me that every creative act is in one way or another autobiographical.[54]

F. David Martin (March, 1955) brings into view that Wolfe bitterly resented the implications of the common indictment which is quoted in the preceding passage.[55] He quotes Wolfe as saying that "all serious creative work must be at the bottom autobiographical"[56] and that "a man must use the material and experience of his own life if he is to create anything that has lasting value."[57]

Because the relation of autobiography to art was one of Wolfe's most difficult problems, he argued quite fluently about it. He considered the experiences of the author to be that person's "clay of life."[58] And he believed that, and this is probably his best-known comment on the problem, "Fiction is not fact, but is fact selected and understood, fact arranged and charged with purpose."[59]

In order to camouflage the use of autobiographical materials more effectively, a writer sometimes changes the sex of his main character. This Willa Cather did in her novel, My Ántonia. She told her story through the eyes of Jim Burden, but gave to Jim the exact sequence of experience which she had lived. In her childhood, Miss Cather was taken from a historical

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[54]Thomas Wolfe, "Something of My Life," The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Richard Walser (Cambridge, 1953), p. 6.

[55]F. David Martin, "The Artist, Autobiography, and Thomas Wolfe," Bucknell Review, March, 1955, p. 15.

[56]Thomas Wolfe, as quoted by F. David Martin in "The Artist, Autobiography, and Thomas Wolfe," Bucknell Review, March, 1955, p. 15.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Martin, p. 16.

[59]Wolfe, as quoted by Martin in "The Artist . . . ," p. 16.

community in Virginia to a remote Nebraska ranch. She derived a great deal of pleasure from roaming the prairie like an Indian. She was fascinated by the frontier land into which she was transplanted. She ran errands to the sod huts and dugouts of her Bohemian, Russian, German, and Scandinavian neighbors. These things Jim also experienced. Also, like Jim Burden, Miss Cather rode her pony twelve miles to get the mail for her family and neighbors.[60]

Mildred R. Bennett (1951) cites a misconception that an unnamed literary critic had concerning Miss Cather. That critic felt that the novelist first had to overcome the "Nebraska in her" in order to advance as one of America's foremost writers. Mrs. Bennett contends that hardly any statement could be farther from the truth:

> It was the "Nebraska in her"--her childhood among the many-tongued pioneers and homesteaders of Webster and Franklin counties, her roamings on pony-back over the tough long prairie grass, and her education, or revulsion to it, in a bustling, wooden-sidewalked prairie town--it was all this that left its indelible mark on almost everything she wrote in later years. And it was this that caused her to complain, in those later years of world-wide fame, that Nebraska--"that country--was the happiness and the curse" of her life.[61]

Miss Cather herself maintained that when the novelist deals with material that is deeply a part of his conscious and subconscious being he has less and less power of choice about the moulding of it:

> It seems to be there of itself, already moulded. If he tries to meddle with its vague outline, to twist it into some categorical shape, above all if he tries to adapt or modify its mood, he destroys its value. In working with this material he finds that he has little to do with literary devices.[62]

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[60] Walter Havighurst, "Prairie Life in My Ántonia," My Ántonia by Willa Cather (Boston, 1949), p. xiii.

[61] Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (New York, 1951), p. xi.

[62] Willa Cather, as quoted by Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom in "The Genesis of Death Comes for the Archbishop," American Literature, XXVI (November, 1954), 479.

Somerset Maugham is a contemporary British writer who is reputed to have relied heavily on autobiographical material in his novels. In The Summing Up (1938), he reminds the reader that the book is not an autobiography nor a book of recollections. He goes on to say that an autobiography is not necessary because he has used whatever has happened to him in the course of his life in one way or another in his writings. His comments are apropos of the relevance of the autobiographical to his works:

> Sometimes an experience I have had has served as a theme and I have invented a series of incidents to illustrate it; more often I have taken persons with whom I have been slightly or intimately acquainted and used them as the foundation for characters of my invention. Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other. It would not interest me to record the facts, even if I could remember them, of which I have already made a better use.[63]

In Of Human Bondage, he utilizes much autobiographical material. The book is not an autobiography, however, but an autobiographical novel. In it the writer has mingled fiction and fact. The book carefully reveals Maugham's emotions, but not all of the experiences of the hero are from the author's life. Instead, some are borrowed from intimate friends. Maugham made Of Human Bondage a vehicle which purged him of his painful as well as his happy recollections. He said, "I put into it everything I then knew and having at last finished it prepared to make a fresh start."[64]

Thus, from the ideas of three leading novelists, it is apparent that the autobiographical often figures significantly in a work of art. Not only can it provide the material from which an artist may begin, but he can make it relevant artistically by revealing the values that are inherent in his material. These things Theodore Dreiser has tried to do. Walt

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[63] W. Somerset Maugham, The Summing Up (New York, 1938), p. 1.

[64] Ibid., pp. 191-192.

Whitman's phrase, "I was the man, I suffered, I was there"[65] is applicable to Dreiser. His novels disclose the life and experiences of their author. Of this man, Robert E. Spiller says, "Of all American novelists, Dreiser limited himself most sternly to what he knew of life through his own experience . . . "[66]

The third area requires only relatively brief discussion. This study is a pioneer venture, it seems. It examines Dreiser's novels for their autobiographical content rather than for strict literary values. As has been brought out, the importance of such an endeavor is an age-old question but is one which many people consider to be of little relevance; therefore, not much work has been done on the subject. Statements to the effect that Dreiser utilized the autobiographical are profuse. But the vagueness of those statements increased in the searcher a desire to pursue a study of how he used such materials. Before I settled upon my subject, I ascertained that a detailed study had not been done. The chief sources I consulted are as follows: James Woodress, Dissertations in American Literature, 1891-1955; the bibliography of Dreiser in Literary History of the United States, Vol. III; Lewis Leary, Articles on American Literature, 1900-1950; and the PMLA annual bibliographies since 1946.

I feel that a person can better understand and appreciate a work of art if he is made aware of how the experiences of the novelist contributed to the work. The purpose of this thesis is not to show that Dreiser's fiction is indistinguishable from autobiography. Rather, I intend to analyze

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[65]Walt Whitman, as quoted by Van Wyck Brooks in "Theodore Dreiser," University of Kansas City Review, XVI (Spring, 1950), 188.

[66]Literary History of the United States, p. 1198.

in detail the use that Dreiser made of experiences and acquaintances in constructing five important American novels: Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, The "Genius," An American Tragedy, and The Bulwark. I have not included the Cowperwood novels, the so-called "trilogy of desire," The Financier, The Titan, and The Stoic. Although these novels are important, they are not relevant to my subject.

CHAPTER II

Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt

When Dreiser asked for a position on the Toledo Blade in 1894, he met Arthur Henry, the city editor, who was destined to become a strong influence in the writer's life. Although Henry could not help him at the time, he was favorably impressed with Dreiser. After the two men became better acquainted, the editor insisted that Dreiser was wasting his talent in newspaper work. Later, in 1899, the Dreisers were house guests of the Henrys in the little village of Maumee, near Toledo. While there, Dreiser was finally persuaded to begin to write short stories. And before long, to please Henry, he began to think about doing a novel. Eventually, and not apropos of anything in particular, he took a piece of paper and wrote the title Sister Carrie.[1] This was the beginning of his first novel, which was finished in 1900.

After writing Sister Carrie, Dreiser came under the influence of another friend, Frank Norris. Norris had already published McTeague, was newly married, and was working to support his wife by reading for Doubleday, Page, and Company. While working there, he read Sister Carrie. He thought that he had found a masterpiece. Since he was interested in discussing the use that he and Dreiser had made of naturalism, Norris arranged an appointment with the novelist. However, the meeting revealed that their methods differed somewhat. Dreiser insisted that he had not

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[1]Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature (New York, 1949), pp. 66, 103-104.

read Zola at the time he wrote Sister Carrie.[2] He said that he had to write the way he did or keep silent.

Norris was Dreiser's big backer at Doubleday and kept insisting that his book must be published.[3] He finally won over the two junior partners, Henry Lanier and Walter Hines Page; and they signed a contract even though Doubleday was in Europe. After arriving home and reading the book, Doubleday refused to publish it. He summoned Dreiser to a meeting, and Dreiser went but not before Norris advised him to stand on his rights.

The book was published but unattractively in a cheap red cloth binding with dull black lettering. Only 1008 copies were printed. Of that number, the company sent 129 for review, and only 465 were sold.[4] The sale of the book was not urged. "A person couldn't say that it was killed; it was merely deprived of light and air and left to die."[5]

In the novel, Caroline Meeber is an eighteen-year-old girl at the beginning of the story. She boards a train which is headed for Chicago. She is described as "bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth."[6] She is planning to live with her sister and brother-in-law, the Hansons, and find work. While on the train, the naive Sister Carrie, as her family affectionately calls her, meets Charles Drouet, a traveling salesman. Before she leaves the train, Carrie has agreed to meet Drouet at a later date.

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[2]Malcolm Cowley, "The Slow Triumph of Sister Carrie," New Republic, June 23, 1947, pp. 24-25.

[3]Ibid., p. 25.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (New York, 1917), p. 1.

Upon arriving at her sister's home, Carrie finds everything quite different from her expectations. She learns soon that if she cannot find a job, she cannot expect to stay there. She decides that she will not allow Drouet to see her in such surroundings as the Hansons' dull flat and informs him by letter that the engagement must be postponed. It is not until she becomes ill and loses her job in the shoe factory where she worked for awhile that she sees him again. Carrie becomes distressed because she is unable to find a job. She cannot help herself; she needs winter clothing; she cannot find a job; and without a job, the Hansons will turn her out. So she allows Drouet to buy clothing for her and to set her up in an apartment. She has no love for him; she yields herself to him only because she craves a winter coat, new shoes, gloves, and other things--the petty vanities of a young girl who for the first time realizes that men find her pretty.

As Drouet's mistress, Carrie soon meets George Hurstwood, the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's Bar--a married man and the father of two children. During Drouet's periodic business trips, Hurstwood looks after Carrie. Before long, he is madly in love with her. One night he tricks her into eloping with him by pretending that he is taking her to Drouet who has been seriously injured. They go to Montreal. The reader would think that Carrie would have been sufficiently oriented by now to know that there could be no legal marriage between her and Hurstwood. However, she is still naive and believes in him when they are married as Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler. Carrie does not know that her husband has stolen ten thousand dollars from his employers' safe. However, he cannot live the life of the hunted, and finally makes partial restitution. From that time, there is a decline in Hurstwood. He and Carrie move to New York, where he opens a bar. His business venture, however, soon results in bankruptcy. Carrie

is no longer interested in him. She sees a different Hurstwood now--a penny-pinching, brooding old man. He promises every day that he will secure a job, but every day he does nothing but sit in the apartment. He is ashamed that he cannot give Carrie the things that she wants.

When they are at the lowest ebb financially, Carrie remembers that she once had mild success in an Elk's Club benefit production of Under the Gaslights. She decides to try to break into show business. Her rise to fame, under the stage name Carrie Madena, is phenomenal. She soon leaves Hurstwood, who becomes a beggar on the streets and finally commits suicide. Carrie, however, enjoys success as a musical comedy star. A hint of her final unhappiness, which is part of her punishment, is brought out in the closing lines of the book as she sits alone in her rocking chair:

> Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit or 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.[7]

I have mentioned that Dreiser just sat down and began, apropos of nothing, with the two words, "Sister Carrie." From this point, he went on and wrote the first half of the novel with no planning and little difficulty. As a matter of fact, however, he was doing little more than recording his own version of some American experiences. Dreiser's life and circle of acquaintance had been utilized in making a meaningful account of life at the turn of the twentieth century:

> Howells' streetcar strike is viewed from an easy-chair, not from the carbarns and the strikers' saloons as is Dreiser's. Crane, the rebel against his respectable Protestant background, observes Maggie the girl of the slums and the streets sardonically, ironically, and so unsentimentally as to shock his friends; but Carrie is Dreiser's sister. . . . McTeague's disintegration is depicted with a fine use of symbolic actions selected by

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[7]Ibid., p. 557.

Norris with care (and remembrance of Zola); Hurstwood's decline is that of the old men Dreiser had known, and it is given added poignance by the fear never far from the surface of Dreiser's heart that he might one day join the Hurstwoods in breadlines and flophouses.[8]

Dreiser spares no one. This is true not only of his autobiographies, Dawn, A Book About Myself, and A Hoosier Holiday, but also of the novels in which he utilizes autobiographical materials. He distinguishes his family, for instance, from others by saying that "it was of a peculiarly nebulous, emotional, unorganized and traditionless character."[9]

The utilization of autobiographical material in Sister Carrie will be examined by tracing the characteristics and experiences of prototypes of the principal characters, Carrie, Hurstwood, and Drouet.

When Dreiser sat down and wrote the words, "Sister Carrie," he began to think of a young Midwestern girl who was seduced by the first man whom she met after leaving home. He could think at the time of only two Midwestern girls whom he knew well. They were his sisters Amy and Janet. He thought of their experiences and decided that these two must be his models. This speculation must be correct because Carrie's experiences are parallel to those of Amy and Janet. However, as the following discussion shows, Dreiser has not made Carrie so promiscuous as her prototypes were.

Dreiser says that when "a girl leaves her home . . . she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse."[10] He knew this from the experiences of his five sisters; for after leaving home early in life, they assumed that cosmopolitan standard of virtue and

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[8]John Lydenberg, "Theodore Dreiser: Ishmael in the Jungle," Monthly Review, VII (August, 1955), 131.

[9]Theodore Dreiser, Dawn (New York, 1931), p. 9.

[10]Sister Carrie, p. 2.

forgot the precepts of Catholicism that had been drilled into them by their father.

We are reminded of Carrie's meeting the flashy drummer, Drouet, in a story that Amy related to Dreiser. Her mother gave her a dollar to buy a pair of slippers, and she went downtown to get them. In the first shoe store that she entered, there was a young drummer standing around. The clerk was out, so the drummer offered to wait on her. When finding out that she wanted shoes, he inquired about how much she wanted to pay. Amy told him that she had only one dollar. He opened the small trunk in which he carried his samples and told her that if any of them fit her, she could have them, although they were worth four dollars a pair. They "dilly-dallied" over the slippers, and before long, plans were being made for an elopement:

> "Oh, but I can't take them!" I said. "My mother would know." But he put his hand on my arm and asked where I lived, and said I was beautiful, and wouldn't I run away with him. He said he lived in Ohio, or Pennsylvania--he had a nice home and his mother would love me. He said he would marry me and buy me beautiful dresses, and do you know then and there I decided to go! It seems almost unbelievable to me now, but so it was, and I believed him. He gave me the shoes and told me to go to a certain corner and wait for him. When he came he paid me more compliments, and then told me where to meet him, at which train, but that I was not to speak to him on the platform; when we were out of Sullivan he would join me. I was so green that I even threw away the dollar mother had given me, for fear she would find it and know that I had not spent it. . . . I thought this was all right. I was to have beautiful clothes and meet his mother. I even thought how she would love me for being his wife!"[11]

In Carrie we have essentially the naivetéé of sixteen-year-old Amy. Carrie is impressed with Drouet to the extent that she would have been willing to go anywhere with him within five minutes after their meeting. She had never seen anyone so suave, and immediately "became conscious

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[11] Dawn, pp. 67-68.

of an inequality."[12] Ultimately, of course, Carrie becomes Drouet's mistress because she has no other way. The next time she meets the drummer, her appetite for beautiful clothes, enjoyment, security is too overpowering. Amy, however, was saved from herself this time. That evening around nine o'clock, she went to the train station as she had promised. As she stepped on the train, the station agent recognized her and asked where she was going. She could think of no reply to that question except "Vincennes." "Vincennes" was the wrong answer because she was informed that she didn't want to be on that train as it was going to Terre Haute. When the young girl persisted, the agent, possibly knowing that something was amiss, asked whether her mother knew of her plans. And then he talked to her in such a "sweet way" that she began to feel that she should go home.[13]

Amy never tried to be a better person. Dreiser speaks disparagingly of her:

> Being too nebulous-minded to carve out a career for herself, she could think of no place to go, nothing else to do but return home and dream her days away. At this time, she was pagan, sensuous, decidedly attractive physically, and fairly spoiling for sex contacts, but with no mental skill or reasoning faculty in so far as I could see.[14]

Carrie, however, although she failed, at least tried.

If Amy was bad, Janet must have been considered worse because it was she who did the leading. Amy proved that she needed a leader in one experience which must have been a real disappointment to her older sister:

> Thus, Amy, speaking in later years of experiences in Evansville, told me that once her employer at the candy factory had attempted to seduce her.

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[12] Sister Carrie, p. 5.

[13] Dawn, p. 68.

[14] Ibid., p. 223.

When it came to the crucial moment and after she had accompanied him to a room in a hotel (and knowing he was married), she was stricken with remorse and cried so loud and long that he let her go.[15]

But under Janet's effective tutelage, such an experience was not repeated. Janet caused her parents to worry more than any of the children. Dreiser says that her head was buzzing with thoughts of three things--"men, clothes, and the possibility of combining the twain so as to produce a good time--a dance, a picnic, a patter of conversation--"[16] Janet's experiences provide even more of the plot of Sister Carrie than Amy's. In later years, Dreiser talked with Janet about the period of her life in which she had revolted against all conventions of society. He wanted to know how she was using her time, how she was thinking:

> "Clothes! Clothes and men!" was her reply. "I don't know whether it was because we were poor or because father was so insistent on the Catholic faith, but I was wild for anything that represented the opposite of which I had. Father was always talking about honorable marriage, but I didn't want to get married. I had not met anyone who interested me enough. I don't think I really knew what I wanted, unless it was just passing contact with men or boys, to go about, be admired for my looks, have everything I saw in the show windows, and see everything that I thought girls ought to see. I know I hated to go to church, and I wouldn't do it. I despised the idea father had of saving money and going without decent clothes to pay old debts. On the other hand, I loved mother and was sorry for her. When men proposed marriage, I found I didn't like them well enough to marry them, but when they told me I was beautiful, it was a different matter. Where I liked a man, it was easy enough to go with him--it was fun--there wasn't really anything wrong with it that I could see. Aside from the social scheme as people seem to want it, I don't even now see that it was."[17]

Janet moved to Chicago and soon met an able, well-to-do, though somewhat old, architect. He set her up as his mistress in a fashionable hotel on South Halstead Street.[18] Before long, however, she felt herself

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[15]Ibid., p. 149.

[16]Ibid., p. 69.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid., p. 173.

more attracted by the manager of Hannah and Hogg's, a popular eating and drinking place. After she fell in love with the manager, she discovered that he was married. However, he persuaded her to elope with him to Toronto, explaining that while he was drunk, he had stolen fifteen thousand dollars from his employers. After arriving in Toronto, he was remorseful and sent back most of the money. The owners agreed that they would not press charges. Since Janet had been living under an assumed name in Chicago, the Dreisers were not involved when the newspapers were filled with the account. The couple moved from Toronto to New York. There, away from the life that he had known, the ex-manager slowly degenerated.[19] He finally got into politics for a time, however, and was unfaithful to the woman that he had supposedly married. But the two continued to struggle along. The years of unhappiness and anxiety changed Janet. She became the devoted slave of her children. And Dreiser commends her as she appeared to him when he visited her in New York:

> Whatever fires or vanities of her youth had compelled her to her meteoric career, she had now settled down and was content to live for her children. Her youth was over, love gone. And yet she managed to convey an atmosphere of cheer and hopefulness.[20]

It is easy to trace the autobiographical line in this part of Sister Carrie. Dreiser made few changes. Carrie's first lover was a young drummer, rather than an old architect. The name of the establishment in the novel is Fitzgerald and Moy's instead of Hannah and Hogg's.

Dreiser uses only the first letter of everyone's name in his autobiography, A Book About Myself. We find that the name of the manager begins with an "H," thus "Hurstwood" in the novel. Hurstwood was not drunk when

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[19] F. O. Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser (Toronto, 1951), pp. 65-66.

[20] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York, 1922), p. 439.

he stole from his employers as was H--. And instead of playing on Carrie's sympathy, as H-- played on Janet's, he stealthily tricked her into the elopement. Hurstwood and Carrie eloped to Montreal and not to Toronto. They had no children, but Janet and H-- had three. In Sister Carrie, Dreiser makes the character based on his sister a successful actress; and H--'s "down-and-out" counterpart finally commits suicide. Thus it is evident that the main plot of Sister Carrie came from Dreiser's own experiences.

Dreiser makes allowances for Carrie, as he expects his reader to do. Unlike the women whom she was modeled after

> Carrie had no excellent home principles fixed upon her. If she had, she would have been more consciously distressed. Now the lunch went off with considerable warmth. Under the influence of the varied occurrences, the fine, invisible passion which was emanating from Drouet, the food, the still unusual luxury, she relaxed and heard with open ears. She was again the victim of the city's hypnotic influence.[21]

Carrie's indiscreetness was modeled from that characteristic in Amy and Janet, but in her longing for adventure she seems to be more a reflection of Dreiser himself. Our first glimpse of Dreiser is seen in the beginning of the novel as he makes Carrie react the same as he always did when leaving home:

> Whatever touch of regret at parting characterized her thoughts, it was certainly not for the advantages now being given up. A gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss, a touch in her throat when the cars clacked by the flour mill where her father worked by the day, a pathetic sigh as the familiar green environs of her village passed in review, and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken.[22]

There was always in Dreiser alternating emotions of joy and sadness upon moving on to another place, just as there are in Carrie. He remembers

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[21] Sister Carrie, p. 89.

[22] Ibid., p. 1.

moving from Sullivan: "But how intense was my elation at the thought of change and seeing more of the world. . . . And then the last great day! I recall looking at the tall, scarred, eagle tree in the field and thinking that I should miss it."[23]

Dreiser longed for adventure. While a young man, he visited in the home of his Aunt Sue, who liked to tell fortunes with coffee grounds. In her enigmatic way, she told him that he was going to travel--that he was going to see cities and towns and crowds. She also saw books and girls in the future. Aunt Sue told him nothing else, but that bit of fortune-telling made a deep impression.[24] Often in the following years as he longed for excitement, he says that he "thought of the cities and towns my Aunt Sue had predicted and of Paul and Al and my sister Eleanor's husband, their distant wanderings, experiences, pleasures, successes. Would ever I become part of so great a world?"[25] Carrie also has a longing for something outside the dull life of Columbia City, the small town from which she comes. She looks forward to the pleasures that she will enjoy in Chicago. She longs to survey the city. On the train she is "dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy."[26] Disappointment follows, as it had for Dreiser earlier, because instead of adventure--night life, the theater, sightseeing--she finds her sister and brother-in-law to be veritable "stay-at-homes."[27]

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[23] Dawn, p. 116.

[24] Ibid., p. 241.

[25] Ibid., p. 292.

[26] Sister Carrie, p. 3.

[27] Ibid., p. 15.

Dreiser understands Carrie's excitement as she leaves Columbia City for Chicago--a scared figure with her small trunk and bag of imitation alligator skin, clinging to the scrap of paper with Mrs. Hanson's address on it. In retrospect, he thinks of the time that he, a sixteen-year-old boy, set out for that big city. He describes his trip to Chicago as:

> . . . the most intense and wonderful of my life. For to me it was of the very substance of adventure. I remember, for instance, the quality of the day: it was so fair and cool, not arrestingly bright . . . The train rushed through woods, fields and towns, which, although I had come this way three years before, seemed wholly new. . . here now I was, bag in hand, going to Chicago and wondering what I should do and where I should stay once I was there and for how long.[28]

It is interesting to note that Dreiser in Dawn says that he wanted to "reconnoiter this fairyland alone, to wander about and get work."[29] And of his heroine in the novel, he says, she was "venturing to reconnoitre[30] the mysterious city . . . "[31]

As Dreiser entered Chicago, he felt as if he were ready to conquer it. He was determined and aggressive in his attitude. Already, he felt a deep love for the large city. "It was so strong, so rough, so shabby, and yet so vital and determined. It seemed more like a young giant afraid of nothing, and that it was that appealed to me."[32] We see much the same approach through the eyes of Carrie:

> They were nearing Chicago. Signs were everywhere numerous. Trains flashed by them. Across wide stretches of flat, open prairie they could see lines of telegraph poles stalking across the fields toward the great city. Far away were indications of suburban towns, some big smoke-stacks

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[28] Dawn, p. 295.

[29] Ibid., p. 296.

[30] The wording is much the same as in his autobiography, but he uses an "re" ending here, as opposed to an "er" ending in Dawn.

[31] Sister Carrie, p. 3.

[32] Dawn, p. 297.

towering high in the air.

To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untravelled, the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing. Particularly if it be evening--that mystic period between the glare and gloom of the world when life is changing from one sphere or condition to another. Ah, the promise of the night. What does it not hold for the weary! . . . Says the soul of the toiler to itself, "I shall soon be free. I shall be in the ways and the hosts of the merry. The streets, the lamps, the lighted chamber set for dining, are for me. The theater, the halls, the parties, the ways of rest and the paths of song--these are mine . . . "[33]

Dreiser understands Carrie's ultimate defeat by materialistic forces. Her defeat recalls to him his temptation:

In fact, the number of things I was weakened to and that in some way suggested themselves to me as things that I might use or even need, was legion--a fair commentary on the unescapable growth of materialism. "You need me! You need me! You need me!" so they talked, or should have.[34]

The beautiful clothes in the store windows talked to Carrie in much the same way at the time she was trying to summon the will power to refuse Drouet.[35]

Dreiser's great desire was to be successful and live in luxury, but he feared that he would end up in the gutter. The author is not only Carrie but also Hurstwood in that the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's is at first the representation of what Dreiser wants to be and at last what he has always feared that he will become. Hurstwood, being able to associate with the elite, having plenty of money to throw around, and browsing in the plush comfort of Fitzgerald and Moy's saloon, represents what Dreiser had always longed for. We gain insight into what he is actually like when we look at Hurstwood in his decline:

Finding a seat on one of the red plush divans close to the great windows which look out on Broadway's busy rout, he sat musing. His state did not seem so bad in here. Sitting still and looking out, he could take some

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[33] Sister Carrie, pp. 8-9.

[34] Dawn, p. 339.

[35] Sister Carrie, p. 75.

slight consolation in the few hundred dollars he had in his purse. He could forget, in a measure, the weariness of the street and his tiresome searches. Still, it was only escape from a severe to a less severe state. He was still gloomy and disheartened. There, minutes seemed to go very slowly. An hour was a long, long time in passing. It was filled for him with observations and mental comments concerning the actual guests of the hotel, who passed in and out, and those more prosperous pedestrians whose good fortune showed in their clothes and spirits as they passed along Broadway, outside. It was nearly the first time since he had arrived in the city that his leisure afforded him ample opportunity to contemplate this spectacle. Now being, perforce, idle himself, he wondered at the activity of others. How gay were the youths he saw, how pretty the women. Such fine clothes they all wore. They were so intent upon getting somewhere. He saw coquettish glances cast by magnificent girls. Ah, the money it required to train with such--how well he knew! How long it had been since he had had the opportunity to do so![36]

Both Dreiser and Hurstwood stole in order to have something they wanted. Dreiser worked as a collector for Mr. Nesbitt of the Lovell Manufacturing Company. His duty was to call at the homes of people who had bought furniture from the company on the installment plan. He worked at this job for only six months because he withheld twenty-five dollars from his collections. He was trying to rise in the social world too quickly. His five or six dollars of spending money each week was not enough for his expensive tastes. He had several affairs going at the time; and in addition he must have good clothes, good books to read, and many other things which he did not have enough of.[37]

As for Hurstwood, his wife discovers that he is being a playboy. She sues him for everything he has. He knows of no other way to have Carrie than to steal. When the opportunity comes, after much indecision, he flees with ten thousand dollars. Whether he would have done so if the lock on the safe had not clicked while he held the money is difficult to decide.[38]

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[36] Ibid., p. 384.

[37] Dawn, pp. 580-581.

[38] Sister Carrie, pp. 285-290.

Dreiser himself tells us that as he was in despair because he could not find work in New York, he must have first thought of writing a novel in which a leading character experienced the same difficulties. That character, of course, is Hurstwood. Dreiser shows his despair:

> The city seemed so huge and cruel. I recalled Broadway of the preceding summer, and the baking, isolated exclusive atmosphere of Fifth Avenue, all boarded up. And now I was here and it was winter, with this great newspaper world to be conquered, and I did not see how it was to be done.[39]

It was that feeling of utter defeat which ultimately led Hurstwood to commit suicide.

Often during Dreiser's newspaper days, he wandered off to what he thought would be better opportunities. At one time, he left a good job in St. Louis and went to Toledo. He could find no position there except a very unattractive, four-day job of reporting the daily occurrences of a streetcar strike:

> . . . I went about the city on one car-line and another, studying the strange streets, expecting and fearing every moment that a brick might be shied at me through the window or that a gang of irate workingmen would board the car and beat me up. But nothing happened, not a single threatening workman anywhere; I so reported and was told to write it up and make as much of the "story" as possible.[40]

Although Dreiser experienced no difficulty, he makes Hurstwood's day of work one of disillusionment. Hurstwood decides to make one last effort to gain back Carrie's respect. He hears that there is a strike of streetcar workmen in Brooklyn and that drivers are needed. He secures a job as a motorman and is accompanied on his run by two burly policemen. After a very tiring day of being called "Scab" and of being the target of brick-slinging strikers, he retreats. The end has almost come for Hurstwood;

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[39] A Book About Myself, p. 464.

[40] Ibid., p. 372.

from this point the decline is rapid.[41]

Drouet also appeals to Dreiser. He represents to him the ultimate authority in matters of dress, manners, and style. Drouet is thoroughly described as he appears when Carrie and he first meet on the Chicago-bound train:

> Here was a type of traveling canvasser for a manufacturing house--a class which at that time was first being dubbed by the slang of the day "drummers." He came within the meaning of a still newer term, which had sprung into general use among Americans in 1880, and which concisely expressed the thought of one whose dress and manners are calculated to elicit the admiration of susceptible young women--a "masher." His suit was of a striped and crossed pattern of brown wool, new at that time, but since become familiar as a business suit. The low crotch of the vest revealed a stiff short bosom of white and pink stripes. From his coat sleeves protruded a pair of linen cuffs of the same pattern, fastened with large, gold plate buttons, set with the common yellow agates known as "cat's-eyes." His fingers bore several rings--one, the ever-enduring heavy seal--and from his vest dangled a neat gold watch chain, from which was suspended the secret insignia of the Order of Elks. The whole suit was rather tight fitting, and was finished off with heavy-soled tan shoes, highly polished, and the grey fedora hat. He was, for the order of intellect represented, attractive, and whatever he had to recommend him, you may be sure was not lost upon Carrie, in this, her first glance.[42]

Although the tone of the above passage is large satirical, these were the styles and manners that Dreiser himself aspired to, as evidence of his affluence.

Dreiser used his brother Paul Dresser,[43] the song writer, as his model for Drouet. What is said of Paul in Dawn is applicable to Drouet:

> I have never known a man more interested in women from the sex point of view (unless perchance it might be myself), nor one to whom women were more attracted. Amazingly attractive, the women of the world in which he moved as well as others of different levels were constantly on his trail with proffers of diversion and support. . . . He was a genial and lovable . . . Don Juan, devoting his time, thought, energy and money to his

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[41] Sister Carrie, pp. 454-470.

[42] Ibid., p. 4.

[43] Dreiser explains that Paul changed his name from "Dreiser" to "Dresser" because he thought it "more pronounceable and suitable to his stage life."

unquenchable desire.[44]

When an affair ended for Drouet, he, like Paul, was not a sad loser. As he shows after losing Carrie to Hurstwood, he is ready to go out and make another conquest. Although Drouet represents Paul and Hurstwood represents Dreiser, I found no record of Paul's ever losing a girl friend to his brother.

Dreiser's second novel, Jennie Gerhardt, was published in 1911. Jennie Gerhardt and Caroline Meeber are alike in that both of them are intimate with the first man that they associate with. Both of them have lived in poor surroundings all their lives; both of them long for something different; both yield to temptation. From this point, however, the two heroines are a world apart. Whereas Jennie has the inborn instinct of motherhood and loves to give, Carrie is selfish and succumbs to temptation to satisfy her personal longing for all the material possessions that she has never had. Jennie is virtuous according to Dreiser's definition of virtue: "Virtue is that quality of generosity which offers itself willingly for another's service."[45]

The action of the novel begins in 1880 when Jennie is eighteen years old. Her parents are very poor but very religious people. They are strict Lutherans. At the beginning of the story, Jennie is trying to help her mother make ends meet while Mr. Gerhardt is unable to work.

At this time, Mrs. Gerhardt starts doing Senator Brander's laundry. Jennie delivers it to the senator. Although there is almost forty years' difference in their ages, Senator Brander becomes interested in the girl.

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[44] Dawn, p. 154.

[45] Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York, 1952), p. 287.

He begins giving her extra money so that she can help her family. He appeals to her, but not sexually; however, she knows that if she submits to him, she can lift her family out of poverty. Brander promises to marry her and is probably sincere, but while on official business in Washington, D. C., he dies of a heart attack. To complicate matters even more, Jennie is pregnant. Old Gerhardt is furious when he is told of her condition and drives her out of the house. After the birth of Vesta, the child, Jennie goes to Cleveland and is soon joined by the remainder of the family, with the exception of her father.

She secures work as the maid of a Mrs. Bracebridge. It is in the Bracebridge home that she meets Lester Kane, the son of a wealthy manufacturer. Lester falls in love with Jennie, but he allows his family to tell him how to conduct his life; therefore, he cannot marry her. And although he admires her goodness, he feels that he must have her. He soon breaks down her resistance because she knows that her family will be well provided for if she submits. She becomes his mistress but does not tell him for many years that she has an illegitimate child. Even when she confesses, however, he is very good to her and insists that Vesta live with them.

Jennie finally convinces her father that Lester has married her, although he has not, and the old man comes to live with her after Mrs. Gerhardt's death. However, Old Gerhardt never quite forgives his daughter until just before his death. He then realizes that she is a good woman and blesses her before he dies.

The death of Lester's father complicates Jennie and Lester's relationship. Mr. Kane's will provides only a small legacy for his son unless he leaves Jennie. The decision is a difficult one to make, but while on a trip to Europe with Jennie, Lester realizes her limitations and

decides that he cannot continue to live with her. After thirteen years with his mistress, he leaves her well provided for and marries Letty Pace Gerald, a socialite whom everyone has always expected him to marry.

From this time, Jennie is very unhappy. After Vesta dies of scarlet fever, she is left alone to ponder over all the mistakes she has made. While Letty is in Europe, Lester becomes ill and sends for Jennie, whom he has always loved. She stays with him until he dies.

In the funeral scene, supposedly all mourners are at the front; but the true mourner, Jennie, must sit at the back of the church. She moves around in the crowd when it goes to the train station, trying to get a glimpse of the coffin containing the body of the only man she could ever love:

> Jennie did not hear that [the dialogue of travelers who were anticipating coming pleasures] or anything else of the chatter and bustle around her. Before her was stretching a vista of lonely years down which she was steadily gazing. Now what? She was not so old yet. There were those two orphan children [Rose Perpetua and Henry, whom she adopted after Vesta's death] to raise. They would marry and leave after a while, and then what? Days and days in endless reiteration, and then--?[46]

Jennie at the end of the novel is remorseful because of the life she has lived.

In Jennie Gerhardt Dreiser has utilized many materials from his life. Actually, with the exception of The "Genius," which will be discussed in Chapter III, there is more meaningful utilization than in any other of his works. In discussing this point, I shall not follow the chronological development of the plot, but will instead discuss the characters of the novel and their experiences. In this novel, Dreiser again uses two of his sisters to create the heroine. But not one of his sisters was as sweet and self-sacrificing as Jennie; anything evil that she does is not

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[46]Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt (New York, 1911), p. 431.

for selfish reasons but for the sake of her family. Dreiser could never attribute to his sisters the qualities that he gives Jennie:

> From her earliest youth goodness and mercy had molded her every impulse. Did Sebastian fall and injure himself, it was she who struggled with straining anxiety, carried him safely to his mother. Did George complain he was hungry, she gave him all her bread. Many were the hours in which she had rocked her younger brothers and sisters to sleep, singing wholeheartedly betimes and dreaming far dreams. Since her earliest walking period, she had been as the right hand of her mother. What scrubbing, baking, errand-running, and nursing there had been to do she did. No one had ever heard her rudely complain, though she often thought of the hardness of her lot. She knew that there were other girls whose lives were infinitely freer and fuller, but, it never occurred to her to be meanly envious; her heart might be lonely, but her lips continued to sing.[47]

Dreiser has her yield to temptation. Her first experience reminds one of Dreiser's sister Eleanor's encounter with Colonel Silsby. It was during one of the worst periods for the family when the senior Dreiser was unemployed that Eleanor, then about sixteen, met the Colonel. He was a prominent lawyer and officeholder in Terre Haute. One day he noticed the young lady gazing wistfully at the hats in a downtown store window. He approached her and asked if she would like to have one. Of course her immediate answer was "Oh, yes, indeed!" After some persuasion, Eleanor accepted ten dollars from the Colonel. Their friendship grew into intimacy, and the seducer contributed many more such gifts to the Dreisers, through Eleanor.

It is a desire related to Eleanor's that first causes Jennie to become intimate with Senator Brander. A girl of her calibre, however, would not yield for things like hats, pretty dresses, or other petty things. There is in her a hatred of poverty which makes her want to help her family rise above it:

> Every time she came he found excuse to detain her, and soon discovered

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[47]Ibid., p. 16.

that, for all her soft girlishness, there lay deep seated in her a conscious deprecation of poverty and a shame of having to own any need. He honestly admired her for this, and, seeing that her clothes were poor and her shoes worn, he began to wonder how he could help her without offending.[48]

The Senator soon found a way, and before long he was practically supporting the Gerhardt family, unknown to Old Gerhardt. Jennie learned from her association with Senator Brander. She was happier than she had ever been. And although she was unsophisticated, emotional and inexperienced in love, she was "mature enough mentally to enjoy the attentions of this great man who had thus bowed from his high position to make friends with her."[49]

There came a time later in Eleanor's experience that Colonel Silsby stepped in and helped the Dreisers through a misfortune. Paul, always something of a delinquent, was in jail for forging his father's name. Mr. Dreiser was enraged and felt that such conduct was unforgivable, so he decided to let the authorities do what they would. But the Colonel went to the jail and paid Paul's bail, unknown to the senior Dreiser, of course. Dreiser's vivid memory enables him to record that experience:

I seem to remember Paul's return, his lurking in an outhouse so that my father should not see him, and signaling to me to let my mother know he was there. He was, if I recall correctly, dirty, unkempt, prisony. My mother came out, cried, and made some secret arrangement whereby he was sent to the farm of a relative of hers.[50]

The Gerhardts find themselves in a like situation. The difference is that Sebastian, nicknamed "Bass," is trying to help the family at the time he is arrested. And Old Gerhardt wants to help the boy but does not possess the means. Senator Brander arranges with the judge to let Bass go. This, Old Gerhardt does not know. Thus, Bass' homecoming reminds

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[48] Ibid., p. 24.

[49] Ibid., p. 43.

[50] Dawn, p. 13.

one of Paul's:

"I'm all right, mamma," said Jennie encouragingly. "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. Go to bed. How does he think Bass got out?"

"He doesn't know. He thought maybe they just let him go because he couldn't pay the fine."[51]

Jennie's mother does not realize that Bass' release was paid for by her daughter's virtue.

Amy, that wild one of the Sister Carrie discussion, is also used in Jennie Gerhardt. After several years of roving, Amy took up with one Don Ashley. Before long, she was pregnant. He promised to take her away and marry her. But when she went to the place where she was to meet him, he was not there. He never came back. Finally it was impossible to conceal her secret any longer. So she went to her mother, always the children's confidante. The mother was astounded, and "at first she cried bitterly, standing in one corner of the downstairs living room and holding the end of the apron to her eyes."[52] But she came to her daughter's rescue in the usual manner. At the time, Dreiser's father was working away from home, and she slipped Amy away to New York, where Janet and Eleanor could care for her.[53]

There is no chance for Jennie to appeal to her lover upon discovering her pregnancy because he is dead by that time. But she, like Amy, is not alone. She has the understanding of all her family except her father. He turns her out of his home and tells her never to come back into his sight. "The strength of love was with her, the support of patience and the ruling sweetness of sacrifice. Silently she kissed her mother while

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[51] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 80.

[52] Dawn, pp. 258-259.

[53] Ibid., pp. 262-263.

tears fell fast. Then she turned, and the door closed upon her as she went forth to a new life."[54] But Jennie is not defeated because even before she leaves the house, Mrs. Gerhardt and Bass have arranged to look after her in another part of the city. Later when her father goes to Youngstown to work, she returns home to await the arrival of her child.[55]

Of special significance in most of Dreiser's works is the role that a mother plays in her children's lives. As was mentioned in Chapter I, all the Dreiser children had a deep love for their mother. It is Dreiser's love for his own mother which enables him to create such a woman as Mrs. Gerhardt. And the things that he says of his mother in Dawn are applicable to Jennie's mother:

> . . . my mother must have led a rich emotional as well as mental life, with all of the affairs of her many children so completely in her hands. I can see her now moving about her latest kingdom, interested in the flowers, the scenery, the sky, the chickens, and always the doings of her children. One of her tricks, in so far as we younger children were concerned and whenever we became too obstreperous, was to threaten to leave us . . . long after I had passed my thirteenth birthday, and when she had already been dead for some years, I still used to dream of her as being alive but threatening to go off and leave me, and would awake to find myself in tears. Even to this day, dreams of her invariably evoke in me a great sadness and longing, the result, I presume, of the psychic impact of those terrors of long ago.[56]

Such is the relationship between Mrs. Gerhardt and her children.

There were many times that Mr. Dreiser had to return home because of his inability to get a job. During those times, his enforced idleness compelled Mrs. Dreiser to do anything that she could find to do in order to provide for her children. It did not matter how lowly the task might seem; she was willing to do anything so that her family might have food. During

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[54] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 92.

[55] Ibid., pp. 92, 95.

[56] Dawn, pp. 150-151.

these difficult times, she took in washing, hired out as a maid, or did other menial tasks.[57] Dreiser says that he could not imagine what life would have been without her: "For that curiously binding spirit which she exercised and which bound us all was . . . powerful . . . and to me so moving and even dramatic in a strong, compelling way."[58]

In Mrs. Gerhardt, that characteristic stick-to-itiveness of Dreiser's mother can be detected. We are told that Mrs. Gerhardt was no weakling:

> For a time she took in washing, what little she could get, devoting the intermediate hours to dressing the children, cooking, seeing that they got off to school, mending their clothes, waiting on her husband and occasionally weeping. Not infrequently she went personally to some new grocer, each time farther and farther away, and, starting an account with a little cash, would receive credit until other grocers warned the philanthropist of his folly.[59]

The first time we see Mrs. Gerhardt, she is, in the traditional Sarah Dreiser manner, looking for something to do. Her husband is not working at the time, and her children are hungry. The job that she secures at the principal hotel of Columbus ultimately brings downfall. It is here that Jennie meets Senator Brander.[60]

Although Dreiser portrays his mother and Mrs. Gerhardt as great women, he admits their weaknesses. In both women, because of poverty, there is a love of money that contributes to the destruction of their children's morals. It has been mentioned that Mrs. Dreiser seemed to approve of Colonel Silsby's assisting the family through Eleanor. Dreiser declares that it was not only Silsby's mood that contributed to the

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[57]Although Amy and Janet are the prototypes of Jennie, I feel that Dreiser has re-created in his fictional character the self-sacrificing manner of his mother, which his sisters did not possess.

[58]Dawn, pp. 21, 366-367.

[59]Jennie Gerhardt, p. 3.

[60]Ibid., pp. 1-2.

seduction of the young girl. Actually, the Colonel was encouraged in the affair by Mrs. Dreiser's lack of social ambition and moral severity, for she entered into the questionable arrangement by permitting Eleanor to keep the first ten dollars as well as the subsequent gifts:[61]

> For as I think of her now, I know that my mother was beyond or behind so-called good and evil. Neither moral nor immoral, she was non-moral, intellectually, emotionally, temperamentally. A strange, sweet, dreamy woman, who did not know how life was organized, who was quick to forget the miseries of the past and contemplate the comforts of the present, or, those wanting, the possibilities of the future; who traveled romantically a colorful and, to her, for all its ills, beautiful world. She was, after her fashion, a poet who suffers much, yet unfailingly and irresistibly continues to contemplate beauty--her one enduring earthly reward, as I came to know.[62]

Mrs. Gerhardt's desire to make a good living is so strong that she influences her daughter. The older woman is so happy when Jennie gives to her the first ten dollar bill from Brander that she cannot think of reprimanding the girl. Instead, she comments on the wonderful treasure that has fallen into her hands. Of course Old Gerhardt is not told because he, like Dreiser's father,

> had such stern views about accepting money without earning it that even in their distress, she would have experienced some difficulty in getting him to take it. Consequently she said nothing but used it to buy bread and meat, and going as it did such a little way, the sudden windfall was never noticed.[63]

Neither Mrs. Dreiser nor Mrs. Gerhardt ever revealed secrets about her children to her husband. Both of them always guarded the truth from their husbands; each was always ready to serve as the scapegoat for her children. Dreiser remembers that at one time his father was very bitter about the goings-on of the Dreiser girls. But his mother merely sat

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[61] Dawn, p. 13.

[62] Ibid., p. 10.

[63] Jennie Gerhardt, pp. 24-25.

and hesitated to side with her husband. Then when the girls came in, Old Dreiser attempted to discipline Amy because she had gone out without his knowing, but Mrs. Dreiser interfered:

> "Stop! Stop now!" called my mother, coming forward and attempting to thrust herself between them. "This is enough! You mustn't choke her! You don't know how to handle children. I know they are wrong . . . , but there are other ways of correcting them besides shouting and waking up the whole neighborhood. You are too rough. You always were."[64]

Mrs. Gerhardt serves the same purpose in her household. Jennie begins to slip around at night to see Senator Brander. Her mother knows, but she feels that it is best if Jennie's father is not told. She tells Jennie, "I don't know whether we had better tell your father or not . . . He doesn't like for you to be out evenings."[65]

In Chapter I, I mentioned that the actions of Dreiser's sisters caused much tension in the home. And one argument of Mr. and Mrs. Dreiser was recorded. One of the Gerhardts' conflicts is typically Dreiserian. Mrs. Gerhardt reveals Jennie's pregnancy to her husband:

> "When did this happen?" he demanded.
> "I don't know," returned Mrs. Gerhardt, too terror stricken to tell the truth. "I only found it out the other day."
> "You lie!" he exclaimed in his excitement. "You were always shielding her. It is your fault that she is where she is. If you had let me have my way there would have been no cause for our trouble to-night. . . ."
> "You are the cause of this," he exclaimed. "You are the sole cause. If you had done as I told you to do this would not have happened. No, you wouldn't do that. She must go out! out! out! She has become a streetwalker, that's what she has become. She has set herself right to go to hell."[66]

Both Mrs. Dreiser and Mrs. Gerhardt are optimistic. They are always looking toward a better day. They yearn for a better position in life. They attempt that betterment in the same manner--by moving on. Mrs.

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[64] Dawn, p. 231.

[65] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 50.

[66] Ibid., pp. 88-89.

Dreiser was always arranging for one part of the family to remain behind while the others moved on to another city where there were more opportunities. One such experience was the move that she and the youngest children made to Vincennes, Indiana.[67] Dreiser describes his mother as a "dreamer or mental web-spinner. Something in her eye, her words, her half-spoken dreams built up in each one of us a longing to go forth and do."[68]

As the Gerhardts make plans for the father to stay with his job in Youngstown and for Bass to go to Cleveland to get a job, Mrs. Gerhardt becomes very happy. She "listened with a strong hope for a betterment of their miserable life creeping into her heart . . . They were in the rapids of a life which was moving toward a dreadful calamity. If only something would happen."[69] Although neither family gained very many material possessions, it cannot be denied that the optimism of the mothers--the desire to become more comfortable financially--was responsible for almost everything they had.

It is interesting to notice the similarity in the deaths of these two women. Mrs. Dreiser was getting steadily weaker one day late in October when she asked Theodore to take her for a drive. As they drove along the park roads of Chicago, she suddenly turned to him with an appealing, helpless look and said, "You know, I feel so strange these days. I hate to see the leaves turning. I'm afraid I won't see them again." To which Theodore answered, "Oh, ma, how you talk!"[70]

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[67] Dawn, p. 31.

[68] Ibid., p. 157.

[69] Jennie Gerhardt, pp. 96-97.

[70] Dawn, p. 509.

Dreiser changes his mother's thought very little when he records the approaching death of Mrs. Gerhardt, and he makes Jennie's reply the same as his own:

> Jennie now took alarm and proposed to take her to some near-by watering place, but Mrs. Gerhardt wouldn't go. "I don't think it would do any good," she said. She sat about or went driving with her daughter, but the fading autumn scenery depressed her. "I don't like to get sick in the fall," she said. "The leaves coming down make me think I am never going to get well."
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> "Oh, ma, how you talk!" said Jennie; but she felt frightened, nevertheless.[71]

When Dreiser's brother Al returned home and heard from his family that his mother had just died, his first thought was "No! . . . Well, that's the end of our home."[72] And Dreiser records in Jennie Gerhardt:

> The death of Mrs. Gerhardt hastened the final breaking up of the family. Bass was bent on getting married at once, having had a girl in town for some time. Martha, whose views of life had broadened and hardened, was anxious to get out also. She felt that a sort of stigma attached to the home--to herself, in fact, so long as she remained there. Martha looked to the public schools as a source of income; she was going to be a teacher. Gerhardt alone scarcely knew which way to turn.[73]

Thus the Gerhardts followed the Dreisers' pattern after the death of the bulwark of their home.

Dreiser was able to make Mrs. Gerhardt the significant character she is because he did little more than record some of the meaningful experiences of his own mother's life.

In Jennie Gerhardt, Old Gerhardt is a representation of Dreiser's father. However, Gerhardt emerges as a fanatical Lutheran instead of a Catholic. And in the novel, Dreiser has made his father a pathetic creature rather than so much the stern, biased religionist that he is usually

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[71] Jennie Gerhardt, pp. 96-97.

[72] Dawn, p. 513.

[73] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 187.

considered. H. L. Mencken (1917) says:

> Dreiser is at his best, indeed, when he deals with old men. In their tragic helplessness they stand as symbols of that unfathomable cosmic cruelty which he sees as the motive of life itself. More, even, than his women, he makes them poignant, vivid, memorable. The picture of Old Gerhardt is full of a subtle brightness, though he is always in the background, as cautious and pennywise as an ancient crow, trotting to his Lutheran church, pathetically ill-used by the world he never understands.[74]

The latter part of Mencken's statement is an excellent portrait of Dreiser's father if we change "Lutheran" to "Catholic."

Some critics have said that Dreiser hated his father and that because of his hatred, he turned to Mrs. Dreiser. However, his comments in the autobiography, Dawn, only partly support such theories. Dreiser states that his father was never "sufficiently liberal or engaging to evoke or deserve that affection which my mother earned."[75] In Jennie Gerhardt, Dreiser expresses his love for his father by showing Old Gerhardt's passion for his children:

> Father Gerhardt at his saw-buck during the weeks before Christmas thought of this very often. What would little Veronica not deserve after her long illness! He would have liked to give each of the children a stout pair of shoes, the boys a warm cap, the girls a pretty hood. Toys and games and candy they always had had before. He hated to think of the snow-covered Christmas morning and no table richly piled with what their young hearts would most desire.[76]

That Old Dreiser was a stern religionist has already been shown. But Dreiser portrays him in a sympathetic light when he says that although he resented the man's driving, dictatorial, harsh authority, he felt sorry for him because he was so lonely.[77] Old Gerhardt is patterned after him

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[74] H. L. Mencken, A Book of Prefaces (Garden City, New York, 1917), p. 117.

[75] Dawn, p. 348.

[76] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 25.

[77] Dawn, p. 164.

in that respect:

> Naturally such a deep religious feeling made him stern with his children. He was prone to scan with a narrow eye the pleasures of youthful desire. Jennie was never to have a lover if her father had any voice in the matter. Any flirtation with the youths she might meet upon the streets of Columbus could have no continuation in her home. Gerhardt forgot that he was once young himself, and looked only to the welfare of her spirit.[78]

Possibly one of the harshest portraits of Dreiser's father is in the scene in which Gerhardt discovers Jennie's child, Vesta. There is no humanity in the old man when he stalks into the house and demands of his wife, "Whose child is that?"[79] The reason for this sternness is that Dreiser is remembering a time several years back when his own father came home to find Amy's child. There followed a "most darksome period of explanation, crimination, and recrimination."[80] Old Dreiser, we are told, never forgave Amy. And it was impossible for the family to understand how he reconciled his actions with his religious convictions of love, mercy, and forgiveness.[81] But in dealing with his father, Dreiser softens the actuality.

Later Jennie asks her father to forgive her. He does not attempt to look at her but finally murmurs, "I have prayed . . . It is all right."[82] However, forgiveness does not come that easily for a man of his type. It is not until he is about to die that he is able to look at his daughter and sincerely say, "You're a good girl, Jennie . . . You've been good to me. I've been hard and cross, but I'm an old man. You forgive me, don't

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[78] *Jennie Gerhardt*, p. 56.

[79] Ibid., p. 115.

[80] *Dawn*, p. 274.

[81] Ibid.

[82] *Jennie Gerhardt*, p. 157.

you?"[83]

Gerhardt experiences the same despondency that the senior Dreiser had suffered. He feels that no one loves him. One day Jennie finds him crying alone in the kitchen. She tries to make him feel better by telling him that he will always have a home as long as she has anything.[84] This scene is patterned after one that Dreiser had with his father, also a broken old man at the time. He remembers when he himself tried to make his own father feel better by saying: "I haven't acted just right--none of us have. I'll write you from now on when I'm away, and send you some money once in a while."[85] At this time Dreiser felt genuine pity for his father.

It is with all of the passion that he can summon that Dreiser has Jennie later go to persuade Old Gerhardt to live with her. As the old man comes down from his bed in the loft of the flour mill where he works, in his dusty and baggy clothes, Dreiser, through Jennie, thinks, "Poor Papa."[86]

One of the most vivid memories that Dreiser uses in this novel is his recollection of having to pick up and steal coal around the railroad tracks. It was during his father's period of unemployment, the period during which Mrs. Dreiser accepted financial aid from Eleanor's lover, that Dreiser was first called upon to do this. He recalls that he and his brother Ed were "occasionally driven away with threats and curses

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[83] Ibid., p. 345.

[84] Ibid., p. 187.

[85] A Book About Myself, p. 252.

[86] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 257.

from some ill-natured or officious railroad man."[87] While living in Sullivan, Dreiser and Ed met someone who made their job easier:

> The thing which made him [Dock Johnson] as well as Al Thompson decidedly useful to both Ed and myself at this time was the fact that neither apparently had any false shame about carrying coal. They would even go brazenly across the common to the tracks, sack over back, whereas Ed and myself, struck by the social and financial shame of our state, were inclined to go through the fields by the slaughterhouse and so reach the mine in a roundabout way. I must have been the more shamefaced of the two for Ed used to rebuke me for my sniveling desire to avoid publicity.[88]

The Gerhardt children use a trick which makes it easier to fill their baskets. Bass, being rather bold and usually in nice attire, follows them to the tracks. When he comes along, one of the children asks, "Mister, won't you please throw us down some coal?" He stops and says, "Why, certainly" and climbs upon the car. When he has thrown down more than enough to fill their baskets, he departs.[89] Jennie is embarrassed because her family must live this way. She represents Theodore and Ed in this respect. On one occasion, she drops her basket and runs all the way home because she meets Senator Brander. The humiliation is too much for her to bear.[90] This chance meeting is to prove beneficial, however. The Senator thinks over and over, "Carrying coal. Really it was very thoughtless in me. I mustn't forget them anymore."[91] From that time until Senator Brander dies, he takes care of them.

Another vivid memory has to do with lack of clothing for the Dreisers. Brander questions Jennie about the other children in her family.

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[87] Dawn, p. 22.

[88] Ibid., pp. 90-91.

[89] It is for this practice that Bass is later thrown in jail and released through Senator Brander's kindness.

[90] Jennie Gerhardt, p. 29

[91] Ibid., p. 31.

When asked whether all of them attend school, she lies, "Why yes, sir." She is too shamefaced to tell him that one of the children had to leave school because he had no shoes.[92] However, Dreiser has softened the actuality of this experience:

> . . . we were marched, shoes or no shoes! And day after day we went until quite November, when suddenly a very cold day and still no shoes, my brother and I were sent home . . . with the word that we were to put on shoes, since it was much too cold to be without them. And this certainly did impress and even humiliate me, for in school were no children without shoes.[93]

He can understand Jennie's reaction because he suffered the humiliation of being poverty stricken when he was a child.

It must be apparent to anyone who compares Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt with his autobiographical writings that the novelist has utilized much of his own life in writing the novel.

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[92] Ibid., p. 22.

[93] Dawn, p. 52.

CHAPTER III

The "Genius"[1] and An American Tragedy

The "Genius" was published in 1915. Dreiser utilized so much autobiographical material in writing it that it was hardly necessary for him to follow the novel with Dawn and A Book About Myself. Although Dreiser uses the name Eugene Witla, The "Genius" is essentially his autobiography. In 1951, Matthiessen took this view:

> The basic difficulty was that here Dreiser was writing a novel too closely autobiographical to be viewed in any perspective. The common denominator in all his most living characters so far was, as we have seen, his deep personal involvement with them; yet this was counterbalanced by the fact that in no case had he been writing directly in his own person.[2]

The "Genius" was not well received. In 1916 a committee of the Western Society for the Prevention of Vice read the book and adjudged it obscene and blasphemous. The Society secured a temporary cessation-of-circulation order from Washington and filed a complaint with the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The executive secretary of the Society, John S. Sumner, went to see J. Jefferson Jones of the Lane Publishing Company, the publishers of the book, and told him that if all offending matter was not removed or if the sale, advertisement, and publication of it was not stopped, the Society would press criminal charges.

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[1] Dreiser insisted on the quotation marks around "Genius" because he wanted his reader to decide whether the word was appropriate for Eugene.

[2] F. O. Matthiessen, Theodore Dreiser (Toronto, 1951), pp. 65-66.

Jones agreed to withdraw the book.[3]

Dreiser refused to compromise and argued that Jones should fight the Society. In 1900, when Sister Carrie failed to sell, the novelist had felt defeated. But in 1916, he had faith in his viewpoint as expressed in the novel, and he was willing to fight to uphold it. His statement concerning the suppression was as follows:

> I look on this interference with myself or any other serious writer as an outrage, and I fear for the ultimate intelligence of America. A band of wasp-like censors has appeared and is attempting to put the quietus on our literature which is at last showing signs of breaking the bonds of Puritanism under which it has so long struggled in vain. . . . When will we lay aside the swaddling clothes forced on us by the antiquated theories of ignorant moralists and their uneducated followers, and stand up free thinking men and women?
>
> To me, this interference by the Vice Society with serious letters is the worst and most corrupting form of oppression conceivable to the human mind, plumbing as it does the depths of ignorance and intolerance and checking initiative and inspiration at its source. Life, if it is anything at all, is a thing to be observed, studied, interpreted. . . . It is our great realm of discovery. The artist, if left to himself, may be safely trusted to observe, synchronise and articulate human knowledge in the most palatable and delightful form. . . . A literary reign of terror is being attempted. Where will it end?[4]

A fight was soon underway. Mencken stepped in to assist his friend. He wanted to use a positive approach and asked Eric Schuler of the Author's League of America whether the League could be persuaded to defend Dreiser. Within three weeks' time, Mencken and John Cowper Powys, through the League, had drafted protests for writers of the League to sign.

Many editors, publishers, and writers circulated leaflets protesting the suppression of the novel. All of these people attempted to help Dreiser by quoting, ridiculing, or denouncing Sumner. But Sumner was not impressed by the agitation. He felt that authors or literary men might be

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[3]Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature (New York, 1949), pp. 193-195.

[4]Ibid., pp. 198-199.

able to judge the literary merits of a book, but they were not any better equipped to judge the effect of the book on morals and manners than anyone else. His idea was that writers should try to survive without exploiting the vicious side of life. Dreiser was left no alternative but to take the case to court. When his case was finally considered by the Appellate Division in 1918, the court declared that its function was not to render advisory opinions--that if the book was improper, action should be taken in the criminal courts. But Jones had voluntarily withdrawn the book; therefore, Sumner had no occasion to take action. Attempts to force Lanes to circulate the book failed. It was not until 1923 that Horace Liveright ventured to reissue it.[5]

Mencken (1948) relates a humorous episode dealing with the protest against the suppression of The "Genius," which suggests that Dreiser was using autobiographical material.

> Dreiser, indeed, was probably the most matter-of-fact- novelist ever known on earth. It was seldom that he departed from what he understood to be the record, and he never did so willingly. . . . One of these situations, as I recall it, depicted Eugene Witla, the hero, as thrusting an inquisitive hand up a girl's skirt. This was in 1922 and the case against The "Genius" had been going on for six long years, so I was glad enough to agree to stop the explorer at the patella in order to get the book released, and Dreiser restored to royalties and peace of mind. . . . but when it came to this one he was a stone wall. I could see no logic in his objection, which quickly became violent, and said so. "But that," he declared finally and immovably, "is something I simply can't consent to. It really happened." So the episode remained in the book. . . .[6]

Eugene Witla is the handsome son of a middle-class family in Alexandria, Illinois. He is looked upon as a dreamer because he is interested in drawing and writing.

His first illicit love affair begins when he is seventeen and working

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[5]Ibid., pp. 200-202.

[6]H. L. Mencken, in his "Introduction" to An American Tragedy, by Theodore Dreiser (Cleveland and New York, 1948), pp. 7-8.

on a local newspaper. Then, ambitious and curious about the world outside Alexandria, he goes to work in Chicago and spends his spare time studying art.

He soon becomes a successful artist and moves to New York. He becomes engaged to Angela Blue, a schoolteacher older than he. Sincere but restless, he has affairs with several women, including Christina Channing, a concert singer, who ends their liaison because she considers her career more important. Eugene marries Angela, who is unsuited to him, being prudent, conventional, and incapable of understanding his art or his amorality. He also finds her possessive and domineering. Eugene soon suffers a nervous breakdown because of hard work and an intemperate sex life. He works for some time as a laborer for a railroad company. But an opportunity suddenly comes, and he goes into advertising. He soon becomes managing director of the United Magazines Company.

He falls in love with an eighteen-year-old society girl, Suzanne Dale, whose mother ends the affair by causing Eugene to lose his position. Angela in the meantime has grown tired of his philanderings and attempts to win him back by becoming pregnant. She dies when their daughter is born. Eugene is penitent and devotes himself to being a good father and returns to his true vocation of realistic painting.

It is a most complex task to trace the autobiographical line through The "Genius" because, as has been mentioned, the novel is largely Dreiser's autobiography. He has merely "arranged and charged with purpose" the facts of his life in writing about Eugene Witla the artist. For the two previous novels, Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, I showed how Dreiser utilized autobiographical material primarily by tracing the characteristics and actions of the major characters. However, for a novel of this type, the best approach seems to be to follow the line of action and show

autobiographical utilization as the plot is unfolded.

One of the first glimpses that Dreiser gives of himself in this novel is in Eugene's love of girls:

> He admired girls,--was mad about them,--but only about those who were truly beautiful. . . . One girl whose yellow hair lay upon her back in great yellow braids like ripe corn, was constantly in his thoughts. He worshiped her from afar, but she never knew. . . .
>
> Eugene's experience with girls had not been very wide. There were those very minor things that occur in early youth--girls whom we furtively kiss, or who furtively kiss us-- . . . He had dreamed of love . . . but always in a shy, distant way. He was afraid of girls, and they, to tell the truth, were afraid of him. They could not make him out.[7]

As Eugene approaches the age of sixteen, he broods constantly about his state of affairs. Like Dreiser, there is an overwhelming desire in him to get away from his hometown. He hates Alexandria. He longs to travel--to enjoy some large city. And of course the city is Chicago, just as it is with most of Dreiser's wanderers:

> It [a Chicago newspaper] was as he had always found, full of subtle wonder, the wonder of the city, which drew him like a magnet. Here was the drawing of a big hotel someone was going to build; there was a sketch of a great pianist who was coming to play. An account of a new comedy drama; of a little romantic section of Goose Island in the Chicago river, with its old decayed boats turned into houses and geese waddling about; an item of a man falling through a coal hole on South Halstead Street fascinated him. . . . What a tremendous city Chicago must be. The thought of car lines, crowds, trains, came to him with almost a yearning appeal.[8]

And then one day he comes into the room where his mother is sitting and says, "I'm going to Chicago."[9] The ensuing conversation is patterned after that of a similar experience in the Dreiser home.[10] And as in Dreiser's case, no one can change Eugene's plans.

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[7]Theodore Dreiser, The "Genius" (London, 1928), pp. 10-11.

[8]Ibid., p. 34.

[9]Ibid., p. 35.

[10]Theodore Dreiser, Dawn (New York, 1931), pp. 294-295.

Eugene's entrance into Chicago is no new experience to the reader of Dreiser. Already, there have been discussions concerning Dreiser and Sister Carrie as they approached that celestial place.

> The city of Chicago--who shall portray it! . . . Engines clanging, trains moving, people waiting at street crossings--pedestrians, wagon-drivers, street-car drivers, drays of beer, trucks of coal, brick, stone, and--a spectacle of new, raw, necessary life! . . .
>
> As Eugene began to draw near it he caught for the first time the sense and significance of a great city. What were these newspaper shadows he had been dealing with in his reading compared to this vivid, articulate, eager thing? Here was the substance of a new world, substantial, fascinating, different.[11]

Upon arriving in Chicago, Dreiser was anxious to find a room for $1.50 to $2.00 a week. He passed by a livery stable and noticed a fat, red-faced man sitting outside the door. He asked the man whether he knew where he could find a small room. The man told him that he could probably get one over at Number 732. When he arrived there, he told the landlady that the man at the livery stable sent him and that he would like to rent a room.[12] Dreiser changes the details of the room search very little in his novel:

> . . . A fat man sitting outside a livery stable door in a tilted, cane-seated chair offered a possibility of information.
>
> "Do you know where I can get a room around here?" asked Eugene.
>
> The lounger looked him over. He was the proprietor of the place.
>
> "There's an old lady living over there at seven-thirty-two," he said, "who has a room, I think. She might take you in." He liked Eugene's looks.
>
> Eugene crossed over and rang a downstairs bell. . . .
>
> "The gentleman at the livery stable over there said I might get a room here. I'm looking for one.". . .
>
> "You can have it for two dollars a week," she proffered.[13]

Those early days in Chicago were not easy ones for Dreiser. He was

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[11] _The "Genius,"_ p. 37.

[12] _Dawn_, pp. 296-297.

[13] _The "Genius,"_ p. 38.

an independent young man; therefore, although his sisters Eleanor and Ruth and his brother Al were somewhere in the city, he had no desire to ask them to help him. He wanted to explore the great fairyland alone. He searched for a job for several days, and finally when he had little money left, he found a very unsatisfactory position as a combination dish washer and bus boy to a Greek, Mr. Paradiso, who operated a dirty restaurant on Halstead Street.[14] But a person of Dreiser's temperament could not stay long in such a place. In telling of the work, he says that it was

> not only too wholly miserable for words, but worse, humdrum. Peeling potatoes, peeling onions, washing carrots and lettuce, enduring the smell of stale meat and chickens and rancid garbage cans, and the sight and order of Mr. Paradiso, greasy, if genial![15]

The novelist gives Eugene Dreiserian independence. His mother sends money, but he sends it back to her, until he gets in such financial straits that he must use it. He walks the streets for ten days, looking for a job. Finally when he has only $1.75, he stumbles on to a cheap little hardware store. He is given the lowly job of cleaning stoves. His work is to brush the rust off decaying stoves, to help piece and screw the stoves together, and to polish them. Although he dreams of making pen and ink sketches of the things he sees while looking out the window of the store, he works on fairly well for two weeks.

Although he is pleased with his output, one day another worker tells him to "get a move on"--that he is not paid to look out the window. There follows a fight in which the worker shoves Eugene against the wall, tries to kick him, and then tells him to get out:

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[14] *Dawn*, pp. 295-296, 300-303.

[15] Ibid., p. 307.

Eugene slipped out quietly. His spirit was hurt and torn. What a scene! He, Eugene Witla, kicked at, and almost kicked out, and that in a job that paid six dollars a week. A great lump came up in his throat, but it went down again. He wanted to cry but he could not. He went downstairs, stove polish on his hands and face and slipped up to the desk.

"I want to quit, . . . That big brute up there tried to kick me," . . .

"They're pretty rough men, . . . I was afraid you wouldn't get along. I guess you're not strong enough. Here you are." He laid out three dollars and a half. Eugene wondered at this queer interpretation of his complaint. He must get along with these men? They mustn't get along with him? So the city had that sort of brutality in it.[16]

Dreiser gives Eugene more endurance in the preceding experience than he himself had. After leaving the Greek restaurant, he looked for four weeks before he finally found a job as a stove cleaner. Eugene stayed on for two weeks in the type of atmosphere discussed above before he finally talked back angrily. Dreiser stayed all of one hour with the stove cleaning job. His only regret was that he had not kicked his opponent.[17] He wondered "when, if ever, would I be strong enough to do unto others as they do unto me. An eye for an eye, as it were. Or maybe two or three eyes for one, and an ear into the bargain."[18]

Another of Dreiser's experiences provides the material for Eugene's second job as a house runner for a real estate concern. His task is to bring in the numbers of empty houses and post up the "For Rent" signs in the windows. He is doing quite well in this position, which pays eight dollars a week, when the agency dissolves.

After the real estate job failed, Dreiser got a position as a laundry wagon driver for Munger Company. The ten-dollar salary seemed large to

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[16]The "Genius," pp. 42-43.

[17]In the real experience, Dreiser was kicked, but he spared Eugene that humiliation.

[18]Dawn, pp. 321-323.

him, and he was very happy with his work. While working there, he became acquainted with a little Scotch girl, Nellie MacPherson, who was the cashier for the company. She became his first serious affair, but he soon dropped her when someone else came along.[19]

A month elapses between the termination of Eugene's real estate job and the beginning of his job as the driver of a laundry wagon. Dreiser fixes Eugene's salary as the same as he himself drew, and even allows him the enjoyment of an affair with a Scotch girl whom he names Margaret Duff. Margaret resembles Nellie, and Eugene knows that

> this girl he was trifling with could not hold him. She had lured him, but once lured he was master, judge, critic. He was beginning to feel that he could get along without her,--that he could find someone better.
>
> Naturally such an attitude would make for the death of passion, as the satiation of passion would make for the development of such an attitude. Margaret became indifferent. She resented his superior airs, his top-lofty tone at times. They quarrelled over little things.[20]

While driving the laundry wagon, Eugene meets Mrs. Mitchly, whose husband is the manager of the People's Furniture Company, which sells on the installment plan. One day when he delivers Mrs. Mitchly's laundry, she tells him that he would make a good collector and that if he is interested, she will speak to her husband about him. Mr. Mitchly soon contacts and hires Eugene. From the beginning, he likes the boy's work very much. We see in Eugene at this time an artist, like Dreiser, who begins to think of his experiences in relation to how he can use them in his art:

> He saw scenes that he felt sure he could, when he had learned to draw a little better, make great things of--dark, towering factory-sites, great stretches of railroad yards laid out like a puzzle in rain, snow, or bright sunlight; great smoke stacks throwing their black heights athwart morning or evening skies. . . . "Wonderful," he used to exclaim to himself, and think how the world would marvel if he could ever come to do

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[19] Ibid., pp. 530, 537, 540, 542.

[20] The "Genius," p. 45.

great pictures like those of Doré.[21]

For awhile Eugene does well with his collecting job. But he then gets an opportunity to go to art school at night. His interest in art becomes overpowering, and he cannot be satisfied unless he is pursuing his interest. Before long, he gets a job as an illustrator for a Chicago newspaper.[22]

The original of Mrs. Mitchly was a Mrs. Nesbitt. Her husband was the manager of Lovell Manufacturing Company, also a company which sold on the installment plan. At the time Dreiser took the job as collector for the company, his own overpowering interest in his art had not materialized as he represents it in Eugene. Instead, he found it difficult to think in terms of anything but luxury, good clothing, women, travel, etc. His lust drove him to hold back twenty-five dollars from his collections, an act for which he was discharged from the company.[23] Dreiser softened the actuality of this experience when using it in The "Genius." Apparently his foolishness at that point in his life came to prey on him, and he did not wish to re-open old wounds by having Eugene fall into the same temptation.

While working as a collector, Eugene meets Angela. She is a representation of Jug, Dreiser's wife. They are almost identical: Both are from small towns; both are schoolteachers; both have a sincere love for their simple families; both are very conventional and religious; both are attractive, but not beautiful; both have such limited backgrounds that they can never understand their artistic lovers; both are five years older

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[21] Ibid., pp. 49-50.

[22] Ibid., pp. 90-91.

[23] Dawn, p. 580.

than the men they fall in love with; both are disappointed in love because their lovers are varietists.[24]

Dreiser's most serious love affair before Jug was with one of his sister Trina's friends, Alice Kane. And although Alice came before Jug, this does not mean that Dreiser was satisfied with only one woman even when his future wife came along. He confesses:

> Yet in spite of my profound infatuation I was still able to see beauty in other women and be moved by it. . . . I think I did imagine that I was a scoundrel in harboring lusts after women, when I was so deeply involved with this one, but I told myself that I must be peculiarly afflicted in this way, that all men were not so, that I myself should hold myself in check eventually, etc.[25]

Nor does Eugene's professed love for Angela cause him to pass up any opportunities with other girls. He has an affair with Ruby Keeny, whom he first sees at his art school posing in the nude.[26] Ruby is a representation of Alice Kane from Dreiser's experiences. Both girls are the adopted daughters of old Irish couples; both are free to go their own ways without the interference of their foster parents; both fall into illicit relationships that end in heartbreak.

Dreiser terminates Eugene and Ruby's affair in the same way his liaison with Alice was ended. There is an argument, and Eugene decides that the time has come for him to make his exit. He soon writes a short note to Ruby and leaves for New York. In her farewell note to him, Ruby writes:

> Dear Eugene . . . I got your note several weeks ago, but I could not bring myself to answer it before this. I know everything is over between us and that is all right, for I suppose it has to be. You couldn't love any woman long, I think. I know what you say about your having to go to New York to broaden your field is true. You ought to, but I'm sorry you

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[24] Dreiser seemed fond of this relatively obscure word, frequently applying it to himself, alternating it with "woman chaser."

[25] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York, 1922), p. 331.

[26] The "Genius," p. 77.

didn't come out. You might have. Still I don't blame you, Eugene. It isn't much different from what has been going on for some time. I have cared but I'll get over that, I know, and I won't ever think hard of you. Won't you return me the notes I have sent you from time to time and my pictures? You won't want them now. Ruby[27]

It is interesting to examine the note that Dreiser received from Alice because it was a pattern for Ruby's letter:

Dear Theo

I got your letter the day you left, but then it was too late. I know what you say is true, about your being called away, and I don't blame you. I'm only sorry our quarrel (there had been none save of my making) didn't let you come to see me before you left. Still that was my fault, too, I guess. I can't blame you entirely for that.

Anyhow, Theo, that isn't what I'm writing you for. You know that you haven't been just the same to me as you once were. I know how you feel. I have felt it too. I want to know if you won't send me back the letters I wrote you. You won't want them now. Please send them, Theo, and believe I am as ever your friend, Alice.[28]

At the end of Alice's letter, there was a postscript. Dreiser made only one change when he used it in the novel--that of substituting Eugene's name where his had been:

I stood by my window last night and looked out on the street. The moon was shining and those dead trees over the way were waving in the wind. I saw the moon on that little pool of water over in the field. It looked like silver. Oh, Theo, I wish I were dead.[29]

Dreiser felt it was impossible to marry Jug because he did not have enough money to keep up a home. Therefore, love had grown cold before it was ever consummated. The novelist chose to change this detail in The "Genius." Although Eugene tries to protect Angela's virtue, he finds his physical passion to be a raging lion at times. He mentally resolves to control himself, but he has to flee from Angela in order to do so. Finally she resists no more, and he lets his passion run wild.[30]

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[27] Ibid., p. 108.

[28] A Book About Myself, p. 127.

[29] Ibid.

[30] The "Genius," p. 186.

It was probably Dreiser's unhappiness over the kind of relationship that Jug and he had that made him change the detail in his novel. It seemed that there was nothing he could do about his own affair, but it was a simple matter to save Eugene from sexual misery. He understood the passionate desire of his character because of his own experience:

> Both of us being inflamed, it was the most difficult thing for me to look upon her and not crave her physically, and, as she later admitted, she felt the same yearning toward me. At the time, however, she was all but horrified at a thought that ran counter to all the principles impressed upon her since early youth. There was thus set up between us in this delightful atmosphere a conflict between tradition and desire. . . . No doubt she longed as much to be seized as I to seize her, and yet there was a moral elusiveness which added even more to the chase. I wished to take her then and not wait, but the prejudices of a most careful rearing frightened and deterred her. . . . the impulse was better than the forces which confuted and subsequently defeated it. For then was the time to unite, not years later when, however much the economic and social and religious conditions which are supposed to surround and safeguard such unions had been fulfilled, my zest for her, and no doubt hers in part for me, had worn away.
>
> Love should act in its heat, not when its bank account is heavy.[31]

It was brought out in Chapter I that love had "thinned down to the pale flame of duty" when Dreiser and Jug were finally married. Also, he found his wife unsympathetic about his artistic tastes. Their marriage was a continual separation.[32]

Dreiser has Eugene and Angela's marital difficulties following the same basic pattern. One major difference is apparent, however, in the Suzanne Dale affair. Angela feels that if she has a child, Eugene will forget his amours. But Jug could not follow such a procedure. Matthiessen (1951) says that "Dreiser--on the testimony of those best able to say--would seem to have been sterile."[33]

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[31] A Book About Myself, p. 427.

[32] Matthiessen, pp. 95-96, 102.

[33] Ibid., p. 165.

It has been mentioned that Dreiser read Balzac, Herbert Spencer, Darwin, Huxley, and others, and after reading them was soon free of the shackles of Catholicism. He has Eugene reading these same writers and ultimately arriving at the same kind of philosophy that his prototype claimed. We see Eugene following the same basic steps that Dreiser followed in formulating that philosophy. Actually, Dreiser in giving his account in The "Genius" did little more than change the material from first person to third person:[34]

> At this time Eugene had quite reached the conclusion that there was no hereafter--there was nothing save blind, dark force moving aimlessly--where formerly he had believed vaguely in a heaven and had speculated as to a possible hell. . . . He had already tackled Spencer's "First Principles," which had literally torn him up by the roots and set him adrift. . . . He came to the conclusion that he was nothing, a mere shell, a sound, a leaf which had no general significance, and for the time being it almost broke his heart. It tended to smash his egotism, to tear away his intellectual pride. He wandered about dazed, hurt, moody, like a lost child. . . .
>
> Then came Darwin, Huxley, Tyndall . . . who fortified the original conclusions of the others, but showed him a beauty, a formality, a lavishness of form and idea in nature's methods which fairly transfixed him. . . . Life was nothing save dark forces moving aimlessly.[35]

If a person were to point out all the parallels between Dreiser's life and the materials used in The "Genius," he would have to take the novel incident by incident. There are very few pages which do not show Dreiser's utilization of autobiographical material. I have limited the discussion to the parallels which seemed most outstanding.

Dreiser's most popular novel, An American Tragedy, was published in 1925. This novel tells of the period during which realistic writers were emphasizing social life, leisure, and the problems of leisure. Dreiser got his idea from the murder trial of Chester E. Gillette, who drowned

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[34] Cf. A Book About Myself, pp. 457-458.

[35] The "Genius," p. 163.

a girl named Grace Brown in Big Moose Lake, Herkimer County, New York, on July 11, 1906, and was electrocuted on March 20, 1908.[36] In explaining the downfall of Clyde Griffiths, the central character, Dreiser has presented a strong indictment against the American economic system of that day. He implies that if Clyde had been endowed with the privileges of wealth and position, he would never have been tempted to do the things which brought his downfall.

Clyde Griffiths is the son of two religious-minded people who hold preaching services on the streets of Kansas City and conduct a mission for "down-and-out'ers." Clyde is not very religious, however, and is always ashamed and embarrassed because of his parents' actions. He decides at the age of sixteen that he must go his own way if he ever expects to be successful. Wagenknecht (1952) speaks of him as a person whose only religion is getting ahead and whose only satisfying activity is parties.[37]

He finally manages to get a job as a bellboy at the Green-Davidson Hotel in Kansas City. For the first time in his life, Clyde is able to dress well, enjoy himself, and have plenty of money.

His remaining particle of faith is shattered when his sister Esta, who has always been interested in the religious work, runs away, supposedly to be married. Her affair ends unhappily when the man with whom she left leaves her pregnant and unmarried.

Meanwhile, Clyde is gaining new friends and is becoming well acquainted with drinks and brothels. Although he agrees to help his mother support Esta in another part of the city, he spends his money on Hortense Briggs,

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[36] Mencken, p. 7.

[37] Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York, 1952), p. 289.

a girl of loose morals. His happy life in Kansas City ends when he and some of his friends while riding in a stolen car run over a little girl. Clyde flees and ultimately goes to Chicago.

In Chicago, he finally manages to get a job at the Union League Club, after working at many menial tasks. Here he meets his wealthy uncle, Samuel Griffiths, who owns a collar factory in Lycurgus, New York. Clyde goes to Lycurgus to work in the factory. His cousin Gilbert, whom he very closely resembles, resents his presence and gives him the lowest job in the shrinking room. However, he soon becomes a supervisor in the marking department. He meets one of his workers, Roberta Alden, and becomes very friendly with her. They must meet each other secretly because supervisors are not allowed to date their employees. Roberta is a virtuous young woman before she falls in love with Clyde. She will not yield herself to him at first, but to keep from losing him, she rents an apartment in which she can entertain him.

Clyde continues the affair with Roberta but begins to be drawn into the Griffiths' social life. He meets Sondra Finchley, a society girl. Sondra includes Clyde in her social affairs because of a vain sense of rivalry. She doesn't like Gilbert and wants to make him jealous by playing up to his poor cousin. The setting for tragedy is laid where Clyde decides that he wants the superficial Sondra rather than the genuine Roberta. At this point in the novel, the reader can definitely uncover Clyde's tragic character--a person who yearns after wealth and position which are beyond his reach. At this time, Clyde is a part of two different worlds and is happy in neither.

He begins breaking dates with Roberta because Sondra's money draws him. When he discovers that Roberta is pregnant, he tries to arrange an abortion. He tries everything he can think of or find out about. Then

he reads in a paper about an accidental drowning and begins to form a plan. He tells Roberta that he will marry her and asks her to accompany him to a semi-isolated lake resort. There he takes her out on the water in a rented boat. As though it were accidental, he lunges toward her. She is hit by his camera and falls into the water and drowns. Although the planned murder turns at least partially into an accident, Clyde has carelessly left incriminating letters from Roberta and Sondra in his trunk. They fall into the hands of the prosecuting attorney, Mason. Clyde's lawyers, Belknap and Jephson, devise every known lie, but Mason wins the case. Clyde is sentenced to death in the electric chair.

Toward the end of the novel, Clyde tells his mother that he has had a religious experience, but the reader is doubtful: "'Mama, you must believe that I die resigned and content. It won't be hard. God has heard my prayers. He has given me strength and peace.' But to himself adding: 'Had he?'"[38]

As sad as a man's dying in the electric chair for a crime committed because of social and economic inequalities is the closing episode of the novel. The reader sees a "little band of five" in a street service in San Francisco. Included in the group is a small boy of about seven or eight looking every bit as out of place as Clyde had always looked. The fact that the same experience could be repeated, with this illegitimate child of Esta's as the central character, is tragic. There seems to be an air of optimism, however, when Russell, the small boy asks, "Kin' I have a dime, grandma? I wana' go up to the corner and get an ice-cream cone."[39] And the grandmother answers, "Yes, I guess so, Russell. But

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[38]Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy (Cleveland and New York, 1948), p. 869.

[39]Ibid., p. 874.

listen to me. You are to come right back."[40] The closing lines of the book are especially optimistic:

> Her darling boy. The light and color of her declining years. She must be kind to him, more liberal with him, not restrain him too much, as maybe, maybe, she had--She looked affectionately and yet a little vacantly after him as he ran. "For his sake."[41]

The ensuing discussion will show how Dreiser used episodes, ideas, and characters from life in writing An American Tragedy.

The most important source was the accounts of Chester Gillette, which first gave Dreiser his plot. There were several cases that Dreiser had read about which were much like the Gillette-Brown case, but apparently he chose the Gillette-Brown case because the details of it were complete and accessible. Upon examining the evidence of the case, Dreiser decided that Gillette's actions had been misunderstood and that he had not been a killer. The novelist felt that Gillette had been too undeveloped mentally to plot as he was alleged to have plotted and too young, inexperienced, and "poorly conditioned, religiously and economically, to understand his own plight."[42] Thus, the young man had been unfairly judged. Dreiser also said that if Gillette had not committed murder, what he had been doing would have been accepted as the right thing to do, because he was doing no more than trying to rise financially and socially. In his attempts, he had found a wealthy society girl who would enable him to enter a more respected world than he and "Billy" Brown knew. Also, had there been better circumstances for him, and had he possessed more money, he might have found a doctor to perform the abortion; Grace Brown would have lived;

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Elias, pp. 220-221.

society would not have known; and Gillette would have been free and respected. Therefore, Dreiser's point is that it was Gillette's fate to be entangled in public opinion whose consequences he hoped to escape by committing murder; and he did so to retain the respectability which the society that ultimately condemned him had prized.[43]

Since Dreiser was sympathetic toward Gillette, he introduced the element of accident into An American Tragedy by modifying some of the circumstances of the actual crime. It was alleged that a tennis racket was the instrument which Gillette used to strike Miss Brown. Since the presence of the racket could not readily be explained, premeditation was alleged. But Dreiser changed the instrument to a camera, plausible equipment for an outing. Also, Dreiser makes the overturning boat partially the cause of Roberta's quick drowning, whereas in the original case there was no evidence that Grace Brown was stunned by a blow from the upset boat. The last modification is that Clyde did not actually drown Roberta but let her drown after the boat accidentally tipped. This made an issue that could not be clearly defined. As a matter of fact, Clarence Darrow told Dreiser that it would be impossible to determine Clyde's guilt on the basis of the novel.[44]

To gather more material for his novel, Dreiser visited places comparable to those in which his main character would live and work; talked with a friend, Dr. A. A. Brill, about the psychology of murder; and visited the Sing Sing death cells, where he talked with a condemned murderer.[45]

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[43] Ibid., p. 221.

[44] Ibid., p. 222.

[45] Ibid., p. 220.

Clyde Griffiths has two prototypes. One has already been introduced, and the other one is Dreiser himself. Dreiser has given Clyde his own background and outlook: both lack an interest in the religious endeavors of their parents; both hate the poverty that binds them; both have strong sex desires; both show what can be termed a false set of values; both have difficulty adjusting to their environments.

Actually some of these points can be applied to Chester Gillette. Although there are no definite printed statements to the effect, I should imagine, considering the details of the case, that Gillette had strong sex desires and a false set of values. However, upon examining his background I learned that he was an active member of the First Presbyterian Church of Cortland, New York. As a matter of fact, he was about to become a Sunday School teacher at the time he killed Grace Brown.[46] The prosecuting attorney, Mr. Ward, said of him, "He takes front rank in the church; that's his mask, the lie he tells--not to the jury that time, but to others."[47] Also, Gillette had never known the poverty that Dreiser knew and had Clyde to experience. He came from a middle-class family.[48]

I have mentioned that Dreiser's father, with his ranting and raving about sin and the importance of Catholicism, ultimately drove Dreiser away from the church. Because of his own resentment of his father's fanaticism, Dreiser wrote with true feeling about Clyde's lack of interest in his parents' Christian work. In the first street scene of the novel, Clyde is outwardly embarrassed. He moves from one foot to the other, keeps

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[46] New York Times, December 1, 1906, p. 2. The foregoing material identifies Cortland, New York, with the fictional Lycurgus, New York.

[47] New York Times, December 5, 1906, p. 2.

[48] Matthiessen, p. 192.

his eyes down, and only half sings. He thinks of his parents' profession or calling as a shabby thing. He feels that everyone looks down on him.[49] Those who stand around listening to and watching the service can sense this discomfort, for they

> nudge one another, the more sophisticated and indifferent lifting an eyebrow and smiling contemptuously, the more sympathetic or experienced commenting on the useless presence of these children. . . .
>
> "That oldest boy don't wanna be here. He feels outa place, I can see that. It ain't right to make a kid like that come out unless he wants to. He can't understand all this stuff anyhow."[50]

When viewed in the light of Dreiser's reflections, Clyde's reaction to poverty is also more meaningful. Early in life Dreiser became "mentally colored and tinged with a sense of poverty and defeat." For years after his childhood, anything which reminded him of it--a wretched neighborhood, a poor farm, an asylum, a jail, or people anywhere who were experiencing hard times--was sufficient to produce thoughts and emotions that were akin to actual physical pain.[51] Much of the time his father was unable to work, but he continued to say his "Hail Marys" regularly:

> I can see him now, 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, and in rainy weather a large cotton umbrella in his hand, trudging off at seven or eight every morning, rain or shine, to hear his beloved mass.[52]

In view of the state of the family, his father's religiosity was difficult for Dreiser to understand.

It is also difficult for Clyde to reconcile all the work that his parents do for God with the poverty that they are always in. The family is always "hard up," not well-clothed, sometimes not well-fed, and always deprived of the comforts and pleasures of other people. He fails to

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[49] An American Tragedy, pp. 17, 23.

[50] Ibid., p. 19.

understand why his father and mother constantly proclaim the love and mercy of God when God seemingly does nothing for them. He senses something wrong somewhere.[53] He is like Dreiser who says of his father:

> Think of a man who had already made a botch of his life, a man whose theories of prevailing justice and reward had been gainsaid and battered by every form of accident and circumstance, being so deeply concerned over the immortality of . . . his soul . . . [54]

Dreiser was on fire with sex desires by the time he was fourteen. His father had always warned him to avoid "loose or evil women," but none the less

> sex, sex, sex! How the hot fire nature had lighted in my body was driving me to almost frantic efforts . . . And how, for the next two or three years (to say nothing of the next twenty-five) it harried me from hell to hell![55]

Clyde at about the same age begins to realize that the sex lure is beginning to manifest itself. He finds himself intensely interested in and troubled by his attraction for the opposite sex and its for him.[56] Like his prototype,[57] however, he begins to feel that he is doomed to sex loneliness because of his unattractive clothing, his physical appearance, and his lack of charm.[58] Actually, Dreiser spares his representation insofar as he does not give him "big ears or large teeth or a mouth not cut like that of a soldier or a beau,"[59] for Clyde is quite good

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[53] An American Tragedy, pp. 17-18.

[54] Dawn, pp. 127-128.

[55] Ibid., p. 209.

[56] An American Tragedy, p. 27.

[57] Dawn, p. 266.

[58] An American Tragedy, p. 27.

[59] Dawn, p. 266.

looking--"a straight, well-cut nose, high white forehead, wavy, glossy, black hair, eyes that were black and rather melancholy at times."[60]

As a young man, Dreiser was not an admirable person by the standards of some. He was obsessed with ambitions and values that might be considered cheap and false, because of his poverty-stricken childhood. These he made use of in creating the character of Clyde Griffiths. Cowley (May 26, 1947) records Dreiser's aspirations during early manhood:

> . . . his early picture of the good life was to own what he called "a lovely home," with cast-iron deer on the lawn; to drive behind "a pair of prancing bays" and to spend his evenings in a "truly swell saloon" with actors, song writers, and tammany politicians amid "the laughter, the jesting, the expectorating, the back-slapping geniality."[61]

It is not easy to forget, in relation to the above discussion, the young Clyde Griffiths as he goes to work among all the splendors of the Green-Davidson Hotel. He stands in awe of all the luxury, wealth, beauty, and show which he observes while performing his various duties. He hungrily looks at the rich, well-dressed people whom he sees in the lobby and as he caters to them in their rooms. He longs to forget the squalor of his background. His reactions are based on Dreiser's:

> Clyde stared, even while pretending not to. And in his state of mind, this sight was like looking through the gates of Paradise. Here were young fellows and girls in this room, not so much older than himself, laughing and talking and drinking even-- . . . And then around and between these walking or sitting were such imposing men and women, young men and girls all so fashionably dressed, all so ruddy and content looking. And the cars or other vehicles in which some of them appeared about dinner time and later. . . . The wraps, furs, and other belongings in which they appeared, or which were often carried by these other boys and himself across the great lobby and into the cars or the dining-room or the several elevators! . . . Such grandeur. 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

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[60] An American Tragedy, p. 27.

[61] Malcolm Cowley, "Sister Carrie's Brother," New Republic, May 26, 1947, p. 23.

you went how, where and when you pleased.[62]

Because of an early life of always moving on, Dreiser was never able as a young man to settle in any one job or place for very long. In a previous discussion, it was mentioned that over a short period of time, he worked as a dish washer and bus boy for a Greek restaurant owner, drove a laundry wagon, cleaned stoves, collected for an easy-payment furniture company, and helped in a real estate office. This period of drifting from one job to another suggested to Dreiser the fictional wanderings of Clyde Griffiths. When Clyde runs away from Kansas City after being involved in running over a little girl, he wanders to Alton, Peoria, Bloomington, Milwaukee, and finally Chicago, picking up occasional jobs as a dish washer, a laundry wagon driver, or anything else he can find.[63]

It isn't often that Dreiser makes a direct statement to the effect that a particular person is a prototype for one of his characters. However, he does say that Asa Conklin, the man for whom he worked in the real estate office, was the prototype for Asa Griffiths of An American Tragedy.[64] Dreiser soon learned that his employer was no businessman. Of him, he says:

> As a very little time was to show, I was dealing with a really defeated and worn-out religious fuzzy-wuzzy whose intentions were probably of the best but whose commercial practicalities and necessities of life were of the vaguest.[65]

He had no commercial ability at all. He might just as well have devoted all his time to the religious mission that his wife and he operated.

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[62] An American Tragedy, pp. 57-58.

[63] Ibid., pp. 180-181.

[64] Dawn, p. 469.

[65] Ibid., p. 470.

Dreiser describes Conklin as a little man "perhaps five feet three or four, stout and yet flabby looking, with a grizzled beard and a shock of silver-white hair . . . "[66]

Dreiser soon met Mrs. Conklin, the prototype of Elvira Griffiths. She was a tall, worn, pale, and spiritual-looking woman. She was the mainstay of her husband. Asa often failed at his ventures, but his wife was always around to help him. He had never been of any assistance to her, however. His life had been made up of one venture after another, all of which had failed. But Mrs. Conklin

> had sworn to cherish, honor, and obey him, and she accepted and perhaps even believed in that as a cross placed upon her by her Saviour. Certainly, her pale, patient face and hands indicated as much. And personally, and regardless of her religious views, I liked her. I liked the courage, the patience, the soft voice, the firm, upstanding declarations of her belief in a Creator and Saviour.[67]

Dreiser has not departed from these prototypes in An American Tragedy. Asa Griffiths is that same weak, ne'er-do-well itinerant preacher, occasionally trying to be a success in some business venture. And Mrs. Griffiths, as her prototype, overshadows her husband. She keeps him going--in fact shields him as much as is possible from the heartaches which their wayward children cause her. Mrs. Griffiths also represents to Dreiser and to his reader that beautiful ideal of self-sacrifice in a mother. Later when Clyde is found guilty of murder, his mother secures a job as a newspaper correspondent so that she can be near her son. She also holds public meetings in which she pleads for the life of Clyde. She manages to raise eleven hundred dollars toward his appeal through

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., p. 476.

this medium.[68]

It is interesting to notice that Dreiser has the Griffiths using the same scriptural watchwords on their "down-and-out'ers" that he had earlier seen in the Conklins' mission:

"TAKE HOLD OF SHIELD AND BUCKLER, AND STAND UP FOR MINE HELP." PSALMS 35:2

"AND YE, MY FLOCK, THE FLOCK OF MY PASTURE, ARE MEN, AND I AM YOUR GOD, SAITH THE LORD GOD." EZEKIAL 34:31

"O GOD, THOU KNOWEST MY FOOLISHNESS, AND MY SINS ARE NOT HID FROM THEE." PSALMS 69:5

"IF YE HAVE FAITH SO MUCH AS A GRAIN OF MUSTARD SEED, YE SHALL SAY UNTO THIS MOUNTAIN, REMOVE HENCE TO YONDER PLACE: AND IT SHALL MOVE: AND NOTHING SHALL BE IMPOSSIBLE UNTO YOU." MATTHEW 17:20

"FOR THERE SHALL BE NO REWARD TO THE EVIL MAN." PROVERBS 24:20

"LOOK, THEN, NOT UPON THE WINE WHEN IT IS RED: IT BITETH LIKE A SERPENT AND STINGETH LIKE AN ADDER." PROVERBS 23:31, 32[69]

Dreiser speaks of these scriptures as "silver and gold plates set in a wall of dross."[70]

Dreiser again uses his sister Amy's experience in this novel. Clyde's sister Esta becomes intimate with a young actor. And whereas Amy does not run away with her seducer, Esta does. However, the actor does not marry her as he had promised and deserts her in a Pittsburgh hotel room. Both girls' affairs ultimately end the same way: they depend on their mothers to help them through their difficulty. Esta works in Pittsburgh as long as she can but finally writes to her mother. Mrs. Griffiths manages to raise enough money to bring her back to Kansas City and keeps her in another part of the city until the child is born. Another parallel is that each girl leaves the rearing of her illegitimate child to her mother. The reader knows Amy's story and background from preceding

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[68] An American Tragedy, p. 823.

[69] Ibid., p. 24.

[70] Ibid.

discussions. Of Esta, Dreiser says:

> The truth in regard to Esta was that in spite of her guarded upbringing, and the seeming religious and moral favor which at times appeared to characterize her, she was just a sensuous, weak girl who did not by any means know yet what she thought. Despite the atmosphere in which she moved, essentially she was not of it.[71]

There is a possibility that an experience that Dreiser's sister Eleanor told him about provided material for the passages dealing with Clyde's learning of Roberta's condition and his subsequent search for an aborticide, although Gillette's experiences as related in his trial are said to be the primary source. The episode that Eleanor related concerned a young girl named Kitty Costigan. She was one of Eleanor's friends who kept company with one of the "young bloods" of Sullivan and soon became pregnant. When her suitor learned of her condition, he showed the cowardice that Clyde shows in the novel. He gave Kitty one hundred dollars, for he was a young man of means, and sent her alone to see an old doctor several miles away. She could not arrange an abortion and thus had no one to turn to except Eleanor. If this material has no autobiographical relevance, surely Dreiser's remarks about the episode are apropos of Clyde's attitude:

> In this connection, though, I have often marveled at the bungling of the average--in many cases, the exceptional--man in situations of this kind. This girl's lover, while apparently worldly-wise . . . was obviously a novice in the matter of sex difficulties. Having placed the girl in this unenviable position, he seemed scarcely to know what to do about it. The bearing of children is simple and commonplace enough, yet where the stigma of the unconventional is involved, all the customary conveniences and easements of the situation disappear and action becomes as difficult and dangerous as in a wild. Among the ultra-sophisticated, it is true, a kind of freemasonry prevails which makes it easy to adjust things . . . But in Indiana, in 1880 or thereabouts, what a crime! Sex liberty! And the situations in which those who attempted it found themselves.[72]

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[71] Ibid., p. 28.

[72] Dawn, p. 75.

I have shown in this discussion that although Dreiser first got his idea for An American Tragedy by reflecting on the economic injustices of early twentieth century society and by reading about the Gillette-Brown murder case, he also utilized many situations and characters from his own life in writing the novel.

Dreiser's main concern in The "Genius" was merely to reveal his life as he had lived it. And although he changed names, places, and situations, the details of the novel are essentially of his life's experiences. But in An American Tragedy, he uses a different approach. He utilizes the story and background of a murder trial, sprinkled liberally with ideas and characters from his life, to show his distaste for a society that fathers young men who have ideals no higher than those of Clyde Griffiths.

CHAPTER IV

The Bulwark

Although The Bulwark is one of Dreiser's posthumous novels, it is not altogether the work of an old man. Dreiser first got the idea for this novel in 1910, and started to work on it in 1914.[1] At that time, however, he completed only a few chapters. In 1913, he mentioned to a friend, Edgar Lee Masters, the story of "the good man" whom he was planning to write about. His idea of that good man developed into Solon Barnes, the Quaker hero of The Bulwark.

After laying down the book in 1914, Dreiser again started to write on it in 1916, this time finishing about one-third of it.[2] In 1916, J. Jefferson Jones, of the New York office of the Lane Publishing Company, had about one hundred dummies of the novel made up. He advertised it as the greatest novel ever written, and in a brochure stated that it would be ready for the reading public in 1917.[3] However, Dreiser did not work on it again until the twenties. During the twenties and thirties, he picked up the book and put it down again several times.[4]

It was not until the summer of 1944 that Dreiser called his secretary, Mrs. Marguerite Tjader Harris, to tell her that he was ready to finish

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[1]Helen Dreiser, My Life with Dreiser (Cleveland, 1951), p. 8.

[2]Ibid., p. 81.

[3]"Bulwark Has a History," Publisher's Weekly, CIL (March 2, 1946), 1390.

[4]Dreiser, p. 81.

the book and needed her assistance.[5] Finishing the novel was very difficult because of all the drafts and revisions the author had made. Many passages were repetitious, and others had to be made more concise. But with Mrs. Harris' help, he was able to piece together what he had already written and dictate the last one-third of the novel. It was finished in May, 1945, and was first available to the reading public in 1946, soon after Dreiser's death.[6]

Solon Barnes, the "bulwark," is a young man in the beginning of the novel. His parents are pious Quakers who believe in obeying each rule of their sect. Solon grows up with their ideals instilled in his mind.

He meets Benecia Wallin, the daughter of a wealthy Friends banker, through his sister, who goes away to school. Solon falls in love with Benecia when he first sees her. Not long before Benecia and Solon marry, he goes to work in the Traders and Builders Bank in Philadelphia, which is controlled by Justus Wallin, Benecia's father. Solon becomes increasingly wealthy and has a happy life, but is saddened because of the decline of the Quaker spirit and the enveloping air of materialism.

During the early years of their marriage, Solon and Benecia have five children: Isobel, Orville, Dorothea, Etta, and Stewart. The children accept the beliefs of their parents in the beginning, but later begin to have their own ideas about religion. Solon's faith is tried when his children grow up and depart from the leading of the Inner Light. He has always believed that if he remains honest and upright as his father was before him, his children will follow his honesty and uprightness. And

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[5]Granville Hicks, "Theodore Dreiser," American Mercury, LXII (June, 1946), 751.

[6]Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature (New York, 1948), p. 295.

even when his theory is disproved, he shows what a sterling character he is by displaying the patience of Job.

As the years pass, Solon becomes a more prominent figure in business life. And with his success comes a sterner measuring stick which his children must grow by. Benecia tries to understand the children, but she is unable to help them very much because she is under her husband's powerful influence. As for the children, they soon go their own ways. Isobel, frustrated and unmarried, becomes an assistant to a psychology professor; Orville realizes his ambition by marrying a rich girl; Dorothea, always longing to be a socialite, is introduced into high society by her cousin Rhoda; Etta cannot "think" in the Barnes home and runs away to Greenwich Village, where she becomes the mistress of Willard Kane, an artist; Stewart is involved in the rape and accidental murder of a young girl and commits suicide in jail because he does not want to bear the embarrassment of publicity and of eventually having to talk with his father.

Toward the end of the novel, Etta grows unhappy in New York and comes home shortly before her mother dies. After Benecia's death, Solon experiences a re-awakening. He blames himself for his children's failures. He understands that he has not lived sufficiently for the things of the spirit and quits his job at the bank because he cannot reconcile himself to the beliefs of the dishonest men who work there.

Etta tries to make her father's last days on earth happy ones. They spend much time talking. She reads to him from Woolman's Journal, which pleases him very much. Etta gains faith in God during those days. She is able to say in the end, "Father, I am not worthy of thee--but I see it now."[7]

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[7]Theodore Dreiser, The Bulwark (New York, 1946), p. 334.

I feel that The Bulwark shows Dreiser's arrival at a final compassionate phase in his philosophy. The approach used in this discussion will be the same as in the previous chapters. Instead of following the chronological development of the plot, I shall show the novelist's utilization of autobiographical material through a discussion of the characters of the novel and their experiences.

That Dreiser sometimes used more than one prototype for a character has already been mentioned, notably in the discussion of An American Tragedy. In The Bulwark, the first prototype of Solon Barnes that is distinguishable is Dreiser's father. However, in this novel, Dreiser pere is a Quaker instead of a Catholic.

Dreiser tells his reader little about his father's childhood. However, at one point, he does say that his father was a " . . . bigoted and ignorant soul, led captive in his childhood to a brainless theory and having no power within himself to break that chain."[8] This is the religious beginning that the novelist gives Solon. Solon's parents, Rufus and Hannah Barnes, begin very early in their children's lives to give them religious training. From the first, no day is ever begun without a hush of thanksgiving. And every morning Hannah reads from the Bible. After scripture reading, there is a weighty silence:

> And these silences were, more than these children truly knew, important features of their subsequent viewpoint. However, at the time, Solon and his sister Cynthia were too young to do much more than wonder. Nonetheless it was the social and religious atmosphere as a whole at that time that permanently imbued Solon and Cynthia so that neither, to the end of their days, ever doubted the truth of the Divine Creative Presence in everyone, by reason of which all things lived and moved and had their being--the Guiding Inner Light or Divine Presence to which everyone could turn in an hour of doubt or distress or human confusion and find, ever present there, help and comfort.[9]

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[8]Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York, 1922), p. 243.

[9]The Bulwark, p. 3.

Solon is an unusual Dreiserian hero. He believes what his parents teach him and sets his feet firmly on the path that leads to respectability and wealth. He loves once, marries the object of that love, and cherishes her until her death. He seems very odd, indeed, if it is not remembered that his prototype through most of the book is Dreiser's father, although the senior Dreiser never realized respectability and wealth.

Considering their own stern religious rearing, it is expected that the senior Dreiser and Solon Barnes would develop into stern fathers. One major difference is seen in The Bulwark, however. Whereas Solon is just a conforming religionist, his prototype was a conforming religionist and also a narrow one who tried to force the tenets of his church on his children. Dreiser makes Solon more lenient in his views and more kindly in his treatment of his children.

No matter how bad off financially the Dreisers were, the father always insisted on a parochial school for the children. He wanted them to be kept in the faith, and he felt that the public schools were bad influences. And this was to the dismay of his wife and children. The mother thought that because of her husband's insistence on the Catholic school as opposed to the public or free school, her children had not been given the proper educational advantages and hence were greatly handicapped in their race for place and position.[10] Dreiser recreates in Solon the senior Dreiser's essential stubbornness about public school education:

> In this connection, the public school at Dukla was not even considered. For whatever Solon Barnes might think of his native land, and he thought a great deal of it, he did not approve of the public school system. The

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[10]Theodore Dreiser, Dawn (New York, 1931), p. 25.

children were allowed too much freedom, and they were not sufficiently guarded. Besides, it was contrary to the Quaker faith to place them in a position where the lax discipline of the outside world might affect them and destroy their faith. One of the nine queries sent down by the yearly meeting to the monthly meetings of Friends read: "And do Friends endeavor to keep their children under the care and influence of those in membership with us?"[11]

Dreiser emphasized his father's narrowness in many different passages in his autobiographies. He says that he was so mentally "cribbed and cabined" by his religious obsessions that he proved to be an irritant to his family. He had certain human elements, actually, but very seldom talked with any of his children without making disturbing inquiries about their moral or religious conduct, which, of course, achieved nothing.

One passage in The Bulwark that reminds me of the senior Dreiser, although the approach is more tactful, is Solon's talk with his daughter Dorothea, the coquette of the family:

> "Daughter . . . why is it thee cannot walk simply and directly as befits a girl of thy faith? Why must thee skip and twist as though thee were a corkscrew or a worm? It is not only ungraceful but undignified--"
> "But, Father, I wasn't doing anything."
> "True, Dorothea. I am not telling thee to reprimand thee but to call thy attention to what is wise and orderly in a girl of thy station and training. I hope thee will not make it necessary for me to speak about it again."[12]

Solon takes fatherhood seriously. He is aware that it requires the strictest form of discipline and religious training to bring a child to a full realization of right and wrong. However, his children are not receptive to his training. At first they accept the faith of their father and mother. But as they grow older, they become a problem. They are confronted with the marked contrast between the spirit of their home and that of the world.[13] With Solon, like his prototype, this is an ever-

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[11] The Bulwark, p. 123.

[12] Ibid., p. 126.

[13] Ibid., p. 138.

consuming problem, but also like Mr. Dreiser, he "could never be anything but the serious, dignified father, always examining papers, partaking of solemn meals, engaged in weighty conversations, and always with a heavy, cautions, humorless attitude toward everything."[14]

In The Bulwark, Dreiser shows his father's disillusionment over his wayward and rebellious children. When he portrayed Solon Barnes as a broken man after Benecia's death, he must have been thinking of his own father's equivalent experience. He tells of going on a visit to his father's home:

> For my father, who was now seventy-two years of age, I had, all of a sudden, as I have indicated above, the greatest sympathy. At home, up to my seventeenth birthday, before I got out in the world and began to make my own way, I had found him fussy, cranky, dosed with too much religion; but in spite of all this and the quarrels and bickerings which arose because of it there had always been something tender in his views, charming, poetic, and appreciative. Now I felt sorry for him. A little while before and after my mother's death it had seemed to me that he had become unduly wild on the subject of the church and the hereafter, was annoying us all with his persistent preachments concerning duty, economy and the like, the need of living a clean, saving religious life. . . . While realizing that he was irritable, crotchety, domineering, I suddenly saw him as just a broken old man whose hopes and ambitions had come to nothing, whose religion, impossible as it was to me, was still a comfort and a blessing to him. Here he was, alone, his wife dead, his children scattered and not very much interested in him any more. . . .
>
> He was sitting in a big armchair facing a rear window, and now he took my hand again and held it. Soon I felt hot tears on it. . . .
>
> I cried too. The long days . . . the fading interests . . . Mother gone and the family broken up.[15]

This development of compassion for an aging parent which Dreiser had experienced, he reflected in his description in The Bulwark of Etta's visit with her father after living with Willard Kane in Greenwich Village. As Etta sees her father standing in the doorway, she perceives that he is raising his head and looking at her.

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[14] Ibid., p. 249.

[15] A Book About Myself, pp. 250, 252.

But he, like his prototype, has experienced a change:

But with what a different look from those that had accompanied his earlier protestations! His eyes! Where now was the really commanding moral conviction which had characterized them throughout most of his dealings with life, as well as with his erring children?"[16]

Most of the ideas that I have expressed in this study have been inferences drawn from careful consideration of Dreiser's novels in relation to biographical and autobiographical volumes. However, that Dreiser used his father as a prototype for Solon Barnes is corroborated by Dreiser's widow Helen in her book, My Life with Dreiser. She says:

It was there [a swing in a small court outside the music room] he could be seen every day working contentedly and happily on his book which lay so very near to his heart. For was it not a study of his father that he was building in his character, Solon Barnes?[17]

Mrs. Dreiser mentions that as her husband finished The Bulwark, when he talked of Solon Barnes, his eyes would fill with tears.[18] In the introduction to this chapter, it was mentioned that the last one-third of The Bulwark was written not long before Dreiser died. It was probably because of his age and his ability to look on his father's actions with a new perspective that Dreiser changed his portrait from a harsh portrayal to an affectionate one.

There are recorded accounts of Dreiser's last year that lead me to to think that the novelist is himself the second prototype of Solon Barnes. From interviews with Mrs. Dreiser and Mrs. Harris, Elias (1949) supplies information which will be used in the discussion of the above theory:

In fact, during the period of completing the book, from fall to spring, he was never more conscious of the creative force. He sometimes refused to

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[16] The Bulwark, p. 313.

[17] Helen Dreiser, pp. 288-289.

[18] Ibid., p. 302.

plan a day ahead, merely waiting to be moved by this power. Frequently, after finishing several paragraphs, he wandered out on the patio of Mrs. Harris's cottage and gazed at the rolling hills or stooped to examine the roses and geraniums near by, finding a kind of refreshment in the contact with nature. When a certain bluebird repeatedly came and perched near him, Dreiser remarked: "He knows me," and noted the bird was not afraid.

The friendliness of the little bird was symbolic of Dreiser's feeling, for he felt that the unity of the creative force must be good and that there was involved with it a kind of love. The puff adder had understood when he had spoken to it; the little flower had seemed the product of loving care; the little bird was unafraid and came so often--for a brief series of Sundays Dreiser even went to church, not always the same church, but some church, whether Congregational or Christian Scientist, and on Good Friday 1945 he was so moved by the service he attended that he took Communion and left deeply shaken by the experience. . . . during these months he felt his oneness with nature and the love that grew from wonder and awe.[19]

I previously quoted Mrs. Dreiser as saying that the senior Dreiser was the prototype of Solon Barnes. In her book she also recognizes that at the time her husband was writing The Bulwark he was putting himself into the story of the Quaker. This was brought on, according to Mrs. Dreiser, by the realization that his own life might end at any time and that he might have done better at times in the past. He often quoted the scripture, " . . . this night thy soul shall be required of thee."[20]

During the time that Dreiser was working on his book, he came into the house from spading in the garden one day and announced that he would stop working at the book for a few days and write an essay on life, which he did and entitled it "My Creator." The essay, which showed Dreiser's appreciation of the creative force working in nature, ended with:

. . . and so studying this matter of genius in design and beauty, as well as the wisdom of contrast and interest in this so carefully engineered and regulated universe--this amazing process called living--I am moved not only to awe but to reverence for the Creator of the same concerning whom--his or its presence in all things from worm to star to thought--I meditate constantly even though it be, as I see it, that my import to this, My Creator, can be as nothing, or less, if that were possible.

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[19]Elias, p. 298.

[20]Helen Dreiser, pp. 302-303.

Yet I have. And at long last, profound reverence for so amazing and esthetic and wondrous a process, that may truly have been, and for all that I know, may yet continue to be forever and forever. An esthetic and wondrous process of which I might pray--and do--to remain the infinitesimal part of that same that I now am.[21]

The Bulwark shows Dreiser in his last days. The actions of Solon Barnes are essentially the author's. The emotional shock of Stewart's and Benecia's deaths puts Solon into a state of dismay for a time. But he begins to take walks around the beautiful grounds of Thornbrough, the Barnes property, which Benecia had always enjoyed so much. Like his prototype, he begins to see the wonder of the creation.

On the first day he goes out, Solon walks around the creek that runs through his property, the place where he had first declared his love for Benecia. His attention is arrested by the various flowers and insects. He sees an exquisitely colored emerald green fly perched on a blossom eating a bud. Although Solon has been around these grounds many times before, he had never seen a fly of this type, and definitely had not stopped to study one. His mind is filled with wonder, not only at the beauty of the fly, but also with the being that created it.

Solon begins to wonder why such a beautiful creature as the green fly is compelled to feed on a defenseless bud. He becomes so fascinated by his meditation that he begins to look about for other wonders of nature. He notices birds in the sky and butterflies flying like "winged blossoms."[22] After bending down to examine 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. For see how

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[21]Ibid., pp. 291-292.

[22]The Bulwark, p. 317.

tragedy had descended upon him, and still he had faith, and would have.[23]

Another time when Solon is walking in the garden, Isobel and Etta watch him from the dining room window. He suddenly pauses and looks in the direction of something they cannot see. They see him turn and take three or four steps and after a pause, move his lips as if he were talking to someone. Later Isobel questions him about his actions:

"What was it, Father, out there in the grass, that caused thee to pause--it looked as though thee were talking to something?"

"Daughter," he replied, "I have learned more about life and God than I ever knew before. I saw a puff adder, which I know to be harmless, but that startled me, because, when frightened, it swells its neck and raises itself up, making itself look as vicious and threatening as the Hindu cobra. However, I decided to speak to it and did so, telling it that I knew that it was harmless and that it could go its way without harm or interruption from me. At which, it reduced its swelling neck to normal, lowered its head, and proceeded to depart. Then, wishing to know how long it really was, I took two or three paces forward in its direction, and again it spread its neck and lifted its head, cobra fashion. Then I talked to it again, saying that I would not follow it or harm it in any way. At which point I retraced my steps and paused again to observe its departure. Then it turned and came back toward me, crawling so close as to cross the toe of my shoe."

"Why, Father, how wonderful!" said Etta.

"Daughter, I know now that we know so little of all of that infinite something of which we are a part--and that there are more languages spoken than we have any knowledge of."

"What does thee mean, Father?" questioned Isobel.

"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. And then, my intent being not only good but loving, it understood me and had no fear, but came back to me, crossing the toe of my shoe. 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?"[24]

There is evidence, therefore, in the recorded accounts of Dreiser's last year and his utilization of that material in his novel, that he outgrew the bitterness of his earlier years. He had a religious experience,

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[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., pp. 318-319.

though seemingly mystical or pantheistic in quality. The discovery that Dreiser made for himself is shown in the above material when Solon bends down and examines a blade of grass, a climbing vine, and a minute flower and decides that there must be a Creative Divinity. Elias says that The Bulwark, for Dreiser, was a kind of tribute to the Creative Force and that the author felt that the book atoned for all his irreverent attacks on God. Dreiser is quoted as saying on one occasion after finishing the novel, "It's funny . . . how a fellow can go along for years and not get it . . . And when it's there all the time."[25]

The preceding discussion shows Dreiser's most important utilization of autobiographical material in The Bulwark. However, there are many additional parallels between the novel and the novelist's life.

Dreiser was thinking of his father's children when he described the Barnes children. As a group, Isobel, Orville, Dorothea, Etta, and Stewart represent the waywardness of Dreiser and his brothers and sisters. The Dreiser offspring could never get close to their father because he would never let them. And so it is with Dreiser's five fictional characters:

> Nonetheless, to the minds of his five children, each with a different point of view, Solon Barnes was somewhat of an enigma. Isobel and Etta loved and admired him as a stern, good man, though Etta, particularly as she grew, felt that there was a difference between her father and herself which could never be bridged. Dorothea alone, because of her superficial viewpoint, felt that her father was fairly companionable and a "dear" because she could usually get around him. Orville had built up an apocryphal notion of his father as a powerful, inaccessible citizen of the world who was to be admired and respected but not really loved except in a filial, perfunctory way. Stewart, on the other hand, felt something tender in his father which did not concern his strength at all, but which, nevertheless, was hidden away deep, like a jewel in a mine, and was scarcely to be reached because of the hard rocks of duty and morality which covered it.[26]

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[25]Elias, p. 304.

[26]The Bulwark, p. 168.

Actually, some of the Barnes children have individual prototypes. Orville represents Dreiser the young man. In the preceding chapter, it was mentioned that one of Dreiser's main ambitions was to get ahead. Orville's ambition is to marry a wealthy girl. That ambition is realized when he marries Althea Stoddard, whose father owns Stoddard Potteries.

Etta's prototype is Janet, who lived for a time with an architect. Unlike Janet, however, who Dreiser says was "not at all ambitious, and only mildly practical,"[27] Etta is interested in the arts and is an aspiring young writer. After living unconventionally in Greenwich Village, she comes home. She realizes her waywardness, asks her father's forgiveness, and tries to undo all the bad things that she has done:

> "Father," she exclaimed, "forgive me--I know now how much suffering I have caused thee--I need so much thy forgiveness and thy love. Can thee not forgive me?"
>
> She stood there, and as before he sat perfectly still, his eyes upon her. After a full minute of silence, he said:
>
> "Daughter, I know now that it is not for me or thee to judge or forgive anyone. God and God alone can forgive. Pray to him as I do now, every hour."
>
> Immeasurably touched by his whole attitude and mood, she came to him with tears welling. "Father, I am here to do what I can to undo the pain I have caused thee. I truly love thee and want so much to be of service to thee . . ;" And as she said that, he reached up and took her hand in his.
>
> "Daughter, thee knows that this is thy home, and if thee will stay here, I would have it so."
>
> She put her arms around his neck and kissed him, and as if with approval, he pressed her hand again. To Etta this was a truly revealing moment in her life.[28]

It is interesting to consider this passage in relation to Etta's prototype's dying words, "You know . . . Theo . . . all the men in the world, together, cannot create one blade of grass."[29]

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[27] Dawn, p. 11.

[28] The Bulwark, p. 314.

[29] Helen Dreiser, p. 297.

Stewart's prototype is also Dreiser. Stewart is a cavalier. He, like Dreiser, has strong sex desires but is unable to enjoy the adventures he longs for because of a lack of money:

> For just now he was intensely concerned mentally with thoughts of girls. . . . In fact, he was cursed with an overwhelming hunger for physical sex gratification. The curve of a cheek or neck, the grace of movement, the glance in the eyes, or the touch of a hand of any attractive girl moved him with a kind of energy that was electric in its character. He was roused, brightened, made to thrill at the mere thought of them. And true to his nature, he was not definitely interested in one, but in all. Seldom did he walk down the street that he did not see a girl who was disturbingly attractive to him. He yearned after her, not realizing how fickle was his mood. . . . And to make matters worse, there was his lack of spending money. For Solon had figured out his legitimate expenses before he came.[30]

As usual in his novels, Dreiser has made the mothers of The Bulwark distinctive individuals. It is Solon's love for his mother that helps him to become the good person that he is. Even as a small boy, he desires never to do anything, either in her presence or absence, that she might not approve of. She is a spiritual person whose

> face and body, if not wholly physically attractive, were truly esthetically or spiritually arresting. For her thoughts were mostly, if not entirely, on the needs of others--never on her own. And her deep, dark, wide-set eyes and her fairly firm and yet kindly mouth, the lips of which sometimes moved as in silent prayer--particularly when she grieved over the ills of life, those of animals as well as those of men, stricken now this way and now that--caused all to think well of her.[31]

When his mother dies, Solon suffers so much that he is at times "lost in a form of dark and painful brooding which tested his religious as well as his mental resources."[32]

The other mother of importance is Benecia. Dreiser's mother is evidently her prototype. Two differences, however, are that Mrs. Dreiser

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[30] The Bulwark, p. 244.

[31] Ibid., p. 41.

[32] Ibid., p. 107.

was not as religious as Benecia and also not quite so dedicated to her husband.

The Barnes children always come to Benecia with their troubles because of her tolerant attitude toward them. But since she is a dutiful wife, she always tries to justify her husband's actions. This Mrs. Dreiser did not always do.

The Dreiser children were always wandering somewhere, but at intervals they would come back home because they loved to be near their mother. Etta shows that same kind of attachment to Benecia, which represents the attachment of her brothers and sisters. She longs to see her mother, but she is afraid to go home because she does not want to get drawn into a morals discussion with her father. When Benecia finally visits Etta in New York, the girl runs to her and says, "Oh, Mother, it is so wonderful to be able to talk to thee again. . . There is nothing I will not tell thee."[33]

Stewart also shows a deep love for his mother even as he commits suicide:

> And so, the second day of his confinement, faced by the prospect of being taken to a County Prison and classed and treated as a felon, of talking to a lawyer, and sooner or later of having to meet his father, he concluded that he could not endure this overwhelming situation. It was too much. His life was not worth the misery he was causing his parents. Why not end it?
>
> And so slowly he felt for the undiscovered penknife in the cuff of his trousers. Then, thinking of his beloved mother, he opened the larger blade of the knife, and turning to the wall and whispering, "Mother, forgive me," plunged it into his heart.[34]

One of Benecia's last gestures before she dies is a gesture of love--the forgiving of her wayward daughter Etta--and this is representative

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[33] Ibid., p. 232.

[34] Ibid., p. 294.

of her prototype.

In death, Benecia is like Dreiser's mother, also. As Mrs. Dreiser grieved herself to death for her drunkard son Rome, Benecia's death was hastened by Stewart's experiences:

> She had grieved so much over Stewart; in fact her various memories of his gay, impulsive spirit, his seeking youth, so fatally defeated, had condensed themselves into a force that truly shattered her nervous system. The care and quiet that had accompanied her youth and the happiness of her married life had unfitted her for any such blow as this.[35]

The important thing for the reader to remember about The Bulwark, in relation to the problem of this thesis, is that it shows the emergence of a compassionate phase in Dreiser's philosophy. Solon's spiritual re-awakening parallels Dreiser's awakening to the awareness of a creative force. In The Bulwark, his last novel, Dreiser was dealing with what he knew from first-hand experience, just as he did in almost everything he ever wrote.

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[35] Ibid., p. 315.

CHAPTER V

The Significance of Dreiser's Utilization of Autobiographical Material

The foregoing analyses of Dreiser's novels have been presented to show the extent and nature of his use of autobiographical material. I have not attempted in these analyses to show that Dreiser's fiction is indistinguishable from autobiography. Rather, I have analyzed in detail the use that the novelist made of experiences and acquaintances in constructing five important American novels, Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, The "Genius," An American Tragedy, and The Bulwark. Actually, then, the primary purpose of this study has been not to prove that Dreiser made a direct transcription of life, but to show to what extent and in what manner he used biographical material in his fiction.

I mentioned in the first chapter of my thesis that this particular study would examine Dreiser's novels for their autobiographical content rather than for strict literary values. However, any work of art will become more real and more easily understood and appreciated if the reader realizes how the experiences of the novelist contributed to the work. The type of study that I have done serves to illuminate the novels of Dreiser--to make known to any person who reads the study what kind of person Dreiser was and how he used his own experiences in creating American life.

Dreiser is usually considered a naturalist. As a naturalist, he believed that man is essentially an animal, impelled by temperament, instinct, physics, chemistry--anything irrational and uncontrollable.

Naturalism has been spoken of as realism "plus" or realism "walking the last mile." As far as likenesses are concerned, both seek truth; both shun sentimentality; both express concern for contemporary society; both build novels on a foundation of observed facts. However, the naturalist's outlook on life is more deterministic, more mechanistic. The naturalist feel that man is an animal that is motivated by the chemistry within himself and by circumstances over which he has no control. To the naturalist, man is a subject of scientific, impersonal, objective investigation. He is a case study in a laboratory. He is put in a clear white light and is studied objectively. The naturalist may or may not write to bring about social reform. The heredity of the characters is already determined, but the environment can be changed. This is one of the reasons the naturalist chooses sordid, distasteful conditions as material. Nothing is excluded.

To say that Dreiser consciously followed the preceding form, especially in the beginning, would be too pedantic. But the points just listed make up the art of Dreiser, excluding The Bulwark, which is not as a whole naturalistic.

The reader will remember Frank Norris' wanting to meet Dreiser after he had read Sister Carrie so that the two of them might talk over their naturalism. But Dreiser maintained that he did not follow any of the theories that had been set up by leading foreign naturalists--that he had not even read Zola. And at this time he had not, although he was later influenced by Balzac. However, the formula of the naturalist fits most of Dreiser's novels because until the last year of his life his philosophy was naturalistic.

Dreiser wrote the way he did because, as he maintained, he would have had nothing to say if he had not. He wrote of life--not only as he saw

it as a spectator--but as he had experienced it as a participant. He chose sordid, distasteful conditions because such an environment was the kind that he had been a part of. He sought to bring about social reform because his hatred of the sordid conditions that he had known and knew compelled him to do so. He thought of man as an animal motivated by the chemistry within his body because of his own hunger for sexual experience and the lust of his brothers and sisters. He portrayed a deterministic or mechanistic outlook on life because this was the way life had always been for him--his family, always wandering off to "greener pastures," seeking respectability by moving from house to house, city to city, but never improving their state, supposedly because it was meant to be that way. The naturalistic watchword is "Truth," and insofar as Dreiser can remember the experiences that he had, he dealt with "Truth" in his novels. It is only when the reader applies the life of this groping, staggering, blundering artist to his work that he is admired and becomes a more meaningful portrayer of life.

Dreiser, then, is a naturalist, although at first an unconscious naturalist, if his contention that he wrote the way he did because he had to is taken seriously. It is important to know how he patterned and rearranged what he knew in order to construct the record. This can best be ascertained by surveying the analysis of each novel that has been used in the study.

I have mentioned that when Dreiser sat down to think about writing a novel, he had only two words in mind, "Sister Carrie." Apparently nothing from his previous experiences prompted him to think of those particular words, but from that point, practically everything he sets down dealt either directly or indirectly with his life or the life of his family.

Carrie's story is primarily the re-telling of the stories of Dreiser's sisters Amy and Janet. The story is mostly Janet's--her experiences as the mistress of an architect, and then of her subsequent elopement with the manager of Hanna and Hogg's Bar of Chicago, of their hardships in New York. Dreiser changes few details.

In addition to telling of the struggles of Amy and Janet, the novelist brings a portraiture of himself into different phases of the novel. Carrie represents the Dreiser who longs for excitement, adventure, and luxury; Hurstwood represents the Dreiser who longs for the better things of life, and he, like Dreiser, steals so that he may have them. Dreiser also has Hurstwood working as a streetcar driver during a strike, an experience that he himself had witnessed first-hand while reporting such a strike during his newspaper days.

Paul Dresser, the novelist's brother, always the flashy lady's man, is the prototype of Drouet, Carrie's drummer.

The only departures from life as he had experienced it, or as he had seen it experienced by his family, that Dreiser made in Sister Carrie are commonplace ones: changes in names, changes in places, and a few changes in and additions to the details of those experiences to make the story more interesting.

In Jennie Gerhardt Dreiser utilized the experiences of his childhood perhaps more than in any other of his novels. One of the tasks of the poor that the novelist always found more humiliating than any other was the picking up of coal from the railroad tracks or stealing it from the cars. He has the children of the Gerhardts involved in this humiliating practice.

In Jennie Gerhardt Dreiser began a type of utilization that he carried

through most of his succeeding novels. He used his own mother as the prototype of the mother of the story. To him, his mother was the epitome of perfect motherhood. Every mother's virtue must be measured by the yardstick which his own mother represented. Mrs. Gerhardt is the perfect representation--not very much taken with the religion of her husband; inclined to temporize with her children against her husband's will and without his knowledge and without very much social ambition or moral severity.

Jennie's story is told by Dreiser from his memories of his sisters Eleanor and Amy. Eleanor became intimate with a wealthy, dignified townsman, much like Senator Brander, and thus increased the amount of income for the Dreiser family. Amy's experience of becoming pregnant and having to bear an illegitimate child provides Dreiser with the idea for Jennie's unhappiness.

Dreiser gives a passionate, sympathetic portrayal of his father in Jennie Gerhardt by using him as the prototype of Old Gerhardt. The novelist has Gerhardt reacting differently from his father under almost identical circumstances. For instance, Bass, the wayward, reckless son, is put in jail because he steals coal for the family. His father cries because he hasn't the means to pay the boy's bond. It will be remembered that the senior Dreiser was willing to let Paul stay in jail. And whereas the senior Dreiser went to his grave without forgiving Amy, Old Gerhardt is at last able to forgive Jennie and pronounces her a good woman in spite of all her misdeeds.

The study of Jennie Gerhardt showed how Dreiser shaped biography and rearranged it into art. In his mind, Dreiser thought of a loving mother, a sometimes gentle, sometimes harsh father, and two wayward sisters. From that point, he had only to put together the experiences of those people, and then make his heroine a virtuous woman, sprinkled with some

of the goodness of his mother--for appeal (The reader will remember Dreiser's definition of virtue: "Virtue is that quality of generosity which offers itself willingly for another's service.").

The "Genius" evolved from this study as in effect another autobiographical volume. I believe that it was hardly necessary for Dreiser to follow it with Dawn and A Book About Myself. There are so many parallels in the novel with Dreiser's own life that pointing out all of them would have proved an endless task.

It can be said that Dreiser sat down and did some wishful thinking as he wrote The "Genius." The only instances in which he has departed from autobiographical material, excluding the changes in names, places, professions, etc., are in relating things that had always given him much misery. There are several examples. Dreiser gives Eugene Witla, the hero, a middle-class background because he has always hated the poverty of his childhood. He makes Eugene's family respected people in the town they live in. The novelist makes Eugene a good-looking young man, as opposed to his prototype who was always a too tall, awkward, gaping figure with oversized ears and teeth.

Eugene must, like Dreiser, wander from job to job upon going to the big city. But the novelist spares Eugene some of the humiliation of his own experiences. He does not want to open up old wounds, for instance, by letting Eugene, while on a collecting job identical to his, yield to the temptation to withhold money.

Dreiser makes his representation an artist, rather than a novelist, possibly for no reason other than to camouflage his story. But he makes Eugene become a famous artist much more quickly than he himself gained fame as a writer. Eugene's first painting brought him immediate success, whereas Dreiser's first novel, Sister Carrie, failed to sell.

Authorities agree that Dreiser was probably sterile. And although Eugene endures the same domestic miseries as his prototype, Dreiser has him siring a child, which, of course, is a departure from the record. All his mature life, Dreiser had to make conquest after conquest to prove his manhood, his virility. It was natural that he would make his fictional counterpart potent.

It is uncertain why Angela had to die in The "Genius." But perhaps this could have been some more of Dreiser's wishful thinking, considering the trouble that his own estranged wife gave him.

The study of The "Genius," therefore, showed that Dreiser made a few changes to please himself and recorded the other parts of his experiences, up through the end of his marriage, as closely as he dared.

In An American Tragedy Dreiser has departed from his usual type of autobiographical utilization. He has drawn his story line from outside sources. The seed of the idea of An American Tragedy was planted in his mind when he read of the murder trial of Chester Gillette, who killed his girl friend, Grace Brown, and also similar trials.

But although Dreiser got his plot from an outside source, this does not mean that he failed to use autobiographical material. Whereas in preceding and subsequent novels, he took almost everything in the novels from his life and circle of acquaintance, in An American Tragedy he has used only characters, settings, and recurrent attitudes from his life. Dreiser has made Clyde Griffiths not only Chester Gillette the murderer but also Theodore Dreiser the wanderer, the hater of poverty, the revolter against organized religion, the woman chaser. The novelist uses a part of Amy's experience in telling of Esta, Clyde's sister. The two are alike in that each bore an illegitimate child and left it for her mother to rear.

Dreiser uses Mr. and Mrs. Conklin as prototypes for Mr. and Mrs.

Griffiths, but it is not often that Dreiser uses prototypes from people other than his family.

The Bulwark was presented in this study as a departure from the ideas which dominated Dreiser's other novels. In The Bulwark Dreiser did not attempt to defend his place in literary history as the pioneer of blunt realism or naturalism. In the first part of the book, he presents the story of Solon Barnes' early life--his own father's, actually--as an example of the person who lived by the religious faith which was taught him. In the second part, Dreiser re-creates through the Barnes children his own wanderings and the wanderings of his brothers and sisters from the beliefs which were taught them early in life. Then in the third part, Dreiser presents an answer to man's wanderings. The reader sees in this part the realistic character development of Solon parallel with Dreiser's own spiritual awakening. Both Solon and his prototype looked for meaning in the confusion of the universe and ultimately found an answer to questions which ended spiritual doubts.

To Dreiser the blunt realist or Dreiser the naturalist of the past, such an ending could not have been. This idea immediately presents the pictures of Sister Carrie in her rocking chair, Jennie Gerhardt as she pays for her sins, Clyde Griffiths as he dies without hope. But, separated from his blunt formula which says that man equals the sum total of his heredity plus his environment and that man is a pygmy too weak to help himself, how does Dreiser end this book? Solon does not curse God and die disillusioned, as a novelist of little faith would probably have had him do. And why not? Because Dreiser has experienced a reawakening of faith and must, being heretofore a truthful recorder of his life and experiences, give Solon, his representation, a similar experience. The

Bulwark, then, shows a change from Dreiser's naturalistic philosophy of life to his final compassionate philosophy.

There are also other parallels in the novel for the reader to notice. Stewart is Dreiser the cavalier; Orville's love of security and ambition to get ahead are parallel to similar feelings in Dreiser's mind; Benecia represents the mother whom Dreiser always worshiped; Etta is another of the novelist's wayward sisters.

Dreiser had the ability to make his characters, episodes, and ideas real on the printed page because they are real. It is futile to hope for his characters because his pen--portraying his life and circle of acquaintance as they were--doomed them to sin and penalty. His aim, as Mencken (1917) says, is not merely to tell a tale but to show the "vast ebb and flow of forces which sway and condition human destiny."[1] The practice that made him a great novelist is suggested in Cowley's words:

> Several times he tried writing false stories for money, but the words wouldn't come; and later in his career he found it physically impossible to finish some of the novels he had started, if their plots took a turn that seemed alien to his experience.[2]

The novels discussed in this study show the evolution of Dreiser's attitude. The Dreiser who has emerged from this study is a person whose personality has many facets. He is a naive wanderer and adventurer as shown in Caroline Meeber, Eugene Witla, and Clyde Griffiths; he is an over-sexed person, as shown in Eugene Witla, Clyde Griffiths, and Stewart Barnes; he is a person who revolts against organized religion, as shown in Eugene Witla, Clyde Griffiths, and Stewart Barnes; he is a person who desires prestige and station, as shown in Eugene Witla, Clyde Griffiths,

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[1] H. L. Mencken, A Book of Prefaces (Garden City, New York, 1917), p. 92.

[2] Malcolm Cowley, "Sister Carrie's Brother," New Republic, May, 26, 1947, p. 24.

and Orville Barnes; and finally, he is a person who is awakened to the realization that there is a Creative Divinity, as shown in Solon Barnes. The important thing to notice is that Dreiser's final attitude, as revealed in Solon Barnes, is far removed from his philosophy as expressed in preceding novels. His final view was not consistent with his approach to life through the years of his greatest productivity because as late as 1928 he declared that he had no philosophy of life and that he failed to catch meaning from life or make up his mind about anything.[3] But this was just Dreiser's exterior. About the same time, Duffus (January, 1926) quoted him as saying:

> There is in me the spirit of a lonely child somewhere, and it clings pitifully to the hand of its big Mamma, Life, and cries when it is frightened; and then there is a coarse, vulgar exterior which fronts the world defiantly and bids all and sundry to go to the devil.[4]

It was not until the end of his life that Dreiser was willing to show his innermost self through the character of Solon Barnes--and that only after his spiritual reawakening.

Dreiser was not the first American novelist to make use of autobiographical material. Herman Melville, for example, used the experiences of his voyages, with philosophical overtones, in his novels. He also utilized episodes from the life of his family. He did not most of the time, however, give a portrait of the adventures and misadventures of his family, as Dreiser did. For instance, he uses his mother as a prototype in his novel Pierre but does not narrate her life's experience to any extent. Dreiser stands at a kind of midway point between such major writers

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[3]Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York, 1952), p. 283.

[4]Robert L. Duffus, "Dreiser," American Mercury, VII (January, 1926), 74.

as Melville and Thomas Wolfe.

Dreiser's significance as a user of autobiographical material lies largely in the fact that he had come from a family whose experiences were relatively significant in America. It was a somewhat typical immigrant family that had difficulty becoming oriented to the New World. As far as the Dreisers were concerned, part of their difficulty was because of a bigoted German Catholic father. On the one hand were religious bigotry and Old World concepts. On the other hand was the New World, largely industrial and materialistic in nature. In such surroundings, young men and young women found no kind of social guidance adequate to enable them to mature into a normal, stable married life. In his utilization of his autobiographical material, Dreiser emerges as a sociological and historical novelist of some importance.

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